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# The Portland Press Herald

Friday, April 8, 2011

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March 24

## Maine Jewish Film Festival

**This year's festival, the 14th annual, puts the focus on feature-length films and unique niche flicks.**

By Bob Keyes [bkeyes@mainetoday.com](mailto:bkeyes@mainetoday.com)  
 Staff Writer

In the past, the folks who organize the Maine Jewish Film Festival have tried to build their program around a theme.

One year, films in the festival focused on labor. Another year, they were about coming of age.

This year, festival director Kari Wagner-Peck and her movie selection committee decided to let the audience weigh in.

"We do an online survey, and our response rate has been great. We have a vocal audience base," Wagner-Peck said. "This year, they said, 'We want more feature films.' They felt that in the past, the festival maybe was too documentary-heavy."

Ask and you shall receive.

The festival, now in its 14th year, opens Saturday and continues through March 31 with an emphasis on feature films and niche movies that likely would only get a screening at a festival like this.

The heartbreaking "Anita" is a good example of the kind of film the festival will feature this year.

The movie is based on a bombing of a Jewish neighborhood in Buenos Aires. Anita has Down syndrome and lives with her mother. When the nearby Argentine Israelite Mutual Association is bombed, she ends up lost and on the streets. The movie is about her journey and the people she touches who cross her path.

"You want to make your audience happy, whether they have been coming 14 years or one year," Wagner-Peck said. "People are saying they love the crowd-pleasers, but they really want to see the films that filmmakers make that you would only see at a film festival."

The festival began in 1988. That first year, films -- videos, actually -- were shown in a local congregation.

Since then, the festival has upgraded its presentation and scope. This year, most films will be screened at Nickelodeon Cinemas in downtown Portland.

Over the years, the festival has shown more than 250 domestic and foreign films and attracted more than 70 artists from across the globe.

Attendance is up, and so is the prestige of the festival. It's among the smaller Jewish film festivals in the country, but it's done a good job landing important films and luring directors to town to talk about their work.

Success can be defined in a lot of ways. The quality of the films is one barometer, but a universal measuring stick is attendance.



[click image to enlarge](#)



In "Maya," a young actress checks herself into a mental institution in preparation for a role and walks a thin line between acting and madness.

Photos courtesy MJFF

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**WHEN:** Saturday through March 31. Opening-night party at 6 p.m. Saturday at Greenhut Galleries, 146 Middle St., Portland.

**WHERE:** Most screenings at Nickelodeon Cinemas, 1 Temple St., Portland

**HOW MUCH:** \$8 per screening (\$6 for students and seniors ages 66 and older). Opening-night tickets are \$35 (includes party and film).

**INFO AND SCHEDULE:**

[www.mjff.org](http://www.mjff.org)

Wagner-Peck said attendance at the Portland festival is up steadily, and last year it jumped 15 percent, suggesting a surge among new audience members. She expects to sell between 2,800 and 2,900 individual tickets this year.

According to festival statistics, each person who attends the festival sees an average of six films throughout the week.

"Those new audience members want independent films. Our tried and true does as well, but people want to feel like they are on the inside of something. The festival offers that," Wagner-Peck said.

"They want independent films, and these are people who are not necessarily Jewish. They are film buffs, and that is their motivation. They like our mission, and they are interested in the Jewish experience.

"But they really want independent films, and that is what they want us to give them."

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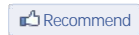

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"Simon Konianski" [click image to enlarge](#)  
is an oddball comedy out of Belgium.



"Anita," [click image to enlarge](#)  
from Argentina, tells the story of a young woman with Down syndrome.



"The Klezmatiks" [click image to enlarge](#)  
is an American documentary about the klezmer/world music band.



"Human Resources Manager" [click image to enlarge](#)  
is an Israeli tragic-comedy about the executive of a Jewish bakery transporting the ashes of a worker to her native Romania.

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