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Editor's Desk: Film festival brings cinema, community together

Five years ago, a few members of our community thought a film festival would be a fun event to have in town. It would add a little bit of glitz and glamor to a weekend of watching movies on the big screen, and — who knows? — it might even bring in a celebrity or two down the road.

BRIAN MCLEAN; EDITOR'S DESK

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Five years ago, a few members of our community thought a film festival would be a fun event to have in town. It would add a little bit of glitz and glamor to a weekend of watching movies on the big screen, and — who knows? — it might even bring in a celebrity or two down the road.

Today, thanks to Executive Director Marty Thacker and a cast of volunteers led by Jeni Woock and Josh Sherwin, the Gig Harbor Film Festival has carved itself an entertainment niche with great expectations, both from the movie standpoint and with its connection to the community.

In the interest of full disclosure, I've spent the past 18 months on the film festival's board of directors and served this year as its vice president. So, yes, it's a biased opinion.

But as I welcomed guests at the state-of-the-art Galaxy Theater throughout the weekend — with a pause Friday night to work as a panelist for the Kilmer-Driscoll Congressional debate at Peninsula High School — it became apparent that most people appreciated the festival for what it's meant to be: A place for independent filmmakers to share their visions

of a story that needs to be told, and a place where the community can interact with the storytellers.

Besides that, Josh Lucas was in town. He drew quite a following Thursday night at Canterwood, where more than 150 people celebrated Lucas and his Australian film, "Red Dog." I think he posed for photos in groups of two or three at a time with all 150 people, too.

We enjoyed having Lucas back in a place he calls his hometown. He moved dozens of times before his family settled here in time for him to go to Gig Harbor High School. A teacher and debate coach got him interested in theater, and he never looked back.

Others haven't "made it" yet, but they're just as good. I saw a half-dozen short films, two full-length features — both documentaries — and was very impressed. Many dealt with difficult subjects, such as "Do You Really Want to Know," which chronicled three distinct families and the way they handled a decision to be tested genetically for Huntington's disease.

A surprise guest was a woman from one of the families in the film. Director John Zaritsky, who held a question-and-answer session afterward, didn't even know she was in the audience, and when she introduced herself with a question, the audience applauded.

"The Revolutionary" featured Fox Island resident Sidney Rittenberg's amazing story about rising to political prominence in Maoist China, and "Horse Soldiers of 9/11," detailed by war reporter Alex Quade, showed the first American soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks.

Inspirational. Thought-provoking. Emotional.

In all, there were more than 40 films, and each told a unique story. Some were serious, some were funny, and some gave me the creeps (like "Watch," by David Golden).

They all were impressive, and the interaction with Q&As, panel discussions and bonus features, such as hearing inside stories from someone like Buck Ormsby of The Fabulous Wailers following "Tacoma Rock & Roll Legends," was priceless.

Same with seeing a young woman run down the aisle just to get a hug from Ormsby, who gladly welcomed her with an embrace.

You just can't get any closer than that.

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