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11TH ANNUAL AJFF Makes Moviegoing Experience Interactive



Credit: Gary Feist

By Jeremy Simon

As the Austin Jewish Film Festival entered its second decade, it brought more than just movies to central Texas.

The 11th year of the festival offered films, of course — with a total of more than 25 features and shorts — but it also included a variety of arts that deepened the audience's experience. In addition to the films screened at the Regal Arbor Cinema and Georgetown's City Lights Theater, AJFF audiences were treated to artwork, a live music performance, and a photography exhibit at the nearby Jewish Community Center.

To accompany the documentary, "Through the Eye of the Needle: The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz," Bernice Steinhart, daughter of the fabric artist featured in the film, brought one of her mother's original works to share with the Regal Arbor audience. The artwork, showing the Statue of Liberty, recalled their family's arrival to New York City in the wake of the Holocaust. "It's a very touching piece, filled with my mother's hope for a new life in America, with a new family, after having lost nearly everyone she loved during the Holocaust," Steinhart says.

As for live music, Nefesh brought the melodic flavors of the world to the Regal Arbor, where the locally-based band demonstrated a hypnotizing blend of Jewish, Balkan, and Flamenco music (and dancing!) before the screening of "The Ballad of the Weeping Spring," a film with music at its core. "The movie that we were opening for embraced many contrasting musical elements and genres, and allowed us to showcase our similar musical diversity with an emphasis on our Jewish flavor with a flamenco Romani theme," says Nefesh singer and violinist Michelle Alany. The performance included Yeminite Shabbat song "D'ror Yikra," Yiddish tune "Der Rebbe Elimelech," and Serbian Romani song "Verka Kaludzerka."

Meanwhile, concurrently on display at Gallery at the J, AJFF sponsored a photo exhibit from Israel's Pri-Or Photo House, subject of the AJFF film, "Life in Stills." Ben Peter, grandson of the owner of The Photo House and himself featured in the film, made his first trip to Austin to answer questions following both of the film's screenings.

Peter says that he believes watching the film makes audiences very curious about the Photo House archives, which include one million photo negatives documenting Israel's defining moments. "To get the opportunity to see a real exhibition right after the screening is amazing," he says. "The film itself shows a small bite from this huge beautiful collection, and I think it's great that the [AJFF] gave its audience the chance to continue this journey in time and go to see the actual photographs."

For one festival attendee, the Q&A with Peter was a festival highlight. "To meet and have access to the person in the film was a pleasure," says Cheryl Bowser, adding that the audience was able to learn more about the film, Peter's relationship and work with his grandmother, as well as their efforts to save The Photo House.

Along with the quality of the films, extras and experiences such as these keep audiences returning to the AJFF year after year.