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A Cinematic Feast

Railroad Square plays host to Maine film festival

By Stephen Collins '74

Ken Eisen '73, who cut his cinematic teeth in the alternative and art movie theaters in Washington, D.C., says with a mixture of pride and disappointment, "Now you can't see films in D.C. as strange as those you can see in Waterville." Pride because it is his Railroad Square Cinema that makes Waterville one of the best cities in the East for viewing strange and wondrous and provocative films; disappointment because the nation's capital's inability to support an art-house cinema is evidence that his passion and livelihood teeters on the margin of sustainable commerce.

One thing Washington and Waterville have in common as of this summer, though, is a hot international film festival. Eisen and Railroad Square partners Gail Chase '74 and Lea Girardin (formerly an audiovisual specialist in the Colby libraries and now director of the Maine Film Office) are among the founders of the Maine International Film Festival (MIFF), which screened more than 40 films July 10-19 at Railroad Square, the Waterville Opera House and the arts and community center in the former Sterns building.

During the 10-day festival, central Maine residents, tourists and film buffs from far and wide watched movies as familiar as *Nobody's Fool* and *Z* and as foreign as entries from India,

Iran, Algeria and Tibet.

Besides showing a mix of independent, foreign and Maine-based films, MIFF organizers brought innovative filmmakers to Waterville to discuss their work. Frederick Wiseman, probably America's best-known documentary filmmaker, discussed his latest work, *Public Housing*, shot in the Ida B. Wells project in Chicago, and Ted Hope, co-founder of the most important independent production company in the U.S., Good Machine, was on hand to introduce five of his productions, including Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*.

Eisen said he and Girardin conceived of a Maine film festival 15 years ago, shortly after their first of 17 trips to the Montreal Film Festival. "In the past few years, film festivals have really taken off—the Washington festival is a good example of that," he said. Eisen, who's been to scores of film fests in about a dozen different cities, said the concentrated format and visibility of festivals are "a great way to excite people about film. People will line up at 9 a.m. to see six obscure films from Latvia that they've never heard of and would be unlikely to attend the other 51 weeks of the year."

One of the tantalizing aspects of festivals is the freshness of the material, most of which comes from outside of the major Hollywood studios' distribution ma-



chines. "No critic has told you what to think about these films, and no bazillion-dollar advertising campaign told you how to respond," Eisen said.

For July's festival, 43 movies were chosen from some 200 entries—some excellent, others (among those not chosen) dreadful, Eisen said. Initially organizers planned to show fewer films, but the number grew each time they discovered a gem in the pre-festival selection process. Among those that made the cut was *Larga Distancia*, which Eisen described as a film "beautifully shot in Baja California." A feature-length, sort-of-a-romance road movie, it was made by independent filmmakers Dakota Glenn '92 and Greg Smith '91 and includes an appearance by actor

Scott Glenn, Dakota's father.

In conjunction with MIFF, Portland filmmaker Huey Coleman '70 moved the 21st annual Maine Student Film and Video Festival from Portland to Waterville. Maine kids 19 and younger submitted entries that were screened and judged the first Saturday during the festival.

Eisen, who reviews movies for *Maine Times* and teaches film courses during the January term each year at Colby, maintains that cinema is "more captivating than any other medium." On one level it's the timeless art of storytelling, he says. On another, "it's a form of collective dreaming projected on the screen in front of us. And it's a way to experience other people and other countries—other realities." ♦