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Kent Film Festival keeps growing

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It started as a small festival in a small town. Now it's attracting filmmakers from around the world and the notice of Hollywood bigwigs. More than 2,000 people are expected to converge in Kent for the third annual Kent Film Festival next week. Events run Thursday through Sunday. More than 40 feature films and many more shorts will be shown on five screens.

Those in attendance will include studio executives looking for films to sign, internationally recognized actors and directors, as well as film enthusiasts from near and far.

Frank Galterio, who started and runs the festival along with his wife, Patrice, said almost all the inns in Kent are booked up for the festival, and they've had to direct people to surrounding towns. (Kent is 30 miles north of Danbury.)

"It's pretty exciting," Galterio, 57, said of the way the event has grown. "It's kind of scary as a matter of fact."

Galterio, a photographer and independent filmmaker, said he knows of one person coming from Alaska, three from Hawaii, and more than 60 from L.A. "I don't know where we're going to get all the popcorn," he joked.

Independent filmmaker John Ballis, of Kent, said one of the reasons the festival is attracting so much notice this year is that last year the film "Man in a Chair" premiered at the festival, and then went on to achieve major theatrical success. "Now everyone wants to show their

film at Kent," said Ballis.

There are several big budget films that will debut in Kent next week before hitting other theaters. One of them, "Oranges," stars Heather Locklear and Tom Arnold. It will be shown Friday, March 28 at 5 p.m. and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

Ballis will be premiering his feature film, "The Entrepreneurs," at the festival on Saturday, March 29 at 7:30 p.m. The film will be shown again Sunday, March 30 at 1 p.m. Ballis co-produced the film and came up with the story along with his friend and business partner James Chip Leonard, who directed it.

"The Entrepreneurs" is part comedy and part drama, said Ballis, who grew up Danbury and still runs a business communications company there.

The film was inspired by actual events. Ballis said he and Leonard are entrepreneurs; in the mid '90s they came up with the eccentrically innovative business idea of photographing the graves of famous people and selling posters of their headstones.

Balis said they flew down to Graceland and did a "Guerrilla style photo shoot of Elvis Presley's grave." The poster they made of the king's gravestone quickly garnered a ton of orders, but Elvis estate lawyers denied permission to use his grave site, so despite the demand, Balis and Leonard were left with a product they couldn't sell.

"The Entrepreneurs" uses this failed business venture as the basis of its story. Balis says in the course of the film the main character, Jesse, learns there's more important things in life than making money.

"In the end he realizes that money's not that important, what really matters is that you're surrounded by good people."

Balis knows of several film executives who will be in the audience watching "The Entrepreneurs," and naturally he's hoping it will be picked up.

In addition to films, the Kent festival will feature several workshops and master classes. Julio Macat, cinematographer for smash hits such as the "Home Alone" trilogy and "Wedding Crashers," will give a class on setting the mood and taking better pictures. That one is set for Saturday, March 29, at 2:30 p.m.

Also on Saturday, at 10 a.m., there will be a panel discussion on making films in Connecticut. Thanks to huge tax breaks for filmmaking, Connecticut has become one of the most popular states for this business.

Connecticut filmmakers are taking full advantage of the tax breaks and a host of Connecticut films will be featured at the festival. The documentary short "Child of Hope: **Darfur** Dreams of Peace" (from Danbury High School Assistant Principal Tim Salem and his students) will be shown Sunday, March 30 at noon, and will be followed by a Q&A.

"Child of Hope" is a follow-up to the high school's film "The Promise," which also deals with the genocide in **Darfur** and garnered widespread attention. "Child of Hope" uses photos taken by local actress Mia Farrow.

In Judy Apicella's documentary, "What Are We Doing To Our Children and Our Planet?" the New Milford resident examines the effects of the many toxins we introduce into our world, and their impact on children's health. The film is the second in a series she's doing on the effects of vaccines and toxins on children. The first, "Shoot Em Up," was shown last year at the Kent festival.

Originally Apicella said she was involved in making feature films, but when she was pregnant with her child Nico, who is now 4, she was compelled to examine issues surrounding vaccines. Like most parents, Apicella planned on having her child vaccinated, but when a friend told her about the possible side effects of vaccination that same day, she did some research on the Internet and was horrified by what she found.

She wondered why she'd never heard of any potential health risks associated with vaccinations. "By the time my husband got home that night I was in tears," she said.

She felt compelled to educate others about the risks associated with vaccines. She said to herself, "I have to make this documentary; I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I have to do it."

"What Are We Doing To Our Children?" will be shown Sunday, March 30 at noon. Both of Apicella's films have recently been picked up by a national distribution company.

Galterio is hoping the Kent Film Festival continues to grow. His ultimate goal is to create a year-round film and acting school that will educate youngsters in after-school programs.

Some people who have attended the mega successful Sundance Film Festival in Utah have told Galterio "this has the same feel as Sundance when it first began." And while Kent's may not be one of the biggest in the world yet, it's certainly put Kent on the filmmaking map.

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The Kent Film Festival takes place March 27-30 at several locations in the center of Kent, Conn. Tickets are \$8 per feature film screening; it's \$35 for a day pass or \$195 for an all-inclusive weekend pass. Tickets can be purchased by e-mailing info@kentfilmfestival.org For further details, visit www.kentfilmfestival.org.

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