

MOVIE MAKER

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

25 Coolest Film Festivals: 2009

by *Jennifer M. Wood* | Published July 31, 2009



Locarno Film Festival

Depending on the era in which one grew up, what is “cool” can be a very different thing. But whether you watched James Dean on the big screen, were introduced to cinema through Quentin Tarantino or believe that great movies begin and end with Michael Bay, “cool” cinema takes us beyond the expected, captures the zeitgeist and changes the way we view the films that come along for us afterward.

The same can be said for the 25 film festivals profiled below. With the help of hundreds of independent moviemakers, festival directors and fest attendees, we scoured the world to identify more than two dozen fests that are creating a truly unique film festival experience (for moviemakers and festival-goers).

ANN ARBOR FILM FESTIVAL

ANN ARBOR, MI • www.aafilmfest.org • Even the best programming can't save an imperfect screening venue. “The biggest reason for the ‘coolness’ of AAFF,” according to executive director Donald Harrison, “is its home base: The historic Michigan Theater... The quality of projection—both in the 1,700-seat movie palace and its state-of-the-art, 200-seat screening room—is world-class.”

BIG APPLE FILM FESTIVAL

NEW YORK, NY • www.bigapplefilmfestival.com •

With the glut of NYC festivals, it's easy to get lost in the mix. But BAFF is creating a niche all its own by focusing “primarily on the New York film community,” says founder Jonathan Lipp. An event for independents, BAFF “plays the films that you hope people will get to see, but worry that they won't be able to—specifically the ones I have been in,” says actor Jesse Eisenberg, who took home this year's NY Emerging Talent Award.

BIG ISLAND FILM FESTIVAL

WAIKOLOA, HI • www.bigislandfilmfestival.com •

“What could be cooler than watching your film in Hawaii under the stars with palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze and the fragrance of plumeria wafting around you?” asks founder Leo Sears. It's hard to argue with logic like that, especially when each of the many moviemakers who suggested BIFF for this list made mention of the Waikoloa Bowl at Queens' Gardens as a truly unforgettable screening venue.

BOULDER INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

BOULDER, CO • www.biff1.com • More than 5,000 feet above sea level may not be the first place you look for high-quality cinema, but sisters and fest directors Robin and Kathy Beeck put the moviemaker first. “They really, truly want you there and they want to be absolutely sure that you have fun,” says moviemaker Christine Bonn (In Times of War).

BROOKLYN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

BROOKLYN, NY • www.brooklynfest.org • It shouldn't be surprising that New York City's coolest borough offers one of the world's coolest fests. Though plenty of big names have been a part of the fest, selections are from received submissions only; no films are invited. All films must be independently-produced and every film is in competition, so that "even the smallest film, regardless of its category, can win the Grand Chameleon Award," says executive director Marco Ursino.

CONEY ISLAND FILM FESTIVAL

CONEY ISLAND, NY • www.coneyislandfilmfestival.com • By sheer virtue of its location, there's built-in cool in Coney Island. "It's a friendly, freaky film festival with a small-town familiarity but a gritty, big-town toughness," says moviemaker Katrina del Mar (Surf Gang). Plus, asks del Mar, "Where else will you get your ticket taken by Insectavora the fire breather? Where else can you walk into a festival that's housed in the Coney Island Sideshow, with its famous posters of freaks, and eat popcorn while watching sword swallows perform between great and super-cool films?"

CUCALORUS FILM FESTIVAL

WILMINGTON, NC • www.cucalorus.org • "One might look at Cucalorus and think, 'What the hell?'" offers director Dan Brawley. "We don't give out awards, Cucalorus is at the wrong time of year and it all takes place in a quiet, historic port city in North Carolina." But it's that non-competitive atmosphere that allows moviemakers to forget the cutthroat nature of their profession and reconnect with their love of movies. "Competition is the opposite of creativity," says Brawley. "Cucalorus really tries to bring people together to explore creativity." This ingenuity extends to the social side of the event, which includes a Blue Velvet locations tour.

DISPOSABLE FILM FESTIVAL

VARIOUS LOCATIONS • www.disposablefilmfest.com • Created in 2007, DFF offers "a democratized space where the work of zero-budget filmmakers is celebrated and exhibited," says co-founder Carlton M. Evans. So what is a "disposable" movie? "Short films made on non-professional devices such as one-time use video cameras, cell phones, point-and-shoot cameras, Webcams, computer screen capture software and other readily available video capture devices," says Evans. "With people everywhere gaining access to these devices, we felt the time was right to draw attention to the creative potential of this new mode of filmmaking."

ENVIRONMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL

WASHINGTON, DC • www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org • Founded in 1993, EFF was green long before it was fashionable. "Environment is a broad topic and the festival reflects that with its extremely diverse selection of films," says managing director Christopher Head. With more than 100 partner organizations, EFF is internationally recognized as one of the largest environmental film showcases in the world and screens at more than 50 venues, including the Smithsonian museums.

FANTASTIC FEST

AUSTIN, TX • www.fantasticfest.com • Called "The geek Telluride" by Variety, the country's largest genre film festival specializes in horror, fantasy, sci-fi, action and "just plain fantastic movies from all around the world," according to the fest's Website. Held at the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, which Entertainment Weekly named the best cinema in America, the venue is one where attendees can eat, drink and watch movies without being distracted. With past events featuring the world premieres of such films as *There Will Be Blood* and *Apocalypse*—and guests including Mel Gibson, Bill Murray, Paul Rudd and Paul Thomas Anderson—this is one fest that truly lives up to its name.

GEN ART FILM FESTIVAL

NEW YORK, NY & CHICAGO, IL • www.genart.org • As one of the world's largest arts and entertainment organizations, Gen Art hosts more than 100 film, music, art and fashion events annually, including film festivals in New York and Chicago. "While it's hard as hell to get into," says Confounded Films' Stephen Lyman, "the film plus party format is unique and a lot of fun for both the filmmakers and the audience."

INDIE MEMPHIS FILM FESTIVAL

MEMPHIS, TN • www.indiememphis.com • Promoting artistic crossover, Indie Memphis "inspires filmmakers from across the country through the unique creative landscape that is the home of the blues and the birthplace of rock 'n' roll," says executive director Erik Jambor. "Sun Studios, Stax and Rev. Al Green's Full Gospel Tabernacle church are all part of the filmmaker experience during the festival's opening weekend, allowing filmmakers to connect as they explore the cultural history that resonates through Memphis."

LAKE PLACID FILM FORUM

LAKE PLACID, NY • www.lakeplacidfilmforum.com • While some moviemakers hit the festival trail with the sole

focus of finding publicity, “one of the main attractions of the Forum is the total lack of frantic publicists, hustling photographers and aggressive celebrity addicts,” says artistic director and co-founder Kathleen Carroll. But that doesn’t mean the A-list sightings aren’t aplenty; Martin Scorsese, Jon Favreau and Steve Buscemi have all been guests. “The Forum is a place where people who are passionate about films can meet and learn from each other,” says famed author—and Forum co-founder—Russell Banks.

LOCARNO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

LOCARNO, SWITZERLAND • www.pardo.ch • “Every August around 180,000 cinemagoers, 1,100 journalists and 3,400 industry professionals converge on the small Swiss-Italian town of Locarno, right in the heart of Europe, which becomes the world capital of auteur cinema for 11 days,” says press coordinator Stefanie Kuchler of the 62-year-old event. While other fests boast outdoor events, Locarno’s Piazza Grande hosts audiences of up to 8,000 for a nightfall screening in the heart of the city, Cinema Paradiso-style.

PHOENIX FILM FESTIVAL

PHOENIX, AZ • www.phoenixfilmfestival.com • Director Paul Osborne, whose doc *Official Rejection* offers a comic take on what indie moviemakers experience on the festival circuit, knows what makes a great fest, and notes that “Far and away, the best we saw was the PFF.” Citing audience turnout, media attention, political fairness and moviemaker treatment as the keys to the fest’s success, Osborne notes that “the festival never takes itself too seriously and its directors are not just available, but actually visible to solve any problems that arise anytime.”

ROGER EBERT’S FILM FESTIVAL

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA, IL • www.ebertfest.com • For more than a decade, Roger Ebert has made an annual event of screening the most overlooked films he’s recently seen, as well as re-released classics, to give them another chance in the spotlight. “Our festival has no prizes, no awards, no deal-making, no submission process,” says festival director Nate Kohn. “It’s purpose is singular: To celebrate 12 films that Roger Ebert feels deserve a second look and further discussion.”

SAN FRANCISCO FROZEN FILM FESTIVAL

SAN FRANCISCO, CA • www.frozenfilmfestival.com • It’s not just cool, it’s frozen. Named for Mark Twain’s famous quip that “The coldest winter I ever spent was my summer in San Francisco,” SFFF takes place in the dead of summer, when the city “is at its most chill,” according to co-director Gabriel Bellman. The fest includes a strong musical component and screens “animation, documentaries, feature films, shorts, music-based films and skate films. We believe we uniquely capture the music-based and diverse nature of San Francisco itself.”

