

One Film at a Time

Director Patrick Schweiss Transforms the Sedona Film Festival

by Kendall Perkinson

When the sun sets in Arizona's Verde Valley, the red sandstone walls of Sedona glow like massive embers. Nestled amidst these radiant cliffs and the surrounding ochre stone is the Mary J. Fisher Theater, home of the Sedona Film Festival. The nine-day event includes more than 150 screenings, workshops, and celebrity and filmmaker appearances.

A decade ago the organization was bankrupt and in debt. The theater, not yet conceived of, was being used as a telemarketing center. Patrick Schweiss changed all of that.

Rough Beginnings

When he was first approached about serving as director of the Sedona Film Festival, Schweiss was working at

a small, family-owned newspaper. The film festival had been merely one facet of a larger project called the Sedona Cultural Park, an ambitious but ill-fated attempt to create a new public venue for a diversity of arts in the city. Sedona's mayor, Rob Adams, reminisced on its demise in a 2013 article for the "Sedona Eye."

"Concurrently with the opening of the Park, a combination of events spelled out the Cultural Park's demise. [T]here was not a plan for the financial sustainability of the Park. There was no economic engine, and the Park had to rely on constant fundraising and philanthropy for revenue. The board had a substantial loan to service and a cost/revenue analysis of the operations of the park had not been done," said Adams.



Photo by
Bob Coates

The Cultural Park opened in 2000 and was forced into bankruptcy by 2003. Before its demise, several members of the board of directors broke away to form a committee dedicated to preserving the film festival as its own entity. When two of those members, Herb and Linda Smith, asked Schweiss to serve as the director, his reaction was not what they had hoped for.

"I actually laughed them out of my office," said Schweiss. I didn't know anything about independent film. I didn't know how to put on a film festival. And why would I leave a cushy family job to work for an organization that was \$75,000 in debt?"

This was not to say that Schweiss was unfamiliar with film entirely. Years earlier, he had found himself constantly engaged in good natured debate with the newspaper's office receptionist about whatever happened to be playing in the theater at the time. "I would love a film and she would hate it. She would love a film and I would say, 'That's the stupidest movie I've ever seen.'" The banter amused their coworkers, who suggested that they start writing a he said/she said review column.

The column became popular, and when his sparring partner left the paper a couple of years later, Schweiss found himself continuing the column on his own. Later, he created an Oscar party event for the Sedona Arts Festival. His organizational and communication skills, along with his ability to generate enthusiasm and donations, had not gone unnoticed.

Not long after Schweiss flatly declined to become involved with the film festival, the Smiths returned to him with a new proposal. They were so sure that he could be the person to turn things around that they offered to match the first \$25,000 he raised with their own personal money. At first, his response was just as dismissive.

However, for two weeks the idea haunted him. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't stop thinking about it, and after seeking some assurance from the paper that he could return to work if things didn't pan out, he accepted the position of Director of the Sedona Film Festival. By his own estimation, their doors should have already been closed.

Rebirth

Schweiss's first order of business was bringing the organization back from the financial brink. He approached friend and board member Georgia Frontiere about hosting a fundraising party that would determine the future of the organization. Frontiere was well known in the world of professional football as the former majority owner and chairman of the St. Louis Rams, earning the title "Madame Ram" for a career that saw the team to 14 playoffs, three Super Bowl games, and one championship. She agreed without hesitation.

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At the fundraising party, Smith explained the offer to match the first \$25,000 donated. He encouraged the crowd to meet the goal that very night, but suddenly and unexpectedly stepped away from the microphone to consult with his wife. A dead silence held the room of 300 people. When he returned, he announced that they were now offering to match the first \$50,000. The crowd went wild.

Patrick was shocked. "I pulled him aside off stage and said, 'Herb, we can't do that tonight. We can't raise \$50,000.'" Smith encouraged him to just see what happened.

By the end of the night, the Sedona Film Festival had gone from bankruptcy to solvency, and a new future for both Schweiss and the festival was born. The infusion of cash was only the beginning. The pressure was now on for Schweiss to live up the potential that others had seen in him.

Hustle

As Schweiss suspected, writing film reviews and planning Oscar parties didn't necessarily prepare him for running an entire independent film festival. He maintains an upbeat sense of humor about just how clueless he was. Even simple communication with filmmakers proved to be a puzzle. "Stupid me. I was calling the agents. It would take me more than a month to even get an answer back, not realizing that you deal with managers or distributors. It was a big learning curve to figure out who you talk to, to just get something done. But I asked the right questions."

But Schweiss learned quickly, and soon the films starting rolling in.

