

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mammoth Lakes Film Festival — Great Films, Just A Drive Away

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, May 25th, 2016

From the line-up, you would never guess that the **Mammoth Lakes Film Festival** is only in its second year. It has the appearance of a well-oiled, expertly curated, more established film festival. Mammoth Lakes Film Festival kicks off this evening, Wednesday, May 25, at 7:00 pm, at Minaret Cinemas, Mammoth Lakes, with a screening of the Sundance award winning feature film *Operation Avalanche*, and it continues all throughout the Memorial Day weekend. I was pleased to learn more about this marvelous venture in conversation with Mammoth Lakes Film Festival founder and director Shira Dubrovner.



Helmut Berger, "Helmut Berger, Actor." Photo courtesy of Mammoth Lakes Film Festival.

Sophia Stein: I received an email from publicist Matt Johnstone just last week inviting me to the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival. And I'm like Mammoth Lakes Film Festival? I've never heard of a Mammoth Lakes Film Festival. But what a great idea! ... So I looked up your festival online, and I noticed that the opening night film is *Operation Avalanche* (which generated phenomenal buzz at Sundance and won the Jury Prize for Directing this year) and the closing night film is *Sonita* (which won the International Prize for Best Documentary at Sundance and was a personal favorite) — and I thought whoever is directing this festival, knows what she is doing!

Shira Dubrovner: Thank you! (Oh, my gosh.) Well, I can't really take credit for all of that — I try to always surround myself with people that really know what they're doing, so they make me look good. I've hired an amazing programmer, Paul Sbrizzi, and I love what we have created. Paul and I met in film school at L.A. City College about twenty years ago. He was a year behind me in the program, but our circles kind of always inter-mingled. His films were really outrageous and very artistic. I always admired his work. We lost touch when I decided to leave L.A. to return to Mammoth where I had lived in my early twenties. I had always wanted to move back. I thought that it would be really cool to have a small community theatre, kind of like those small equity waiver theatres in L.A. that they build in these makeshift storefronts, in this town. I was feeling like it was time for me to leave the big city. I wanted to be part of a small community with a small town feeling. So I moved to Mammoth and started a one-hundred seat community theatre that has consumed my life for the past ten years. ... But then I started missing being involved in film. I knew that Paul had been involved in film festivals for the past fifteen years — programming with Slamdance, LA Film Fest, and many others. Paul is a true artist. I've always loved his artistic integrity. So I thought that he'd be the perfect person to partner with to create a film festival here in Mammoth Lakes.

Sophia: What is your personal connection to Mammoth Lakes?

Shira: In my twenties, I was doing a lot of rock climbing. I had a rock climbing boyfriend; we lived in Yosemite in the summers and Mammoth Lakes in the winters. Then I moved to L.A. and started doing independent films and equity waiver theatre. I was feeling very lonely. You're in this big city, and you don't even know your neighbors. You can drive around the whole day and not see one person you know. I was starting to miss feeling like part of a community. Even though I was doing well, I was working with some very reputable people, I still felt alone. I wanted to get at the heart of a community. So I made the decision to move back to Mammoth. I always remembered how warm and welcoming it had been. If you were feeling down, you could go to the grocery store, and say "hi" to this person and "hi" to that person, and it kind of uplifts you. It makes you happy just because you're around people you love.

Sophia: The festival will be screening 17 features over five days. You have articulated your goal: "[To] find those nuggets of gold, of true artistry, and not go too commercial." Can you talk about what you and Paul are looking for when you select the films?

Shira: Paul watches over a thousand films a year. He has this incredible, uncanny ability to watch a lot of films. So, you know, nothing gets past him. The tricks don't get past him. You go through these phases where independent films all seem to have the same kind of story, even though it's told a little bit differently, it seems the same, everybody is on the same bandwagon. Paul really digs through that haystack to find that needle. He tries to find someone who has a really independent, specific, original voice, where their artistry is given expression in their filmmaking. He's patient; he will really wait to find those artists. You'll see that in our shorts programming. Also, Paul likes to identify filmmakers that are risk-takers. We're on that same page, in that regard. I feel that if you are the kind of person to choose to live this life style in the mountains, you are not living a conventional, easy life. It's always a struggle living in a small town – especially, in a resort town. You are sacrificing convenience for physical beauty and a certain quality of life. I feel that ideology and mindset goes for an independent filmmaker, as well. An indie filmmaker is going to do whatever it takes to make their film happen. They're not going to compromise, and they're not going to conform to what Hollywood wants. They're going to stick to their guns, live life, and speak their truth the way they see it. So I feel like Mammoth Lakes is a good match for an independent film festival.

