

Hollywood on the Harbor

LA Harbor
International
Film Festival
May 5-7

by Joshua Stecker

Art comes in many shapes and forms in San Pedro. A walk through downtown on First Thursday will lend notice to the amazing work by our painters, sculptors and photographers.

We even have the Little Fish Theatre Company for our live entertainment needs. But the one noticeable art medium lacking in San Pedro is that of the filmmaker. There exists an amusing sense of irony when one looks at San Pedro, with its 'anti-Hollywood' and blue collar reputation, being home to one of the premiere movie theatres on the west coast, the Warner Grand Theatre.

"We have this gorgeous movie palace, it's an icon of the town," said Stephanie Mardesich, co-founder and director of the Los Angeles International Film Festival, which is having its 3rd annual festival May 5-7 at the Warner Grand Theatre. "I see this festival working in synchronicity with all the wonderful improvements going on in downtown."

You may have seen Mardesich running around town with "LAHIFF" emblazoned on her chest. This is the time of year when she becomes a walking billboard for the Festival, plastering the town with posters and flyers in the hopes that San Pedro and Palos Verdes residents will spend a night or a weekend visiting the beautiful Warner Grand and experiencing a program of original, educational and nostalgic films themed with the Harbor in mind.

Unlike the more well-known film festivals such as Cannes and Sundance, the LAHIFF isn't a competition or a marketplace for Hollywood heavies to wheel and deal. "The film festival isn't about this one weekend," said Mardesich. "It's about what we're trying to build in terms of the cultural, historical and educational aspect of our town and our place within the whole region of the Los Angeles area."

Mardesich remembers the exact date of when the idea for a local film festival took shape. "It was July 15, 2003. I went to Ports O' Call Restaurant for happy hour to meet up with my late aunt and the Taste of San Pedro press launch was going on. Being the shy girl I am (laughing) and seeing all these people there, I suddenly thought, 'This harbor is beautiful, things are happening in town, we have the Warner Grand Theatre, we should have a film festival!'"

She confided the idea to then *San Pedro Magazine* editor, Jack Baric, who immediately was on board with making it happen, becoming a co-founder. "Jack was very much there to listen in the beginning," remembers Mardesich, "but he had other responsibilities with the magazine and other endeavors."



Stephanie Mardesich, co-founder and director of the Los Angeles Harbor International Film Festival. (Photo by Joshua Stecker)

Those other endeavors included forming his own film production company, Pirate Town Productions, which will have the world premiere of its first feature documentary about San Pedro, *Port Town*, which opens the Festival on Friday, May 5. (See cover story this issue.)

Mardesich then approached Lee Sweet from the LA Department of Cultural Affairs and manager of the Warner Grand. "When I said to Lee what we wanted to do, we started working on a date, we started working on a name, we knew we had to have a theme that reflected the Harbor, I wrote the mission statement, everything just started rolling."

Cut to a year later and the Los Angeles International Film Festival was born. The first annual Festival cascaded onto the silver screen April 30 – May 2, 2004, which included a screening of the film, *The Perfect Storm*. The Festival's first year program reflected everything Mardesich wanted to accomplish as far as creating an original, fun-filled weekend that all walks of life in town could enjoy.

"Jack particularly made the observation about looking for that niche market," explains Mardesich. "The niche market with this festival is the Hollywood Nostalgia Tribute Night which celebrates movies that one of these days we won't be able to see on the big screen."

This year's nostalgia film is *The Poseidon Adventure*, which will include a video tribute to the late actress and star of the film, Shelley Winters. Along with the Hollywood Nostalgia Tribute Night, Mardesich was adamant on providing an educational outreach program for senior high school students and the community at large.

"I came up with a concept 'Read the Book, See the Movie,'" said Mardesich, "because I've always been interested in source material. I think it's very important to recognize it and yet distinguish between the medium of the printed word and the end product of the film. I believe the writers never get enough credit because if you don't have a story, you don't have a movie."

This year's 'Read the Book, See the Movie' film is *20,000*

Leagues Under the Sea, based on the Jules Verne classic novel. The LAHIFF was fortunate enough to have Signet Classics donate 600 copies that are distributed two months prior to the program on May 4. Those books went to local high school seniors and are also available to the public for free at the Los Angeles Maritime Museum, the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium and Williams' Book Store in Downtown San Pedro, as long as supplies last. Disney generously donated a copy of the film for the screening.

Since the LAHIFF is a non-profit endeavor, sponsorships such as the one from Signet Classics are whole-heartedly welcomed. This year, the LAHIFF is proud to also have Absolut Vodka as a main sponsor, lending its signature Absolut Martini Bar to the Hollywood Nostalgia Tribute Night's Green Room Gala at the Arcade Building across the street from the Warner Grand.

Community sponsorship has also been generous. Along with the many restaurants, local organizations and media sponsors (of which *San Pedro Magazine* is one of them), San Pedro's legendary Godmother's Saloon will be serving a no-host bar in the Warner Grand Theatre every night of the festival.

The Festival closes on Sunday, May 7, with the screening of the award winning documentary by James Thebaut, *Running Dry*, narrated by Jane Seymour that focuses on the world water crisis. The screening will be followed by a Q&A session with the director and an "Awareness Event" fundraising party at the nearby Media Gallery.

For Mardesich, the opportunity to bring these films to life on the screen of our local movie palace is a dream come true. "I didn't watch cartoons, I watched old movies when I was a little girl," she remembers. "I've always paid attention to movies. There's nothing like that suspension of disbelief where you are transported to wherever it is that movie is taking you."

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For more information and to purchase tickets to the LA Harbor International Film Festival on May 5-7, visit warnergrand.org or laharborfilmfest.com.