



## Spotlight on LI's film festivals

By: Claude Solnik June 27, 2014 0

Like other colleges, Stony Brook University is settling into its summer lull – but not the school's Staller Center Arts, which is entering its busy season.

Now in its 19th year, the center's Stony Brook Film Festival, slated to run July 17-26, has become a major Long Island's motion picture boom. Like the rest of the country, the Island loves its summer blockbusters – Nassau and Suffolk, where making movies is increasingly common, the summer also brings several popular celebrating the art of cinema.

Look no further than Stony Brook, where the annual festival has grown from 2,000 to 18,000 attendees, many of whom come to Long Island ready to spend.

### Extended scenes

Cinema, according to Staller Center Director Alan Inkles, is "the art of the 21st century," so when the center's International Theater Festival faltered two decades ago, pivoting to Hollywood – and the rich indie and international film markets – was an easy call.

"We had to figure out a different thing to do," Inkles said. "I felt everyone goes to the movies."

While pay-per-view, streaming options, DVDs and Blu-rays have certainly cut into the average multiplex's take, Inkles is right – lots of people go to the movies. According to motion picture industry tracker The-Numbers.com, annual ticket sales announced by the Motion Picture Association of America peaked in 2002 at 1.58 billion, generating \$9.19 billion in revenue, but they're still holding strong – the MP reported 1.34 billion ticket sales in 2013 and record revenues of \$10.9 billion.



Alan Inkles: Cinema is "the art of the 21st century." PHOTO: Bob Giglione/LI

Looking to capitalize on this never-ending (and lucrative) love affair with movies are several Long Island celebrations, including the Stony Brook Film Festival, the Long Island International Film Expo (July 9-17) at Hamptons International Film Festival (Oct. 9-13).

Each is growing in popularity. Stony Brook now welcomes those 18,000 annual visitors. The Long Island International Film Expo, a joint production of the Long Island Film/TV Foundation and the Nassau County Film Commission, has been dubbed one of the 25 coolest film festivals in the world by MovieMaker magazine and attracts thousands each year to Bellmore Movies. The Hamptons International Film Festival has attracted as many visitors, including bigwigs like Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese.

The Hamptons festival, in fact, has been credited with extending the season at one of the planet's most popular seasonal vacation destinations.

"We're considered off-season," noted Anne Chaisson, executive director of the Hamptons Film Festival. "But people will say the season continues through the film festival. We bring in a lot of business."



A-list: (From left) Celebrities Robert Romanus, director John Putch, Dana Delany, Kevin Rahm and David DeLuise join festival director Alan Inkles at the 2008 Stony Brook Film Festival. Courtesy photo/Staller Center for the Arts

### Director's cut

All of Long Island's big-screen celebrations, to some extent, bring in business, making the film-festival industry a link in LI's economic chain.

Hamptons festival organizers conservatively estimate annual event there leads to \$3.5 million in expenditure. Visitors fill hotels and restaurants; the festival headquarters where visitors pick up their badges and passes, is the East Hampton hotel/restaurant c/o The Maidstone.

"We look at how it's perceived in the industry and what it means for the area," Chaisson said. "We've invited many people who've never been here before who fall in love with it

and come back year after year."

Other regional businesses look to proactively engage the film festival crowds. American-Italian eatery Panti in Stony Brook and the Kitchen A Bistro in St. James are both hosting parties this year related to the Stony Brook Film Festival, while Nassau County considers the Long Island International Film Expo a major piece of its economic puzzle – particularly, a major plug for the county's burgeoning film industry.

"We've made it a film community," said Debra Markowitz, director of the Nassau County Film Office. "The festival is important, but we also make it a community for filmmakers. They network, find people to work with."

The festivals' economic impact also stretches to local businesses that handle printing and other forms of advertising, such as Edgian Press in Hicksville, which prints programs for the Hamptons festival. And whenever you get a bunch of celebrities – Spielberg, Vanessa Redgrave, Christopher Plummer, Glenn Close, James Franco and A-listers have been spotted at the Hamptons International Film Festival – crowds are sure to follow.

"With Richard Gere, there was almost a riot in front of the movie theater," Chaisson noted. "And he lives here."

### Ticket price

While the festivals are proving to be an increasingly popular economic engine, there are challenges to organizing these big parties, starting with costs. Inkles estimated that it costs about \$200,000 to organize and promote the Stony Brook festival, and that doesn't include Staller staff time. The Hamptons festival, is held in October because it can't afford to rent space in the summertime, according to organizers.

And as they attract ever-larger crowds, the festivals must also be mindful of the importance of being a good neighbor.



Debra Markowitz: "We've always got overflow from the city. Now with the state tax credits and the need for studio space

"There's always been the push and pull," Chaisson said. "But what the [Hamptons] festival brings to the community far outweighs the annoyance it may be to have people in town for the weekend."

set up its own industry. We're no longer the back lot." PHOTO: Bob Giglione,

To maximize their impact, each of the festivals has also tinkered with its format, formula and size. The Sto festival has gone from three theaters and 100 movies to 37 movies (17 features and 20 shorts) in a single seat venue – "I'm going to grow by getting better," Inkles noted – while the Hamptons festival has grown to showcase 125 different films at theaters across Montauk, Southampton, Westhampton and East Hampton.

The Hamptons festival, where a ticket for a single show can run \$30 (a 10-day pass in Stony Brook runs \$80) also carved out a reputation for premiering award-season frontrunners. The event, which runs in the heart of the contender season, has introduced the cinematic world to future Academy Award Best Pictures "The Artist," and "12 Years a Slave."

"We're a festival that distributors want to show their films at," Chaisson noted. "They use the festival as part of their campaign. We have many [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] voters in the Hamptons."

While most of the films screened at the Long Island festivals are small-scale, independent, art-house-type productions, Markowitz believes the festivals are a big part of the Island's growing filmmaking industry. With a series including "Blacklist" and "Person of Interest" and major motion pictures including "Noah" and "The A Spider-Man 2" being filmed here, the big-screen celebrations don't only pump up local pocket books – they build momentum toward future economic activity.

"It's not a matter of competing with the city," Markowitz said. "We've always gotten overflow from the city with the studios, tax credits and the need for studio space, it's set up its own industry. We're no longer just the back lot."

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