

**When did the Film Society start?**

Local film lovers Jerry and Carol Littleton and others who were keen on bringing a series of alternative and foreign films to the Annapolis Royal area launched the Society in 1992. They were true visionaries and were confident that the community possessed the sophistication and interest for such a series. During those same years, the Toronto International Film Festival initiated its Film Circuit, a grassroots distribution and marketing system to help communities across the country build audiences for Canadian and independent films. We've been part of that network for most of our history. The Circuit has been invaluable in preparing availability lists, programming support and consulting. There are now 180 film circuits around the country and we get most of our movies from them. Because they are so well connected to the major Canadian film distributors they do the important legwork for us.

**What kinds of films are chosen?**

We try to choose a variety of high-quality films from around the world and in various genres. Our goal is always to bring in films that entertain, inspire and perhaps stir us to pause, think and reflect. It's amazing to look back at the hundreds of films that the Film Society has screened and see the artistic, political and social issue range of the offerings. It spans from a film like *The Necessities of Life* about an Inuit hunter with tuberculosis who leaves his northern home and family goes to recuperate at a sanatorium in Quebec City, to the more recent Russian classic, *Leviathan*. We're also very mindful of our audience and try to choose films we hope they will like based on what is available. Economics also play an important part in our choices. People often suggest films to us and we try our best to see if they are available. It all depends upon a film's ability to get international distribution and whether or not there's a distributor within Canada. Often, if it's an independently produced film, the royalty costs may run two or three times what we pay for films from the regular TIFF Film Circuit.

**What is the process of film selection?**

There are a few avenues. For example, as a programmer you might look at a film, say, circulating at the Cannes Film Festival, which is usually held in May and screens new films of all genres, including documentaries, from around the world. It is one of the most

prestigious and publicised film festivals in the world. From there you'll likely see a film that is very talked about and that a lot of people like or may even consider a masterpiece. By the excitement the film is generating you can pretty much assume that the film is going to be part of the critical conversation the entire year. You certainly make note of that film and of others creating buzz from other festivals you follow. Tracking the paper trail of the film, what the critics are saying, what awards it's receiving and finding out as much as you can about it, say, by talking to people who may have seen the film and seeing it yourself if you have the opportunity are among the key aspects of film selection. That process goes on in addition to our involvement with TIFF Film Circuit Group. We receive a release schedule three times a year with a few dozen films that have been screened at TIFF and made available to the film circuit groups in Canada. The coordinators at the Film Circuit see hundreds of films a year including all of the films presented in the current release schedule. They've also gauged audience responses, so their insights are extremely valuable. While most of the films we select come from this release schedule, coordinators at the Film Circuit have been great about booking films for us outside the schedule if they are available.

### **How is the series put together?**

We meet at the end of each series to evaluate how the series went, audience attendance, costs, revenues and other business. As soon as we receive the Film Circuit release schedule we review the films carefully. Independently, we look at trailers, talk to people who have seen the film and read copious reviews. We communicate regularly via email sharing reviews, articles and other support materials. A few of us have seen some of the movies under consideration. Some of us have attended the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax or TIFF. Over the course of a couple of meetings we make our final decision, which entails eliminating some of our earlier picks and adding films to our list that we didn't initially consider but were now getting a lot of buzz. The process always involves a lively discussion from committee members, all passionate and knowledgeable film goers.

### **Are you able to view the films you select beforehand?**

For the most part, yes. Several committee members make it a point of attending annual festivals in Toronto, Halifax and elsewhere and also catching new films released initially in large metropolitan areas. One committee member this year saw more than 100 +

## **Q & A**

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films at one festival within a week's time.

### **Is there a set criteria?**

Yes and no. Because we can only show a certain number of films a year we have to be discriminating and at the same time not shy away from controversy or films that provoke debate. Part of our mandate is to bring in films that challenge and expand the common perceptions of culture, history, politics or contemporary society; and to select films that reflect the diversity of the world. The reality is, some people who support the series aren't necessarily cinephiles who want to be challenged or transported to another culture. They're just looking for a good, quality movie with a strong narrative. That's always a big consideration.

So somehow you have to find a balance. Gauging what your audience may or not like is more of an art than a science. Plus, times have changed. People's tastes in film have changed. The experimental films we saw in the 90s just aren't a big draw these days. At the same time there's more openness to World Cinema and the fact that excellent filmmaking is being done in any number of developing countries. There are certainly times when there is a film you like but don't think it should be in the series for a variety of reasons. Either it's too long or close in storyline to other films we've recently shown, or the audience appeal may not be broad enough. In the end, the goal always is to maintain our core audience and also bring in new audiences by offering a wide range of films. Choice of films, availability and audience appeal are key.

### **What are the challenges you face?**

Supporters often say they come to the films even if they know nothing about them because they know there is a committee that has vetted and carefully chosen the selection. I love hearing that! However, one of our biggest challenges is to combat snap judgements like, "I didn't come because I didn't like the trailer," or "it's just getting so-so reviews so I gave it a miss." There are some films that are very hard to market, but we try our best by posting reviews and bios of directors on Facebook and our web page, announcing the films in Valley Events and King's newsletter and other venues and hope people will find them and come. Often people will tell me, I'm sorry I missed that film I heard it was really good.

Of course, the other big challenge is Netflix and a host of other streaming venues that

are driving down audience attendance at all movie theatres. We are always examining new opportunities for promoting our screenings. For dedicated filmgoers, theatres are an essential part (some would say the lifeblood) of the movie experience. The challenge is to convince movie lovers that when it comes to experiencing watching a film on your watch or on the big screen there's just no horse race.