SEBASTOPOL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

SEBASTOPOL, CA • www.sebastopolfilmfestival.org • This fest is making a big splash in a town that Tom Waits, Les Claypool and Peter Krause call home. Understanding that few things go better with movies than a bottle of wine—particularly in California’s wine country—the doc fest takes place near one of the area’s biggest coalitions of wineries, Wine Road. “Part of being the coolest is knowing about it when no one else does,” says program director Jason Perdue of the two-year-old event, “and being the one to let everyone else know.”

SIDEWALK MOVING PICTURE FESTIVAL

BIRMINGHAM, AL • www.sidewalkfest.com • “After 10 years, Sidewalk has perfected its own personal trifecta: Hospitality, networking and humility,” says festival coordinator Natalie Hummel. “The festival places a huge emphasis on filmmaker attendance, and not for the sake of name-dropping. It likes to mix filmmakers up in an unusual town with unusual activities, thus forcing guests to break out of their shells and share raw, human experiences, both in theaters and on rooftops.”

SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST

AUSTIN, TX • www.sxsw.com • Originally founded as a music event, this cutting-edge fest added film into the mix 15 years ago in response to the changing nature of the entertainment business. Since then, SXSW has grown into one of the world’s best known media events, introducing audiences to ground-breaking musicians and moviemakers alike. In 2009, this behemoth event screened more than 250 films and boasted more than 7,000 film participants. In addition to being a featured employer on “The Real World,” SXSW has also partnered with Fantastic Fest (also on this list) to double the cool factor.

SUNSCREEN FILM FESTIVAL

ST. PETERSBURG, FL • www.sunscreenfilmfestival.com • Plenty of fests offer workshops, and most have a well-known guest or two. But a fest that has celebrities teaching the workshops? “From actor Patrick Wilson teaching an actors’ workshop to Oscar-nominated screenwriter Timothy Sexton (*Children of Men*) and Steven de Souza (*Die Hard*) teaching screenwriting, Sunscreen gives filmmakers more than just a festival,” says executive director Tony Armer.

TRAIL DANCE FILM FESTIVAL

DUNCAN, OK • www.traildancefilmfestival.com • “Strange” and “cool” aren’t always interchangeable terms. But when TDFF president Anthony Foreman asks, “Where else can you walk right in the middle of a wild west shootout, have a world famous trick-roper twirl a lasso over your head, dance to live rock ‘n’ roll music with a wild west town backdrop and see some of the finest independent films ever produced right in the same facility?” this is clearly one place where the two words converge.

UNITED FILM FESTIVALS

VARIOUS LOCATIONS • www.theunitedfest.com • With events in New York, Los Angeles, Tulsa, San Francisco, Chicago and London, this is one appropriately-named fest. “Rapidly growing in size and scope, and building on a solid festival history, the United Film Festivals showcase top-notch, award-winning narratives, documentaries and short films in six thriving cities across the U.S. and Europe,” says founder Jason Connell. This growing reputation has attracted the attention of well-known indies like Henry Jaglom, who showcased Hollywood Dreams in New York, and Matthew Modine, who premiered Cowboy in Los Angeles.

“WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST WATCH?” COMEDY FESTIVAL

SEATTLE, WA • www.whatthehellidijustwatch.com • The name alone might be enough to land the event on this list. But this fest, which is dedicated to “bringing the funniest videos we can find to the masses,” according to organizer Kanton Budge, has a lot more to offer, including low submission fees, an intimacy that makes the fest “a great testing bed for filmmakers to showcase their work and see how an audience responds” and free beer! “We’re sponsored by the local brewing company, Mac and Jacks. They provide us with a few kegs every year, and we give out a free beer with every ticket purchase.”

WOODS HOLE FILM FESTIVAL

WOODS HOLE, MA • www.woodsholefilmfestival.org • “The Woods Hole Film Festival is a filmmaker’s festival,” says executive director Judy Laster. “More than just a screening showcase, WHFF has an expansive outreach through our ongoing efforts to help filmmakers get screening opportunities after the festival and through our partnerships with global media organizations.” This includes year-round events on Cape Cod, including programs such as Dinner & A Movie and Filmmaker in the Schools. “Set in the scientific, seaside, summer village of Woods Hole,” Laster says that “a small film can have a worldwide experience.” MM