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Film Festival season kicks off today

By [Matt Dodge](#)

Mar 26, 2011 12:00 am

Maine's dramatic rocky shore and hard-living coastal villages may have provided the setting for many feature films, but once the A-Listers are back on the plane to Hollywood, the state is often reduced to little more than a brief mention somewhere towards the bottom of the credits.

But by embracing the finished product, the state may be finding a growing national niche.

What amounts to Maine's film festival season kicks off Saturday evening as the Maine Jewish Film Festival returns to Portland for its 14th year. Running through next Thursday, the MJFF brings nearly 20 films to screen at the Nickelodeon Cinema, Maine Historical Society and Salt Institute for Documentary Studies.

Next weekend, The Lewiston/Auburn Film Festival makes its 100-movie debut up in the twin cities, with the Maine International Film Festival and Camden International Film Festival to follow in July and September, respectively.

Ranging from documentaries and comedies to a Marx Brothers movie and an Israeli sitcom, this week's MJFF offers a range of work trying to pin down the Jewish experience through film in a number of genres. But don't worry Gentiles, organizers say there is something here for everyone.

"We're definitely aware that there aren't that many Jewish people here, so we have to be responsive to a diverse audience. This is an American film festival catering to a diaspora audience, so we have films from all over the world," said Audrey Farber, festival assistant.

The MJFF saw a 15 percent increase in attendance last year, with a nine percent increase in new attendees according to Kari Wagner-Peck, executive and artistic director of the festival, who said the figures were drawn from a post-festival survey that was very useful in programming for this year's event.

"They liked that there were less documentaries last year, and they wanted more features and more humor — they missed the shorts program from 2008, so we brought back shortish films," said Wagner-Peck. Tuesday's MISHMOSH, the MJFF's Shortish Film Program, will feature six short films from Israel, Ireland and the U.S.

Also making its triumphant return to the festival, the critically-acclaimed Israeli television sitcom "Arab Labor." Three episodes will be screened Monday night at the Nickelodeon Cinema.

"It's like Norman Lear meets Dave Chappelle except funnier, and I know that's hard to do," said Wagner-Peck.

The series — its title in colloquial Hebrew carries the connotation of second-rate work — focuses on the family and work life of a Palestinian journalist and Israeli citizen. Much of the series levity stems from the character's love-hate relationship with his Arab identity and his ambition to integrate comfortably into Israeli society. Created with both sides of the volatile political situation in mind, the show is written by a Palestinian and produced by an Israeli.

"It's edgy and irreverent, it's taking this powder keg situation and looking at the whole thing in much more comfortable light because you are laughing the whole time," she said.

"It's happening here"

Located just a short jaunt down I-95, Lewiston/ Auburn might be Maine's second largest metropolitan area after Portland, but it has seldom been described as a cultural Mecca.

While Bates College and a few local theatre companies strive to keep things interesting with dance, theatre and music performances, the twin cities often find themselves battling against decades of negative press and a stigma as "old mill towns."

The debut Lewiston/Auburn Film Festival wants to change all that, bringing over 100 feature length, short, documentary and experimental films to 12 venues.

"We're not this recovering mill town anymore, we're actually getting our feet on the ground," said Molly McGill, communications director for the festival.

"We wanted to bring something exciting to L/A, something the community can look forward to and we wanted to promote arts in some way. Film was just obvious choice because it hadn't been done here and L/A as a community hasn't been exposed much to indie film, " said McGill.

While accepting international films into the festival, McGill said organizers "had a strong focus on Maine — and part of the judging process was weighted toward L/A."

The festival will bestow awards on films in each of the four categories, plus awards for Best in Show and Best of Maine. McGill said films will be shown in genre-grouped blocks to allow attendees sample plenty of films before casting their vote.

Along with more traditional theatre settings, restaurants like Lewiston's Fish Bones American Grill will serve as unique venues for the event, turning their lobby area into a cozy viewing room complete with couches, a projector and a special popcorn blend.

"All the [restaurant] venues are doing special film-themed menus," said McGill.

Films at the festival run the gamut from the feature length documentaries to experimental shorts. Festival Headliner "Pal Hop Days" tells the story of a weekly Friday night music event that swept LA in 1964 known as the PAL HOP.

For more than three years, PAL HOP was the nucleus of one of the largest garage bands scenes in America, and the film from local filmmaker Bill Maroldo follows six of the original groups as they reunited for one final concert in the summer of 2010.