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Lights, Camera Action On Film Festival! Celluloid's Most Provocative Producers Find a Supportive Venue

By Giosue' Santarelli

California has long been recognized for its beautiful Pacific Ocean sunsets, grand earthquake fault lines and as the film making capitol of the world. The movie industry has permeated every corner of the costal cultural landscape.

That heritage gives rise to the second annual Action On Film (AOF) International Film Festival that is being held July 28-30 at the Long Beach Convention and Entertainment Center. "We have three days of films, a huge award and dinner show and then parties and other events" said Nick Covington an AOF festival public relations representative. AOF offers a venue that gives film makers a voice in the industry and a chance to be seen. It is a primary motivator for the formation of the event.

Not your father's film festival, this event is proactive and progressive in that the offerings include experimental films, animations, screenplays, stand alone scenes, action sequences. It's



also not spread out all over town in

Hollywood priced to suck your wallet dry. They have a

very refreshing and unique way of approaching the festival mentality, and their ultimate goal is to assist independent filmmakers in being seen and heard through the art of their films.

To that end AOF inked a deal with CustomFlix to become a full distributor of all of their films in the brand new AOF Library series. Given the fact that CustomFlix has just been bought out by Amazon.com the transaction should give

added muscle to getting its films seen and distributed.

The founders of this festival have staked claim to their niche and as the title suggests have parlayed the genre by joining forces with the Long beach International Martial Arts Championships a staple of the area since the 1960's. The grand daddy of all modern day tournaments, this year is the Championship's 50th anniversary.

The martial arts competition announced this year that the Walt Disney Wide World of Sports family will also be involved in the event. This year's intertwining of events will also include the joining of the Black Belt Magazine World Trade Show and Hall of Fame Events. Attendees are sure to see as much live activity as AOF can provide.

Don't let the name fool you! The film festival accepts comedy, drama, documentaries, and animation pieces too. Diversity is also part of its character and the professionals at the helm

offer a venue that has been viewed through the lens of a cinematographer. They understand the art, the artist and the avenues that need to intersect in order to further burgeoning and potential film careers.

Film maker Del Weston saw the need for a festival that gives independent producers and directors a place to display their efforts. Open to film entrants of every background, the attraction is for free thinking individuals without any specific affiliation to any particular group, studio or company. Given the amount of films entered Mr. Covington says that about one in six gets into the show so it's a pretty good shot for a film maker to get their stuff seen!

With the festival slated to show nearly 200 films this year and expecting enough quality products to expand by another 50% next year the AOF festival may be one of the fastest growing movie related proceedings around. With 7 screening rooms ranging from 50 seats to 250 and the Center Theater capacity at 825 it is easy to see how the three day festival will attract over 30,000 lovers of action, martial arts and film. The variety of theater sizes also allows for large audience pictures to be

viewed comfortably and also appropriate space for films requiring a more intimate setting.

Last years initial offering was quite a success and included the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award presentation to famed actor/producer David Carradine. Perhaps best known for his Kill Bill movies and break through television series



Kung Fu his very presence added instant credibility to AOF's launch. Additionally a who's who of martial arts celebrities are expected to be in abundance at the Championship Tournament.

Steven Williams of *X-Files* and *21 Jump Street* fame was also in attendance. This year expect to see Golden Globe winner John Saxon showcasing the limelight of notable actors, actresses and international martial artists. Mr. Saxon

who has been involved in over 200 films and TV shows will be premiering his new film *The Craving Heart* at this year's festival. Legendary animator Phil Mendez is also scheduled to be among the Hollywood Royalty in attendance. There promises to be surprise guests this year that should stun those in attendance too!

One major advisor to the festival has been Alan Baily who has been a major studio executive for the last 25 years and who Covington says has been instrumental in the events success. Frank Trjeo and Steve Cooper who own the Martial Arts Tournament have sought to expand the show, hence the hook up with Disney. All of that action only helps AOF's star to rise among reputations of film festivals. On top of that they refuse to settle for the status quo year to year. Look for this festival to grow with each subsequent year, both in size and scope. The names Cannes and Sundance, the mention of which sends directors and actors hearts all a flutter, has another rival! This venue someday may achieve such international acclaim and froth. Realize that AOF is really just beginning its festival trek and can bask in the simplicities and offer experimental and progressive ideas that other

mega named events no longer can.

