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Lights, Camera...Wisconsin!

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by Mary Bergin

Thanks to new incentive plans, a growing slate of film festivals and a bona fide big-shot cinema, Wisconsin now is ready for its Hollywood close-up.

When actor Robert Redford created the new Sundance Cinemas 608 in Madison, he envisioned not a typical movie theater, but a space to foster creative thinking and support artistic endeavors. He wanted visitors to watch the films and discuss with others what they had just witnessed.

"The citizens of Madison are well-educated, enjoy their lifestyles and have historically been big supporters of art and independent film," says Nancy Gribler, vice president of marketing, Sundance Cinemas. "We hope to host many community and festival events."

Redford's approach makes Sundance Cinemas 608 unusual. The primary focus is movies—documentaries, artistic pieces and indie films—but the three-story, six-screen entertainment complex also harbors live music, a gift shop that sells local art, lounges with leather couches, a coffee shop that opens at 7 a.m. and a white-linen bistro-styled restaurant and bar.

A computer kiosk provides film synopses and reviews. Theatergoers enjoy reserved seating in plush seats that gently rock. Couples even can lift the armrest between them and snuggle. Each theater features surround-sound speakers, and no commercials disturb the prefilm experience.

Other touches strengthen the one-of-a-kind sense of place, such as counters and tables made from wood reclaimed from the bottom of the Great Lakes and a rooftop bar. Access to the building doesn't require a movie ticket.

Sundance Cinemas 608 is the first movie theater project for Redford, whose Sundance Institute and annual Sundance Film Festival in Utah have long been associated with quality, independently produced films. His second complex, Sundance Cinemas Kabuki, opened this year in Japan Town, San Francisco.



Wisconsin Film Festival.

Festivals of Films

Sundance Cinemas 608 is only the most recent example of the state's widening embrace of avant-garde films. Fans and producers of independent films are migrating to Wisconsin for annual festivals that encourage imaginative, high-quality, low-budget moviemaking.

Milwaukee's fifth-annual International Film Festival, Sept. 20–30, bridges varied cultures through an eclectic array of entertainment. Visitors can view more than 140 films at multiple venues. Highlights include the 12-state Midwest Filmmaker Competition, the 24-Hour Film Contest (based on a one-word theme) and the Student Screenwriting Competition for local high schoolers.

The springtime Wisconsin Film Festival in Madison, encompasses four days of film showings at 10 downtown theaters. This year's event featured more than 150 films, in partnership with the outreach work of the Arts Institute at the University of Wisconsin.

Some fans—like Karla Hill of Lake Geneva, whose son, Mason, directed *The Captain and Me*—support filmmakers by showing up in costume. In this case, Hill and a dozen others dressed as pirates to honor Mason's short, silent-film-style comedy. Following the films, directors or others involved in the project answer audience questions.

The Beloit International Film Festival, or BIFF, this year showed 100-plus films from 26 nations. The annual January event, associated with Beloit College, moves movie viewing into restaurant and church settings.

At all three festivals, selected works include documentaries, shorts, feature-length films and animation. Parties, workshops and panel discussions turn the events into learning and social experiences.

A newcomer to the festival scene, the second-annual ICFLM (It Came From Lake



Sundance Cinemas 608.

Michigan!) film festival, a sci-fi, horror and fantasy/surreal gathering, occurs Oct. 26–28 at Wisconsin State Fair Park in West Allis. The location allows for inexpensive, dorm-style lodging and lots of room for festival events, which include costume parties, "red carpet" premieres of *Exile* and *The Black Hodag*, classic film screenings and workshops on topics such as inexpensive special effects.



Awards for Beloit International Film Festival.

Setting the Stage

Until now, Wisconsin's film presence in big-budget Hollywood projects has been sporadic: baseball stadium scenes in *Major League* with Charlie Sheen and *Mr. 3000* with Bernie Mac, various lakeside shots in *Chain Reaction* with Morgan Freeman and Keanu Reeves, and Madison campus cuts in *Back to School* with the late Rodney Dangerfield.

Scott Robbe with the nonprofit Film Wisconsin Inc. hopes to change that. Robbe's organization educates movie producers about the state's picturesque charm as well as new funding and tax incentives.

"There are a lot of unique locations that aren't known to filmmakers," Robbe says. "That includes turn-of-the-century European architecture, the Calatrava-designed Milwaukee Art Museum addition and the vistas of the Mississippi River Valley. They all are extremely cinematic."

Robbe predicts a very bright future for both TV and film production as the state's financial incentives and natural beauty become more well-known. Get ready Hollywood—Wisconsin's ready for stardom.

More Cinema Landmarks

ORIENTAL THEATRE

No other theater has given 1975's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* a longer run than Milwaukee's Oriental Theatre. The campy cult hit plays at midnight on the second Saturday of most months. Built in 1927, the three-screen cinema bursts with well-preserved East Indian décor, such as murals and statues of Buddha, elephants and lions. The pipe organ is one of the biggest of its kind in a U.S. theater. 414-276-8711. The Iowa State Fair achieved fame as the subject of Phil Stong's 1932 novel *State Fair*. The book then inspired three movies and a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. The fair still maintains the old-fashioned feel captured in the movies, with dairy princesses, hog calling contests, fast-talking barkers and rows of stock barns filled with well-coiffed cows and pigs.

THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

Velvet seats and marble fireplaces still grace The Grand Opera House in Oshkosh, an 1883 Victorian theater with near-perfect acoustics. Today, the National Register of Historic Places hall hosts live concerts, theater and occasional movies. Before the city acquired the theater, The Grand was an X-rated venue and site of the 1976 made-for-TV movie *Exit Dying*. 920-424-2350.

AL. RINGLING THEATRE

Al. Ringling Theatre in Baraboo exists because the namesake circus founder wanted a majestic, European-style opera house in his hometown. The theater ran its first film in 1915, about seven weeks before the benefactor died. Today, seasonal theater tours include a demo of a Barton organ. Restoration efforts are ongoing. 608-356-8864.

STRAND THEATRE

When *The Wizard of Oz* made its worldwide premiere Aug. 12, 1939, the film was shown not in Hollywood, but Oconomowoc. Although the city's historically significant Strand Theatre, where the classic premiered, no longer exists, a handful of vintage Wisconsin theaters still thrive.

MABEL TAINTER THEATER

The 1889 Mabel Tainter Theater in Menomonie was named after a local girl who loved the arts but died at age 19. The theater's 313 seats come in four widths—small to extra large. Victorian touches include a restored 1,597-pipe organ, hand-carved woodwork and hand stenciling. 715-235-0001.


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