Sophia: I read that one of your intentions with the festival is to prompt audiences to be more adventurous with what they see on the big screen. Are there any titles this year that particularly push that envelope?

Shira: Um, yeah. [She laughs a knowing laugh.] We have *Helmut Berger, Actor* (that's the title of the film). It definitely is an edgy film. A lot of festivals have been afraid to program it. We don't want to be like that! We say, we're going to program it, and it's up to the audience to accept that they are going to be pushed challenged by this festival. That's what they expect from our festival.

Sophia: In what ways is *Helmut Berger, Actor* challenging?

Shira: Let's see, how do I put this? It's kind of *Grey Gardens* on steroids. I don't want to give anything away – that's the problem with trying to explain how it pushes the envelope — but trust me, it does! I feel like Mammoth will never be the same after this screening.

Sophia: What are some additional highlights of 2016 Mammoth Lakes Film Festival that we can anticipate?

Shira: As you mentioned, the opening and closing night selections, *Operation Avalanche* and *Sonita*, are two amazing films. I am really proud of the Sierra Spirit Award that we will present to filmmaker Joe Dante on Saturday night, and we will be screening his sci-fi comedy, *Innerspace*. I feel that Joe Dante exemplifies the independent filmmaker's spirit. His personality and voice come through in all his films: be it the early cult classics (like *Piranha* and *The Howling*), big budget

Hollywood features (*Gremlins*), or explorations of storytelling in emerging technologies and forms (such as his 3D thriller *The Hole*, that garnered the first-ever award for Best 3D Feature at the Venice Film Festival when it premiered). We want to celebrate his success in contributing to the entertainment industry in the all the ways he does, while staying true to his own voice.

Sophia: I have got to tell you, my husband, who is a big Trekkie, is really excited about the Q&A following the Centerpiece screening and award ceremony: Joe Dante onstage in conversation with actor Robert Picardo (*Star Trek: Voyager*). How did you get Picardo to become involved?

Shira: I directed a play in an equity waiver theatre in L.A. with Robert. He was the star of *Broken Glass* by Arthur Miller. I loved working with him. First of all, he's an amazing actor. He is so captivating on stage, you cannot take your eyes off of him. (I don't even think he realizes how good he is.) Even when the other actors on stage are speaking, your eyes always gravitate to Robert. So I've kept in touch with him. I've brought him to Mammoth a few times to do staged readings. He's good friends with Joe Dante and that's where the whole idea started. (That is so funny, these Trekkies are really loyal fans!)

Sophia: Another of your goals is to discover new talent — filmmakers who “when you see them five years later are up for an Academy Award.”

Shira: Director Leonardo Guerra Seragnoli (*Last Summer*) is an Italian filmmaker who lives in London now. I definitely think that he is on the cusp of being one of those filmmakers that you're going to see a lot more of. Obviously, Matt Johnson of *Operation Avalanche* is another one.

Back in 2013, Matt directed *The Dirties*, and none of the A-List film festivals wanted to touch it because it was so controversial at the time. He made this movie about this kid who wants to kill all these bullies, shoot them up at school. And then it was happening in real life — you know, that whole art imitating life, life imitating art. So nobody would touch it, except Slamdance. Of course, this year, everybody programmed *Operation Avalanche*. I think that *Sonita* [directed by Roksareh Ghaemmaghami] will probably be nominated for an Academy-award.

Sophia: *Sonita* is one of the most powerful films that I've ever seen about the commoditization of women and about what it takes to make art. I'm so with you in thinking that it should score a nod for the Oscar.

MovieMaker Magazine named Mammoth Lakes Film Festival as “one of 50 film festivals worth the entry fee.” You offer these phenomenal prizes and program amazing adventures for your filmmaker guests in attendance.

