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Photograph by Stephen Laufer



Jane Sullivan, director of the Santa Cruz Film Festival.

Hat Trick

All it takes to put on the Santa Cruz Film Festival's third year is blood, sweat, tears, 74 films and some behind-the-scenes abracadabra

By Sarah Phelan

Blonde, beautiful and ballsy, Jane Sullivan, the director of the Santa Cruz Film Festival, doesn't hesitate when asked to describe her role in the fest's third annual celebration of independent film.

"That of a coyote, that magical jester that runs around," she replies in a voice so husky they should give her a radio show. "No one knows the coyote is there, but it brings a lot of strange delight to people as it keeps on circling the perimeter, bringing laughter, making sure everything is going well and turning the bad into positive."

With 74 films showing in the space of nine days, there's an awful lot of strange delight for one coyote to spread. But she clearly thrives on the pressure, as do her co-conspirators Arlene Maltman and Johnny Davis, the festival's communications director and director of programming, respectively.

The festival team has also taken on a more manageable amount of coyote mischief, paring down last year's program of 154 films by more than half. This year's theme is moving pictures and the celebration of art in the cinematic world.

"This time we're celebrating artists," says Sullivan, "and in this century, artists can do so many things. Artists try to hack away at the human condition, and these days they're doing it in lots of different ways, which is why we have *Greendale*, a film by Neil Young on opening night, and Ray Manzarek's directorial debut, *Love Her Madly*, on closing night."

Undercover Ant Farmers

One of the fringe benefits of launching a film festival is all the people you meet, says Sullivan, and the proximity it brings you to truly talented souls. For instance, she met Chip Lord, UCSC's chair of film and digital media, as a film festival colleague, but had no idea he was part of the Ant Farm, the San Francisco art collective that created Cadillac Ranch and Media Burn.

A conceptual artist in her own right, Sullivan says she has been personally influenced by the Ant Farm collective's work since the '70s, but she didn't realize the connection until she noticed that he was the director of the *Ant Farm* DVD, "because he wasn't tooting his horn."

Now that the secret, as it were, is out, Lord will walk audiences through the DVD at the release party the festival will throw for it on May 14.

And then there's the case of Jim Mazzeo, a struggling artist who did two covers for Neil Young albums and ended up in *Greendale*, which Young directed under the pseudonym of Bernard Shakey.

"All this time, Mazzeo lived around the corner from me in Seabright, in the same house where Neil Young stayed, and I had no idea," says Sullivan.

While there are some big names in this year's festival, the focus on artists like Lord and Mazzeo (and even Manzarek, at least as a director) gives exposure to artists who usually aren't in the public eye.

"You look in *US* and *People* magazine for the last six months and you'll see the same nine people. I'm sorry, but *Friends* being canceled is not the end of a cultural era," says Sullivan. "*MASH*, maybe, but not *Friends*."

Sullivan also notes that at least 60 percent of the films in this year's festival have never had a bit of press.

"So, our duty is to start getting the awareness to people," she says. "Even the truly independent media still review the same old Hollywood drivel. There's a machine there. Film festivals are the only little window people get to see truly independent fare."

New Gods and Empty Buildings

Asked what films touched her personally, Sullivan names David Holbrooke's provocative *Time for a New God*, David Lebrun's 22-years-in-the-making documentary *Proteus* and *In the Company of Women*, a feature-length examination of women in independent film, which includes luminaries like Jodie Foster, Maggie Gyllenhal, Rosie Perez, Susan Sarandon, Nancy Savoca and Tilda Swanton.

Sullivan credits this year's selection of films to the hard work of her board of directors--Cynthia Begin, Poppy DeGarmo, Mike Gendimencio, Sean Kelly, Cheri Lovedog, Jesse Nickel III, Dina Scoppettone and Eric Thiermann--and input from longtime local arts supporters like Bruce Bratton.

"We've opened up the selection process; we've tried to give more people greater access and listened to more opinions," he says.

However, while people can have their opinion and critique a film, the selection step is the hardest. Everyone can be a critic, but to choose something for public consumption is taking a risk, whether the subject matter be disturbing, as in Giovanni Sanseviero's child-molestation-themed *Empty Building*, or existential, as in Franco Pavoli's *At the First Breath of Wind*, which Sullivan describes as "not your typical Cineplex fare, with only four lines of dialogue." (As it happens, back in the '80s, Sullivan guerrilla-marketed Pavoli's film *Blue Planet* with her friend, Fellini actor Bruno Bossio. That film had no dialogue and had a

successful run in Santa Cruz, according to the Nickeloden's Jim Schwenterly.)

Sullivan says the festival decided to lower the ticket price (\$6 regular, \$5 students and seniors), to make the fest more accessible.

And for the first time, festivalgoers will have the opportunity to buy a \$100 festival pass, which gives them access to all 74 films, as well as everything from panel discussions about film financing, distribution and access to all the afterparties. The latter will include events at the MAH, Blue Lagoon and Soif Wine Bar, as well as a rave at Running Dog studio, a special event at the Drive In, a May 16 Surf Night with the Fue and surf pschedelic band the Merman at Positively Front Street, and a closing night performance by Ray Manzarek of the Doors at the Rio May 21.

"The pass is probably worth \$200," smiles Sullivan, "and you'll be supporting the festival. I understand how difficult it is to live in Santa Cruz and I understand when people can't come, but I believe in supporting the things you believe in."

That said, Sullivan knows the film fest has already acted as a catalyst and will continue to spark more creative and film-related endeavors in a town, which, who knows, could one day become Cannes West.

"Time was when people used to say of Santa Cruz, 'Throw a stone and you'll hit a healer.' Well now it's, 'Throw a stone and you'll hit a screenwriter,' in that people are discovering their dark experiences and healing themselves by writing about it. And that's a great step. I mean, how many people live an unexamined life?"

The **Santa Cruz Film Festival** plays May 13-21 at various venues around the county. Call 831.459.7676 for details or check the fest's website at www.santacruzfilmfestival.com.