



PRESS STORIES

Publication: The ADVOCATE Greenwich Time
(Greenwich, CT)
Date: March 29, 2007
Author: Beth Cooney
Title: **Parlez-vous Français ?**

The film festival known as "Focus on French Cinema" began three years ago as a humble endeavour by some passionate Francophiles and cinema fans.

The first year's event was so modest, films were shown in classrooms at Purchase College. The audience sat in desks. There wasn't Champagne or even buckets of popcorn.

"And the best we could do was show the movies on DVDs," says Catherine Lamairesse, chairman of the festival, a cooperative of the Alliance Française of Greenwich, Purchase College and French Feeling Films.

This year, 11 films are being shown over three days in the Purchase College Performing Arts Center.

The change of venue, Lamairesse says, is one of the significations the festival has evolved into a big-screen event.

Here are a few more: Three French films will make their American premiere at the festival, which begins tomorrow with a Champagne Gala.

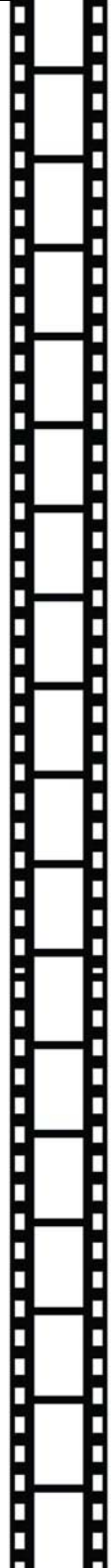
Extras such as shuttle from the Port Chester, N.Y., train station and weekend babysitting have been added to make the festival more accessible to commuters and families.

Several filmmakers and actors from France and Canada are joining organizers and faculty from Purchase College for panel discussions and celebrations. Perhaps most notable is actor Claude Brasseur, who plays a pivotal role in Thierry Klifa's "Le Héros de la Famille," which makes its American premiere at the festival tomorrow. Brasseur, who represents the third generation of a famous French family of thespians, is well-known to French audience for his acting credentials, versatility and transition from a popular French television series to the big screen. He is attending the festival during his first visit to the United States since 1968.

"It is a tremendous honor for us," notes Catherine Laleuf, a member of the festival's executive board. "The best way I can describe him to American audience is that he's a bit like the French Michael Douglas in that his father was a famous actor. He began his career on a popular television show, but then went on to a very long and varied career in film."

The presence of scions of French films such as Brasseur and Canada's Luc Picard also signifies the festival's emergence as a serious cultural exchange, say its organizers. It is now one of the largest –if not the largest- French film festivals held in the United States. Organizers spend the entire year planning the program, working closely to the Cultural Services Division of the French Embassy and lobbying filmmakers for access to their projects at places such as Cannes Film Festival. Patrick Gimenez, a member of the festival's board and a Miami-based distributor and producer, is credited for securing major acquisitions for the festival.

"We began with this very passionate idea that French movies don't have a chance to be screen here," says Lamairesse, explaining the festival genesis. "And we have come to a place where... we are offering one of the most serious explorations of French films in the United States."





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While some of the festival's organizers are French expatriates, they say the festival's audience is largely American. "Just 25 percent of the audience are French," says Lamairesse. "The rest are students and people who come from the surrounding community to see all these great films they would not have a chance to see otherwise."

The audience comes with a good reason, notes Anne Kern, a professor of cinema at Purchase College whose specialty are French and Italian films.

"Outside to the United States, the French are the post prolific filmmakers in the world," she says. "And a like there are some clichés of French cinema –like all they do are these high art films- actually the French produce a very diverse and very interesting body of film every year."

If there is a unifying theme in the films selected this year, it is that they rely on slimmer stories to explore genres ranging from drama to comedy with the focus almost always on human relationships.

"You are less likely to get the big car chase, the gratuitous violence you might get in an American film," notes Ronnie Scharfman, a professor of French at Purchase College.

"There is violence," adds Kern, "but it is motivated by the relationships being explored, not just violence for the sake of it."

While America produces about 700 feature-length films a year, France ranks second with about 240 films. "Even the United Kingdom only makes about 120 a year," Kern says.

Yet missing a great French is a common occurrence because the movies, from serious dramas to light-hearted comedies, are often relegated to a few urban art houses. Even when a film generates some buzz stateside, Laleuf points out the chances of it reaching American audiences can be slim because, "if it is a good movie, with some crossover appeal, the rights get bought up so it can be produced and made as an American film." Films such as "Three Men and a Baby," (originally made in France) and the French "La Cage aux Folles" (the American version is "The Birdcage") are examples of that tradition. "When the films rights get bought up, you can't even get the DVDs here," says Laleuf. "And it means the essence of the French films are lost."

One thing festival planners don't want to do is scare off their potential audience with a doubt about subtitles. Yes, all the films being shown will have French soundtracks with English subtitles, but they say reading them is part of the crossing experience. "French is my native language and I read subtitles," says Laleuf. "They just make a film even more interesting."