With many cities seemingly offering up some rendition of a film festival it is important to note that the AOF festival is mandated by their sponsors to actively recruit 30% of the films they show. In addition to the hundred's of other entrants there is a fairly decent chance an up-and-coming film maker will get some attention at AOF. Also unlike other spots the support for artists is real and definable. This is not necessarily a place to show this year's flick and then be forgotten as an artist. For example last year's best actress winner Blythe Metz is doing a documentary and AOF is producing it for her. They are providing the cameras, editing equipment, labor and virtually all the hardware necessary. That is concrete support many artists find lacking in the industry at an early stage in a director's career. Many talents have been smothered for lack of just this kind of sustenance.

Awards can be great for spurring on artists and film makers, getting them exposure but aside from the ego stroke, the recognition and advancement opportunities offered by this festival are also surprising. One wittier screen writer ended up opening up his own

production company and crediting AOF with a lot of his success. Another was catapulted from several category wins and was invited to speak to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). They both were also featured in Hollywood Scriptwriter Magazine. It is apparent that AOF can open up doors for quality film makers.

In addition to the rigorous 3 days of activities, one natural benefit to the festival is its proximity to the Pacific Ocean, world class hotels, superior restaurants and entertainment venues. Add to that the nightlife, an aquarium, and even the Queen Mary, all in a half mile proximity to the convention center, and you've got a recipe for 3 nonstop days and nights of film, food, fun and frothy action by some of the worlds most renown artists.

As for the film makers for whom the festival was founded -- there are awards, recognition and yes, even actual prizes. Being cited is a sign of respect that many film makers would suffer to find but this festival is a great place to guarantee that their work will be seen for years to come. Put that on top of the potential distribution deals and the festival becomes irresistible

for aspiring film moguls. This year 50 film makers will get professional DVD mastering, artwork, packaging, and distribution at no charge. That arrangement is enough to make a seasoned film pro salivate at the potential.

Perhaps the biggest perk is that the event is attended by investors and production company representatives. These companies and individuals bring together industry movers and shakers with the aspiring film makers. The potential for a connection is there. Most film makers don't get the chance for their efforts to be seen and perhaps garner quick response. Last year's 15 investors and nearly two dozen production companies are expected to be surpassed in numbers making this years festival even that much more attractive for artists.

According to Mr. Covington regardless of the subject matter the most successful films were the ones that the film maker's supported and promoted. It is a great venue with industry professionals in attendance, but it still is up to the film's producer to push it, talk about it and present it in the most positive light.

As with most important functions of note a

panel discussion is scheduled at the festival dealing with successful *independent film making*. Bringing together knowledgeable professionals with those seeking guidance and offering hard knock experience, the session is guaranteed to be enlightening.

Mr. Covington cites letters from individuals to festival organizers stating that AOF has played a major part in helping them get their next project under way. Last year's Breakout Action Star, Steve Cirbus, has two new films entered this year one in which he acts, and the other he wrote produced, and directed. Some of the reason he has these offerings is in part to his experience with AOF.

There are a number of film festivals that charge movie goers by the amount of films screened. The AOF festival charges only per day. For \$15 you can see as much as you want for the one low price. For a full weekend pass the cost is only \$35 if you purchase tickets in advance. Film makers are offered submission discounts and every accepted film maker gets two free passes to the festival.

Resembling a mini Academy Awards ceremony the award show offered at the

festival is only \$35 -- add dinner to the show all for \$75. You can purchase tickets to the event at the www.aoffest.com website in advance (which is less expensive) or at the door. A variety of passes are available depending on how much you want to see and do at the festival.

With the incorporation of all kinds of film makers, films, projects, and people AOF is striving to give both the film maker and the audience reasons to come back. Given their statistics that 60% of past entrants resubmitted projects again this year it seems they are achieving their goals of giving artists and viewer a festival to call home.

Some special memories are certainly in the offing this year if the initial festival is any indication. Take for example that the youngest film maker in last years festival, a college student, was turned down at the film school of his choice. With the recommendation of AOF officials his passion helped him gain entrance after all. The film *Bred In The Bone* became an award winner in multiple venues as did about 15 other pictures that were screened at AOF's initial festival. Steven Williams who has attained a lengthy body of work had

never been recognized nor received an award before last year. He won best Actor for his work in James Marlowe's *Graves' End*.

Making a difference in the lives of film makers has AOF officials hoisting out their chest with pride and rightfully so. Given the association with The Martial Arts Tournament the one of a kind weekend is becoming an important one for creators and aficionados of film and sport alike.

Mr. Covington summed it all up nicely. He said "it's all entertainment when you get down to it. We're just the first to put so much together in one space at one time and to tie them up professionally."

For more information on purchasing tickets to AOF Festival, go to www.aoffest.com.

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