

MOVIES

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OPEN CINEMA

Food-for-thought films

Admission-by-donation documentaries get folk talking



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It's a blustery Tuesday night, and dozens of film buffs are inching their way into a downtown cinema.

There's no stadium seating or Dolby sound, however, and no flashy concession stand bulging with over-priced junk food.

This isn't the Odeon or Empire Capitol 6. It's a funky Fort Street arts centre, doubling as the sold-out venue for the screening of two homegrown documentaries — *Ted Grant: The Art of Observation* and *Art Is a Mirror* — and an open forum.

Welcome to the OC, Victoria-style. Despite those initials, Open Cinema will never be confused with the prime-time soap about the photogenic, upscale denizens of a SoCal suburb, although it's as addictive and hip in a grassroots way.

Now in its fifth year, Open Cinema is a popular series of community screenings of socially relevant documentaries punctuated by stimulating discussions at bars, restaurants, cafés and community centres.

Admission is by donation, and food, drinks and conversation are on the menu along with film.

The brainchild of Mandy Leith, a documentary filmmaker and former BBC and National Film Board editor, this social experiment uses films that get people talking to provoke social change.

"Part of the rationale was seeing how the broadcast market for documentaries was dwindling with the advent of reality TV," recalls Leith, who co-founded Open Cinema with other filmmakers, including Erin Brown, Bill Weaver and Garfield L. Miller.

Her "baby" uttered its first cries in 2003 after a Media That Matters conference at Hollyhock, the Cortes Island wilderness retreat. There was much talk about how consumers were starting to watch films on computers and cellphones.

"I said, 'Yes, but what about bringing people face-to-face? We can't forget that,'" Leith, 45, recalls. "And this experiment has shown there is a strong audience for this. There's a hunger not only for films but human connections."

Indeed, there has been a significant revival of such community-driven alternatives to the alienating "blockbuster model," notes its dynamic director. Open Cinema is a distinctive brand of such "microcinema," a term coined by two San Francisco film buffs who began showing movies out of their mobile home in 1991.

Local and global concerns have been addressed in dozens of films



BRUCE STOTESBURY, TIMES COLONIST

Open Cinema is the brainchild of Mandy Leith, a documentary filmmaker and former editor at the BBC and NFB.

since the inception of Leith's user-friendly variation, which offers not only a cabaret-style alternative to passive moviegoing, but a showcase for filmmakers seeking an audience.

Issues addressed so far include waste management (*Crapshoot: The Gamble With Our Wastes*); the battle to defend public education in Mexico (*Granito de Arena*); internet porn as an empowerment tool (*Webcam Girls*); drug use on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (*Flow*); crop circles (*Star Dreams*) and the power of meditation (*The Fires That Burn*).

Many Open Space events have unspooled at Hermann's Jazz Club, while others have been held at issue-specific locations. The drug documentary *Crystal Clear, Crystal Fear* was shown at the Fernwood Community Centre, for instance, and a screening of *A Hard Straight*, tailored for the Restorative Justice Coalition's annual symposium, took place at William Head penitentiary.

Another issue sure to stir debate

surfaces in *Flow: For Love of Water*, Irena Salina's documentary about the impending global water crisis. The Sundance hit makes its Western Canadian premiere Monday at 7 p.m. at the Victoria Event Centre (1415 Broad St.) as part of an Open Cinema fundraiser/Earth Day celebration.

It's a collaboration with Van City, the Council of Canadians, Greater Victoria Water Watch Coalition and the Victoria International Education Development Association, with 20 per cent of proceeds aiding a water project in Zambia.

Expect complimentary food, a cash bar and an open forum headlined by author Richard C. Bockling (*Mighty River*) and Gwen Barlee, policy director for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee.

Admission is by a suggested \$10 donation, and patrons can bid on silent and live auction items, including a luxurious Sooke Harbour House getaway and a signed, limited-edition photo of Pierre Elliot

Trudeau donated by legendary Canadian photojournalist Ted Grant.

The ambitious non-profit, mostly volunteer-run program operates on an annual budget of about \$20,000, with funding from the B.C. Arts Council, CRD Arts Development and support from sponsors such as Van City, CineVic, MediaNet and the NFB.

As elated as Leith is over its growth, Open Cinema has in a way become a victim of its own success. Hence the need to raise funds and awareness to make it a self-sustaining enterprise no longer so dependent on volunteers.

"My ability to keep my 'baby' alive without being fairly paid is limited," laughs Leith, who earns a nominal salary and wants to devote more time to filmmaking.

"We need to raise a salary we can offer to someone so it's not just running on passion. It's been fine for the first five years, but now it's a challenge building on our success. It's an interesting problem to have."

Li, Chan deliver a flight of fancy

REVIEW

The Forbidden Kingdom

Starring: Jackie Chan, Jet Li

Directed by: Rob Minkoff

Parental advisory: mild violence

Running time: 113 minutes

Rating: *** (out of five)

JAY STONE

Canwest News Service

Kung fu meets, well, more kung fu in *The Forbidden Kingdom*, a pint-sized Chinese epic that answers the age-old question: what would happen if Jackie Chan and Jet Li were in a movie together? Answer: the white teenage boy would get the Asian girl.

Based on an ancient Chinese legend — I believe it was called *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* — *The Forbidden Kingdom* is a sort of adolescent version of those martial arts films where people fly through the air, kicking each other among the glorious bamboo forests and sending special-effects shock waves picturesquely across the screen. The fights were choreographed by the legendary Wo Ping (*The Matrix*) and the movie was directed by the unlikely Rob Minkoff (*The Lion King*), which gives you an idea of the tone of *The Forbidden Kingdom*: *Crouching Puberty, Hidden Hormones*.

Michael Angarano stars as Jason, a kung fu-obsessed teenager in south Boston who discovers an ancient Chinese fighting staff in a pawnshop and is magically transported back to medieval China. There he becomes a key player in an ancient legend whose backstory is given by an itinerant warrior-scholar (Chan) who arrives drunk on a donkey, spouting Zen wisdom ("He who speaks does not know. He who knows does not speak.") This is partly a tribute to Jackie's seminal kung-fu Drunken Master films, and partly just cool.

The story concerns the famous battle between the Monkey King (Li), a roguish kung-fu immortal, and the evil Jade Warrior (Collin Chou), who tricks him into long-term ossification.

The Forbidden Kingdom races along nicely, but it stops every once in a while for little heart-to-hearts about dead parents, missing fathers and other flotsam and jetsam of superfluous subtext.

Chan is good both as a fighter and in his movie persona as the weary hero scampering away from wave after wave of disposable soldiers.

Jet Li fights well when called on to do so and Chou, as the bad guy, has a few nice moments, especially when he's told of how the prophecy of the return of the fighting staff may be coming true. "Mortals are always whispering of prophecy," he says. "It's their opium." No, our opium is kung fu fighting, especially when it defies gravity. It also defies sense, but we knew that going in.