

Global Roots Film Program and The Brattleboro Women's Film Festival

By Cynthia Close

Vermont has a well-established film culture born in its fertile soil, nurtured by its progressive politics and grown through community support. Two impressive examples of the long-term survival of film and expanded vision of film programs in the state are The Brattleboro Women's Film Festival, celebrating its 25th anniversary this March and the newer Global Roots Program, founded in 2013 by the Vermont International Film Foundation.

Back in 1991, The Women's Crisis Center (now known as the Women's Freedom Center) in Brattleboro, launched the first festival, screening films made by women filmmakers, about issues that most concern women. The Center was originally founded during the great wave of feminism that swept across the country in the late 1960's and early 70's. Their philosophy then, and now, states: "the roots of violence against women lie in the patriarchal structure of societies – social systems constructed in ways that maintain male power and privilege over women and condone violence as a method of control...Our goal is to end men's violence against women and the inequitable institution of patriarchy that gives rise to multiple forms and expressions of abuse."

The work of the Center takes a multipronged approach. They have a 24/7 hotline for women to help in the moment of extreme crisis, as well as providing housing and long-term support for women and children who are seeking safe haven from violence and abuse. While their geographical focus is Windham County and Southern Windsor County in Vermont, their message of advocacy for women's empowerment, and their desire to effect social change on a more global level, made the founding of the Women's Film Festival a logical development for the organization.

The 2016 Women's Film Festival takes place from March 11th to March 20th. All screenings are held at the New England Youth Theater in Brattleboro. This year's impressive program also serves as a Women's Freedom Center fundraiser and features thirty-seven films, by and about women. The screenings of sixteen documentaries, seven feature films and fourteen shorts from around the world, begins on Friday, March 11th at 7:00 pm with a gala reception of champagne and hors d'oeuvres. The opening night film, *Mavis!*, is a celebration of the amazing life of an extraordinary singer, Mavis Staples. The screening immediately follows the reception. This documentary film by Jessica Edwards is an ideal pick for opening night as it encompasses the civil rights movement as seen through the life and music of an inspirational woman, who, at 75 years old, is still alive and well.

For the past fifteen years, Vickie Sterling, the WFC's Executive Director, has also been the film festival organizer. The films are all recent, most of them having been released in 2015. There are an impressive number of foreign films, starting with the fourteen minute short, *Cailleach*, from Scotland, and including films from Norway, Romania, India, Pakistan, Finland, Cuba, Switzerland, Poland, Japan, Germany, Venezuela, Turkey, France, Brazil, Russia, Ukraine, South Africa and Israel. A smorgasbord, of cultural experiences that should appeal to all genders and as Vickie Sterling emphasized, "these are films that for the most part, will never be available on Netflix, so your only opportunity to see them will be at our festival."

Originally the festival was a Board created event run by a volunteer committee. The intention was to raise awareness of women's issues in the mainstream population and to provide a vehicle for women filmmakers to have their work shown. In spite of the fact that we are seeing more women in directorial roles in the feature film industry, their percentages are still abysmal when stacked up against the overwhelming numbers of theatrically released films made by men. This film festival may be the one chance for certain films to have a theatrical screening in front of a live audience.

Now, Vickie Sterling has the primary curatorial responsibility for the festival. She scouts for interesting films to invite to the festival, year-round. Her message is that these films are of interest to everyone, not just women, and they will challenge your preconceptions as well as entertain and inform. In an attempt to reach a younger audience, last year's festival included a matinee of five or six short films targeted to a middle school population. This year's program is not preachy, nor depressing which some folks might presume when the sponsor is also an advocate for women's rights. The schedule includes *Can I Stay?* a delightful three and a half minute animated short film and the hilarious, feature-length, Romanian documentary *Chuck Norris vs. Communism*.

The New England Youth Theater seats a hundred and twenty-five, and if the weather cooperates, there is a good chance that many of the screenings will be sold out. Most of the films have trailers posted on the festival website. Check it out and join the 25th-anniversary celebration of the 2016 Women's Film Festival in Brattleboro.

GLOBAL ROOTS

The Global Roots Program is a relatively recent initiative of the Vermont International Film Foundation (VTIFF). Centered in Burlington, Vermont's largest city, and home to the state's most diverse population it was a logical step for The Foundation to see internationally produced films as a vehicle to reach out and engage immigrant, and "new American" communities. The challenge was to overcome resistance from the target population who often did not have an established film culture in their native lands. Movie going, along with the free expression of ideas that is essential in any cultural exchange program, is not the norm among most immigrant communities.

