



WORLD COMMUNITY FILM FESTIVAL
25TH ANNIVERSARY

Changing the World, One Frame at a Time

By David Morrison

In certain ways I am a creature of habit. I enjoy my routines, and being organized, with both work and social plans in place for weeks and months ahead. In this regard, over the last few years some annually staged events have become personal traditions, meaning things I simply must or will not miss. One such example is the two-day World Community Film Festival (WCFF) in February, presented across four Courtenay venues handily situated mere yards from each other. Screening documentaries principally concerned with social justice and environmental issues, it is an event that has unfailingly put fire in my belly to make positive changes in my life, to become engaged with causes that matter, and to spread the word to that end. This is just one reason, but a big one, as to why the WCFF is so very important.

In 2016 the WCFF reaches the amazing milestone of its 25th Anniversary, and to put that in context I know attendees who were in diapers when the first one was held. In these days of Netflix and download convenience the WCFF's longevity is testament not only to its status as being as inspirational and

educational as it is entertaining, but also a tribute to the incredibly hard work of the many volunteers that have passionately driven it for a quarter-century. At the helm of this force for good have been WCFF founder Wayne Bradley and Janet Fairbanks, with whom I chatted recently.

Of the WCFF's origins two-and-a-half decades ago, Wayne says: "The festival was the bright idea of a friend of ours who was involved with Cuso International (Canadian University Services Overseas) in Vancouver. There weren't a lot of film festivals around back then, and I'd never even been to one!" As Janet recalls, it immediately captured local imaginations: "The very first festival may have even had the largest attendance! There were hundreds of people, but it also ran for a third day, which we did for the first two or three years." As Wayne explains, the organizers were astonished at the turnout: "I was stunned! I was really skeptical we could do it, but we did it and could not believe the community response."

These days, such is its standing and enduring appeal that the WCFF attracts attendees not only from the

Comox Valley, but routinely from all over Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland and considerably further afield. "We even have a couple come from Winnipeg, who stumbled across us because they came here for a holiday," chuckles Wayne. "Now they come every year!" If you, dear reader, have not yet attended the WCFF and may view such a journey as unfathomable simply to watch a few films, let me tell you as one who has that it is worth every cent in fare or gas, every kilometre traveled. The WCFF is inspiring, empowering, moving, fascinating, vital and beautiful. Trust me.

If the festival has one drawback, however, it is trying to decide what to watch - akin to selecting the juiciest strawberry! The programming is of such a high quality and widespread interest that across the four venues there are always clashes that my wife and I usually need to settle (in advance) by the flip of a coin! The 25th WCFF presents the same problem for us, with an embarrassment of documentary riches as usual, but all in all it is a nice problem to have.

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A few highlights of WCFE 25 definitely worth noting:

The opening night feature, with a title echoing the *raison d'être* of the WCFE, is *How to Change the World*. Examining the early days of Greenpeace (founded in Vancouver, of course) and the heroic actions of the group's original members, the WCFE screening will be graced by the presence of one of those brave early activists, Rex Weyler, for a Q&A session. A packed house is guaranteed.

Saturday brings a full day of powerful films so potentially riveting that in truth it is difficult to recommend any individual documentary or suggested schedule. (Where did we put that coin?) From a personal perspective, as a music industry veteran I am looking forward to *Following the Ninth: In the Footsteps of Beethoven's Final Symphony*, a study of the significance of Op. 125 as the stirring soundtrack to protests and resistance around the globe. *Landfill Harmonic*, a profile of the Paraguayan kids of the Recycled Orchestra of Cateura, whose instruments are made entirely from garbage, also looks remarkable.

A lot of ground will be covered on the Saturday, especially concerning First Nations affairs and history; environmental issues, the exploitation of labour, and the good work being done by so many to alleviate suffering and oppose oppression the world over. There will be films of provincial and national interest, and at various junctures stops in the US, Australia, France, Japan, China, Egypt, West Africa, Honduras, Chile; the Hawaiian island of Kauai and, to close out the festival in epic style, Haida Gwaii.



Consider, however, that the program for WCFE 25 has been painstakingly pieced together from scores of films watched by the selection committee pretty much since the curtain went down on 2015's event.

"There are so many fabulous films we could screen, so paring the list down is a major challenge," says Janet. "We're watching them all year. We find that the ones that follow a character, or just a few characters, are the ones that stay with you. And we try to make sure we're covering as many parts of the world as we can, as well as local and Canadian films that look at what we are doing in Canada that affects the whole world."

"The criteria for selection is something of a melting pot," continues Wayne. "We like to have films that present some historic perspective, and have to always think of what the issues of the day might be. We look at others festivals' films, as their audience award winners are often the most popular films at our festival. Over time we've learned to recognize the types of films that people will be attracted to. Films about food issues, for example, are always really popular, and the dynamics in the community and the broader country will often automatically direct you to a certain theme – First Nations films, for example – because there is a focus of energy going into the making of those films. We tap into that energy and try to use it to inspire people."

"Although we screen films with some kind of message, we like 'entertainment'

and uplifting stories as well," Janet interjects, "but we do work very hard to try to find truly inspiring stories." I for one, and my wife for two, can attest to the fact that the hard work has paid off.

I could have talked to Janet and Wayne all day long. I haven't even touched on the interesting topics of how Wayne calculates potential educational opportunities from average individual viewings, or the nitty gritty programming complexities of staging this event, or the positive impact of the evolution of filmmaking and screening technology on the festival – maybe next time – or, indeed, the changes Janet and Wayne have made in their own lives, not necessarily as a direct consequence of their involvement, but of the festival content that has inspired them as viewers. That's what the World Community Film Festival does, and is for.

See you there, then? Look out for us; we'll be sat next to the couple from Winnipeg. ~

The 25th Anniversary of the World Community Film Festival will be held at four venues in downtown Courtenay on Friday, February 5th and Saturday, February 6th. For full programming details please visit www.worldcommunity.ca/film-festival or contact Janet Fairbanks and Wayne Bradley on (250) 337-5412 or by email at wcfilmfest@gmail.com. Tickets are on sale now from the box office at the Sid Williams Theatre, 442 Cliffe Ave., Courtenay (Tuesday to Saturday 10:00am – 4:00pm). Tickets can be purchased in person, by telephone on 1-866-898-8499 (toll free) or (250) 338-2430, Ext. 1, or online at sidwilliamstheatre.com/tickets. ~

