

LA FILM FEST

HEADS

EAST

COMING UP ON ITS 16TH YEAR, THE LOS ANGELES FILM FESTIVAL (LAFF) IS IN FOR A BIG CHANGE. TRADING IN ITS WESTSIDE DIGS FOR THE NEWLY DEVELOPED DOWNTOWN SCENE, FILM INDEPENDENT (FIND), WHICH CURRENTLY RUNS THE FESTIVAL, IS HOPING TO LASSO A NEW CROWD INTO THEATERS JUNE 17 (OPENING DAY) AND SOMEWHAT REDEFINE A FESTIVAL STILL IN ITS TEEN YEARS.

BY ADAM KELEMAN

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INCE ITS INCEPTION IN 1996, L.A.'s premiere summer film festival (originally known as the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival) has been an evolving institution. Initially taking up shop at Raleigh Studios in Hollywood, the festival went on to play at the DGA, Arclight Hollywood, and the Laemmle Sunset 5. In 2006, the festival moved to the affluent neighborhood of Westwood, taking advantage of the W Hotel for panels and discussions, as well as the many vintage single-screen theaters within walking distance.

However, at the close of last year's festival, Westwood took a major hit: the Mann Festival theater closed in August 2009, with the Mann Bruin and Village coming close to following suit. "The festival grew enormously in its years in Westwood," says film producer and current LAFF Festival Director Rebecca Yeldham, "but as our audience base continued to grow, we were finding that the footprint was shrinking because the theaters were going wayside. Many of the standalone, historic theaters in L.A. have been

closing in recent years, and another one closed [in Westwood] right after the festival ended last year, and then there was the prospect of losing two more."

Yeldham laments the seemingly slow fade of the Westwood film scene. "We were in a very precarious situation. We didn't know if the Village or the Bruin would be operative for 2010. We had a number of incoming calls from different communities about the festival moving. Downtown was very aggressive, and we started taking meetings down there and looking at all the venues, meeting with the L.A. Live folks." It was clear the financial incentives to move downtown took precedence. Even if Regency Theaters eventually saved the Bruin and Village from extinction, "it wasn't a risk we were willing to take," Yeldham adds.

Exactly how FIND and Yeldham narrowed down the candidates for the move is quite clear. LAFF was in need of a central base where festivalgoers could gather between screenings, and where several festival screens would be reachable by foot.



Yeldham, though, quickly stopped short of divulging the other L.A. regions in consideration, stating, “I don’t want to highlight any single area as not making the cut. The areas that we looked at all had a consolidated footprint of theaters, and it was really a decision of where we felt we could create a hub and create the expanse of venues that we needed to continue to grow the festival.” Because of the sheer number of theaters and restaurants accessible to a large crowd, Downtown’s L.A. Live proved

are so vibrant. That is our plan, to center it at L.A. Live but embrace the venues throughout Downtown, the restaurants, bars and galleries. And as we grow, we will be expanding throughout Downtown.”

Not everyone, though, is happy with the new Downtown home of the festival. Indiewire’s Anne Thompson and Movie City News’ David Poland have both expressed doubts about the location, mainly noting the eventual, reluctant trek on the traffic-clogged freeways leading into Downtown as well as a potentially dire parking situation. However, pointing to the 25th Anniversary of the Spirit Awards as a “test-run” for L.A. Live, FIND is taking extra precautions concerning parking for the upcoming festival. Yeldham says, “We paid special attention to parking for our patrons. We want to make sure that when people come down to the festival it is a seamless process.”

The principle challenge of the LAFF directors and programmers is to shape a program and event that both reflects the city at large and uncover the hidden, more challenging cinematic gems. “The LA Film Festival is not an elitist festival [and will feature both] high-art and popular genres, something for everyone,” remarks former Newsweek film critic and current LAFF Artistic Director, David Ansen. Keep in mind that L.A. is inescapably an industry town, a sprawling suburban city where

stars are made, deals are done, and dreams are realized. Outside the golden gates of Hollywood, though, lies another LA, one filled with diverse creative enclaves and dozens of economically disparate ethnic communities. Yeldham aims to echo the broad interests of the City of Angels, proclaiming, “We’ll play very low, micro-budget independent films made in somebody’s kitchen for \$15,000, and we will play a studio film if they’re films that we love and we feel our audience will respond to. I think it’s fair to say the team programs to our taste but it’s with a view to put on a great show with our audience.”

With the new festival site, it is fair to say that FIND is making a concerted effort to bring in a formerly untapped crowd of Eastside kids – those mainly inhabiting Silverlake, Echo Park, and Downtown – who, in years past, would rather count their pennies than travel all the way to Westwood. Ansen is also betting on a more international skew to fill festival seats this summer, acknowledging the divergence in regional sensibilities between this year’s and last year’s venues. “I wouldn’t say there would be any major shift [in the program],” says Ansen. “We’re looking for the best films, but Downtown is going to influence us, and we’re very aware of the diverse audiences we can bring to the festival. We’re closer to the Eastside.”

Yeldham and Ansen believe this year’s festival selections both emulate the

Downtown L.A. area and stay in tune with what the festival has always been about – variety. “The line-up, we hope, reflects the diversity of Los Angeles. We’ve got movies from 40 different countries – a very strong Latin line-up, a very strong eastern European line-up, and a very strong

Danish line-up. There is a wonderful mix for the hardcore cineaste, and films for horror movie lovers. Something for everyone, but the theme is quality.” What assuredly differentiates LAFF from other festivals, like premiere-heavy Tribeca, is “the breadth of its programming,” Yeldham asserts. Further divulging how the team of programmers scour festivals around the world for films, she adds, “What we have strived to do here is to present to our audience a real cross-section of the great movies that we’ve had a privilege of seeing, both through the submissions process and on the festival circuit, ranging from Sundance, SXSW, Berlin, and Rotterdam to new films that we’ve discovered through the process.”

The festival and its directors aim to bring both the high and low art films together, from all parts of the world, whether they make a world premiere at LAFF or not. Choosing the Sundance-holdover *The Kids Are All Right* to open the 2010 festival, Ansen hopes that the L.A. audience will embrace a film he holds dear to his heart. He fervently proclaims, “I’m so happy about our opening night [continued on page 79]

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to be the right choice for a home base. Also, the flourishing art scene and upswing of hip eateries and bars further cemented the judgment to head east.

“With a festival,” Yeldham points out, “you really do need [a central base] so people can walk from place to place. However, we also love the other parts of Downtown that