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Film Festival shows off Asbury Park as mecca for entertainment

BY MAUREEN NEVIN DUFFY • APRIL 10, 2008

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I pressed the flesh with Budd Schulberg last weekend. He's the man who breathed prose into Marlon Brando, bringing him to life on the screen in "On the Waterfront." Schulberg was gracious and unhurried.

A few minutes later at home, just a few blocks from where I met Schulberg after the screening of his important film about the Nuremberg trials of Nazi criminals, "Nuremberg: The 60th Anniversary Director's Cut," footage denied the public for decades, the full weight of that extraordinary experience began to set in.

This is Asbury Park, which hosted the Garden State Film Festival. This is what the redevelopment critics were trying to get across: Asbury Park doesn't need to become a bedroom community to survive. It has cache as an arts and entertainment destination built on history. This is the history that can employ the economy to produce the revenue necessary for survival.

People came here last weekend — despite whipping wind and spray and bone-chilling cold — to watch independent films in restaurants and bars, VFW halls and neighboring temples, venues to be used when the only theater in Asbury Park is already filled with features. Imagine 153 films in one glorious weekend, all within walking distance.

In its sixth year, the film festival continues to point the town fathers in the right direction. For three days each year, thousands of film fans flood into the city, filling restaurants and lounges and picking up merchandise at its stores. The city makes money and the visitors don't even burden the schools or stress safety personnel.

Is there enough arts and culture to keep the momentum going all year? One would think if they come in the raw spring, what could keep them away when the sun is baking the beaches? Instead of buying people out of their properties with expensive legal fees, the city should be thinking of ways to encourage Madame Tognoli to extend her Metro Lyric opera season next summer and encourage Madison Marquette's Gary Mottola in his efforts to revive consumer interest here.

There's plenty to be exploited in Asbury Park without stripping buildings of tenants and the revenue from tax rolls to lay these lots barren for indeterminate periods. If Diane Raver, film festival founder, can do all she does so well with little citywide ballyhoo, can you imagine if the city created a "film month" with special movie theme dishes at the restaurants, Hollywood fashion shows and talent contests?

Thank God, people like Raver and Mottola know the value of this unique place. Maybe now the town fathers also will see that it doesn't lie in bulldozing and approving more condominiums. We've got enough places to live; we need places to play.

Maureen Nevin Duffy is an independent journalist from Asbury Park.

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