After figuring out how to delegate film submissions viewing and rating, he turned his personal attention to the board's quest to find a year-round identity in the community of Sedona. At that time the annual festival only lasted three days, and they wanted to build a membership base that not only supported the event, but also had something to look for-

ward to on a regular basis.

One Tuesday a month, the festival started renting out a single screen at a national movie theater chain. On that night they would show an independent film and invite a writer, director, or actor involved in its production to be a guest. "The first couple of months, I was literally out on the street giving tickets away," Schweiss said.

Soon the monthly event developed a small but regular following. After a year or so, people started asking if it could happen more often. The crowds grew. The frequency of the screenings doubled to every other Tuesday. Meanwhile, the main festival itself was getting longer each year as the quality and quantity of submissions improved.

By the year 2010, the Sedona Film Festival was hosting a screening on 45 of the year's 52 Tuesdays, with the main event itself lasting an entire week. In 2011, they were able to purchase and renovate a building adjacent to their offices that had been sitting vacant for two years. Named for its benefactor, the Mary J. Fisher Theater stands as a crowning, tangible symbol of an organization that was nearly extinct.

Focusing on the Heart and the Art

The Sedona Film Festival has a different demographic than many of its peer events. The attendees tend to be older, between the ages of 50 and 65, largely hailing from more sophisticated cultural centers like New York City and Los Angeles. This shows both in the festival's film selections and the kind of films that tend to have a positive reception there.

Schweiss concedes that viewers are not likely to catch many slasher flicks during the event. The films that do well, he says, tend to put soul above all else. They tend to be documentaries that inspire action, dramas that pull heartstrings, and stories that have social and spiritual messages to deliver. Today, there's a screening committee of 25 to 30 people that rate submissions, and each film has to be seen and rated by



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several other people as well for the sake of diversity.

What makes the Sedona Film Festival more than just a nine-day emotional movie binge is its particular focus. “We are very much a filmmaker-friendly festival. The filmmaker, in our world, is the artist,” Schweiss explained. Most mornings of the festival a workshop is held on some aspect of the craft—from screenwriting to cinematography to musical scoring—by advisory board member Kathleen Glynn. Glynn brings her experience as a producer for all of Michael Moore’s award-winning films to round-table discussions, panels, and audience Q&As with other experienced filmmakers.

Which isn’t to say that the festival hasn’t had its fair share of celebrity appearances as well.

A City Apart

When Nicholas Cage took the stage in 2011 to introduce his directorial debut, he told the audience that his family had been coming to Sedona for almost 20 years, calling it “the most beautiful and mystical place in the United States.” He added, “I hope that one day I can call Sedona my home and we can all be neighbors together.”

Cage is not alone in this characterization. There does seem to be something magical about Sedona that forces anyone observing its majesty to be present in the moment of observation. Perhaps this helps to explain the draw of the place for people who believe in the mystical, the ethereal. An entire New Age tourism industry has sprung up in Sedona since Jose Arguelles, co-ordinator of the Earth Day concept, organized the world’s largest synchronized meditation event, “Harmonic Convergence,” in Sedona in 1987. The city is now flush with crystal shops, aura readers, psychics, and information about how to find and best experience the four primary “spiritual vortices” in the area.

Schweiss gives no indication about whether he buys into all of that, but he has no doubt that the raw beauty of Sedona has been a major factor in the success of the film festival. “It’s the natural, physical awe of what Sedona is that attracts people here. If I was doing this festival in some place that didn’t have this scenic beauty and this national reputation, we wouldn’t be doing nearly as well.”

Now & Later

In February of 2015, the film festival honored Orson Wells on what would have been his 100th birthday. His daughter Beatrice, who currently resides in Sedona, received the honor of hosting the ceremonies.



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The festival also brought out infamous and groundbreaking independent filmmaker John Waters. The particularly crass style of DIY storytelling he pioneered in the 1960s drew classes from Northern Arizona University in nearby Flagstaff, which made for a convergence of very different audiences. “Yes,” Schweiss said with a laugh before the festival, “I’m scared.”

As for the future, Schweiss said he never wants to get away from what has made the Sedona Film Festival successful: “challenging, inspiring, thought-provoking, conversation-starting films.” He explained that while the filmmakers are the artists of his world, he tries not to forget his own place in the grand scheme of this art, calling to memory a conversation he had with a woman who had just been particularly moved by a screening.

“I want you to go home tonight,” she said to him, “and repeat something to yourself for me. I want you to go home and tell yourself, ‘I am changing the world, one film at a time.’” 🍌