Shira: We are lucky because of our location; we're so close to L.A., and so we have a lot of industry people who own second homes here. Ever since I started the film festival, they have been coming out of the woodwork to support us. We have gotten a lot of great sponsors to give away great prizes. The narrative feature winner gets a \$10,000 camera grant package from Panavision and a \$10,000 post production package from Light Iron. The feature documentary winner will receive a Scarlet Red Camera. They each get \$1,000, as well. The short winners in each category are awarded a GoPro Camera and \$500. We give out two audience awards, as well, and those filmmakers also receive GoPro Cameras. In total, we're giving away about \$40,000 of cash and prizes. Additionally, we house the filmmakers and provide a stipend to offset their travel expenses.

The landscape here is so beautiful that we can't bring up all of these filmmakers and not take them around! So we take them to the ghost town of Bodie, which is one of the top five ghost towns in America. Mammoth Rock 'n' Bowl has a great night where they turn off all the lights, and just have neon lights, rock 'n' roll, and bowling in the dark. It's a lot of fun. We'll be doing that Friday night. We provide the filmmakers with visitor packets and encourage them to go on some excursions on their own. The natural hot springs, for example, that's kind of on the down low;

we'll tell them where they're located, and they're on their own to get there. This year, we have filmmakers representing around 26 films. They will bring anywhere from 2-10 cast and crew members along with them, so we are expecting to host about 60 filmmakers, plus the jurors. We really want to get the filmmakers here because I feel like there's no festival if you don't have the filmmakers.

We hope that everyone leaves the area fully charged and inspired to keep going with their careers. I feel like artists need these jumpstarts, these moments of encouragement in their lives. Because sometimes, it's a roller-coaster ride, being a filmmaker. I feel like giving them these supportive, inspirational experiences by being in this area and having the opportunity to meet people like Joe Dante, hopefully, they will be revved up for their next films. That's what we hope they leave with.

Sophia: Who are your jurors for the competition this year?

Shira: We have John Fielders, who worked as an executive at Columbia Pictures and as a producer with John Waters on many films. Showrunner John Worth just finished production on the AMC show *Hell on Wheels*. We have Kelly Leow, the Deputy Editor of MovieMaker Magazine, and John Scheinfeld, a critically-acclaimed Emmy documentary filmmaker (*The U.S. vs. John Lennon*). Allison Amon owns Chelsea Management and Production Company and produced *Queen of Versailles*. Katherine Tulich is a freelance writer, a film critic contributing to rogerebert.com. Amanda Salazar is the Vice President of Film Acquisitions at Fandor in San Francisco and co-director of Camera Obscura Film Society. Bojana Sandic works at the Newport Film Festival as Director of Short Film Programming.

Sophia: Impressive. You know when I go to the big film festivals, I often feel like I'm running a marathon. When you are seeing upwards of 30 films, 3-4 films a day, there is little time to "savor" or "delight" in any one experience. In Gina Hall's article for the Huffington Post about The Mammoth Lakes Film Festival festival, she says: "[T]here's something about attending a film festival in which you can make all of the screenings, talk afterward with the filmmakers at parties (without an expensive VIP paper bracelet), and still have time to appreciate the local flavor." This intimacy is one of the reasons that I am particularly excited to attend your festival.

Shira: You're gonna love it. You're gonna love it.

Sophia: Who comprises the audience?

Shira: Right now, because we're only in our second year, I would say that a majority of the audiences are locals, from Ridgecrest to Bridgeport. Then, the next tier are folks from Reno, and then Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego. We want to get the word out there to cinephiles that we have this great film festival that's just a drive away. Word is getting out. What better testimony than from a live human being that actually attended! We're hoping that the word of mouth continues to spread. It will be interesting to see where we are in five years. But we do want to maintain that intimacy and keep the film festival catering to the filmmakers first. We want to stay true to that vision.

It's funny because a lot of the filmmakers last year said: "We feel like we're at the beginning of a 'Sundance,' in the early years of what will become a 'bigger' festival. Of course, we want to be a big huge festival! Hopefully, it will grow organically, and we will not lose our vision.

Paul and I are on the same page about staying true to the artists. We always want to have a mix of new filmmakers that really need that support, that don't have Hollywood backing them when we find them, filmmakers from around the world — be it middle America or Iran or Romania — and we give them, hopefully, that little springboard for them to have their work seen.

Top Image: "Operation Avalanche." Photo courtesy of Mammoth Lakes Film Festival.

Mammoth Lakes Film Festival – Official Website

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Sonita, “Sonita.” Photo courtesy of Mammoth Lakes Film Festival.

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