Orly Yadin, the Foundation's Executive Director, is an innovator and has been an influential force in the revitalization of the Vermont International Film Festival since she

assumed the position of festival director in 2012. Held annually at the end of October, the first film festival took place in 1985 at Marlboro College in southern Vermont and attracted about one hundred people. Today the festival is based in Burlington, with showcases, a touring festival screened at various venues across the state, an education program in the schools, reaching audiences numbering in the thousands throughout the year.

It soon became apparent to Orly, her staff and Board of Directors, that there is strength in numbers and that the various film initiatives and interest groups in the city, and ultimately in the state, could best be served by joining forces under one umbrella organization. As a result, the Vermont International Film Foundation was formed. The annual film festival is still The Foundation's most ambitious program, but in February 2014 the Burlington Film Society, founded in 2012 by Barry Snyder and Eric Ford as a focus for the exhibition of and advocacy for cinema as an art form, became a program of the foundation. Along with the first Global Roots initiative in 2013, The Foundation has become a dynamic engine for the support of film culture in the state of Vermont.

Seth Jarvis, VTIFF's outreach, and education coordinator manages the Global Roots Program. The idea was to bring the films to the audience, rather than hold the screenings in a traditional theater setting. As a result the 2013 and 2014 programs were held at the North End Studios, located in the heart of the Old North End, Burlington's most densely populated and diverse neighborhood. The screenings were all free, to make them accessible, and held monthly from early spring to September. In the first two years of the program, the films were licensed as a package from The Global Lens Initiative, a mechanism to curate foreign language films and distribute them in a package deal to educational institutions and libraries throughout the United States. The rental fees were costly, so a partnership with the Fletcher Free Library made the program financially feasible, allowing VTIFF to continue offering the screenings at no cost.

A goal of the Global Roots Program is to use the films to stimulate dialogue. For that to occur, a speaker who could lead a discussion following each screening is essential. On April 14th, 2013, Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger was the speaker for the inaugural film *Parade*, a Serbo-Croatian political farce by director Srdjan Dragjevic about a group of gay activists in Belgrade. *The Highway*, a Nepalese film along with films from Iraq, China, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Rwanda rounded out the first season. Jean Luc Dushime, an aspiring filmmaker from Rwanda, who had immigrated to Vermont, was the speaker for the last film in that series, titled *Grey Matter*, a trenchant drama about a brother and sister dealing with the aftermath of genocide.

The following year the Global Roots Program continued at the same location in the North End Studios with varying degrees of success. The local Bhutanese community seemed the most responsive to outreach efforts. However, it still took concerted attempts to find creative ways to tap into the various immigrant communities that the program set out to engage. While these films occasionally dealt with the harsh realities of the political and war-torn worlds this potential audience escaped, the films were first and foremost

entertaining and good storytelling. All cultures have experienced connection through stories, and film is one of the best mediums to engage and transcend differences.

In 2015, the Global Roots Program moved to Winooski. Screenings were hosted by the Community College of Vermont and The O'Brien Community Center. The diverse CCV student body was a receptive audience, and many students attended the program. Attracting a younger audience by tapping into the bilingual first generation children of immigrant families is an excellent way to connect with a non-English speaking community.

Always looking for new ways to improve their public programming, Orly Yadin, and her team are planning to expand the 2016 "Global Roots brand" by putting on more programs in various locations both in Burlington and beyond. In January, they partnered with Middlebury College and brought three international films to the college's Dana Auditorium. These included; *The Club*, in Spanish with English subtitles, *The Look of Silence*, the companion film to *The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer's award-winning documentary on the 1965 Indonesian genocide, and *The Assassin*, by legendary Taiwanese director, Hou Hsiao-hsien.

Starting in February 2016, The Global Roots Program comes to Contois Auditorium in Burlington City Hall. A three-day festival of films and speakers from Israel and Palestine is planned, focusing on the Middle East and issues of vital importance to the global community. The program is made possible by a grant from the Sisters of Mercy Initiative and co-sponsored by the Burlington – Bethlehem – Arad Sister City Program whose mission is to promote understanding and friendship among the people of Israel, Palestine, and the United States. As of this writing, details of the program had not been finalized.

Looking ahead, Orly Yadin reminded me that they were "not called the Vermont International Film Foundation for nothing." The demographics of Vermont are changing. Perhaps not as swiftly as in other states, but when 33% of the student population at Burlington High School is foreign born, that represents a significant shift in our previously overwhelmingly native-born population. The Global Roots initiative along with the other programs of VTIFF not only acknowledge this shift but also "bring the world" to Vermont, making it more visible and something to celebrate, rather than fear.