



◀ AUDIENCES SOAK IN THE WATERVILLE OPERA HOUSE AT THE MAINE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

CLASSIC AND WORLD CINEMA IN MAINE IN THE SUMMER

The Maine International Film Festival is an oasis of programming perfection in Northern New England

GROWING UP in the Pine Tree State, film geeks like me had our work cut out for us. With rare exceptions, Maine was not the kind of place that quickened the pulse when it came to viewing independent, classic and world cinema. One of those exceptions was The Movies on Exchange St., a single screen oasis of eclectic programming that provided some of the best international film fare for Portland-area cinephiles until its sad demise a few years ago. A few blocks away was Video Port, an expertly curated institution (“store” just doesn’t do it justice) where many of us cut our teeth on the classics, also long gone. The last great oasis is the Maine International Film Festival, which celebrated its 19th edition this past July.

MIFF’s home of Waterville is a sleepy yet culturally vibrant central Maine city of 15K that at first glance seems an unlikely cinema stronghold, but boasts one of the country’s finest independent movie theaters, the Railroad Square Cinema. One of Railroad Square’s founders (in 1978), and MIFF (in 1998) is Ken Eisen, who remains at the festival’s helm as its program director. Ken

doesn’t get enough credit for his role in bringing the world’s best cinema to Maine for almost 40 years. In a time when classic, repertory and international film is getting harder for American youth to stumble upon and fall in love with, Eisen and his colleagues (including Railroad Square co-founder and manager, Alan Sanborn) swim against the current, just as they did when they started their theater in Waterville—because it was where they lived and it was

what they loved. As romantic an endeavor as any field of dreams, they built it (twice—the original burned down in 1994) and the people did come, and they’re coming still.

The 10-day festival, now under the umbrella of the nonprofit Maine Film Center, is directed by the indefatigable Shannon Haines. This year attracted more than 10,000 filmgoers to 100 films. There was original regional work (two Maine shorts programs), new world cinema and a 35mm restoration of the Maine-shot 1957 classic *Peyton Place*. MIFF held its centerpiece World Filmmakers Forum for the second year, hosting movie-makers from four countries for screenings and seminars. Special guests included Robert Benton (Lifetime Achievement Award), Gabriel Byrne (Mid-Life Achievement Award) and Lori Singer (Career Retrospective); accessibility to this caliber of star is unparalleled.

The festival’s programming seamlessly blends the classic, repertory and new together in its scheduling. One highlight for me was the balmy evening I drove over to see Luchino Visconti’s 1943 neorealist classic *Ossessione*. As I sat there waiting for the show to start I felt like I’d just won the lottery. How lucky could I be to see a rare imported archival print from Rome’s Cinecittà in Waterville, Maine, of all places? I had always wanted to see this film, which was banned by Mussolini; all prints were ordered destroyed by MGM. Somehow, though, this masterpiece survived, and is satisfying audiences many decades later. That’s exactly the kind of story that Ken Eisen and co. at the Maine International Film Festival can relate to.

—Tim Rhys, *MM* publisher

