



JFilm Festival celebrating 30 years of bringing Jewish cinema to Pittsburgh



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Anything that's been around for 30 years must be doing something right. In the case of the JFilm Festival, that something is bringing a smorgasbord of Jewish cinema directly to Pittsburghers on a yearly basis.

JFilm was launched three decades ago by the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh. It was originally known as the Jewish-Israeli Film Festival before it was rebranded as JFilm in 2015 and, a year later, folded into the larger nonprofit Film Pittsburgh that now presents four annual festivals: JFilm, ReelAbilities, Pittsburgh Shorts and the Three Rivers Film Festival.

The [30th iteration of JFilm](#) is set to kick off Thursday and run through April 30. Its programming slate includes 23 films that, with the exception of four virtual screenings, can be viewed around the city at AMC Waterfront 22 in West Homestead, The Oaks Theater in Oakmont and McConomy Auditorium on the campus of Carnegie Mellon

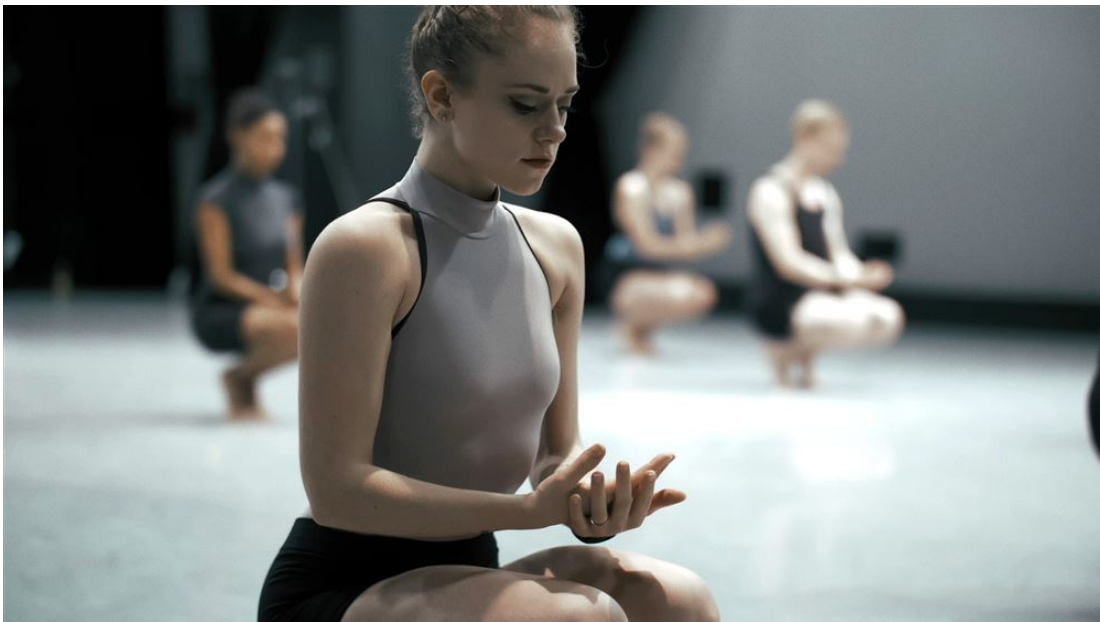
University. Festival passes, tickets for individual screenings and admission to other JFilm-related events are available via filmpittsburgh.org.

“We are so excited to be celebrating this incredible milestone,” Film Pittsburgh executive director Kathryn Spitz Cohan said in a statement to the Post-Gazette. “When I started more than 20 years ago, the festival was much smaller and run by a group of passionate volunteers — many of whom still attend! And we’ve steadily grown it into the largest Jewish cultural event in Pittsburgh.”

Last year’s JFilm featured the [Pittsburgh premiere](#) of Cooper Raiff’s locally filmed dramedy “Cha Cha Real Smooth” and the [world premiere](#) of Pittsburgh synagogue shooting documentary “Repairing the World: Stories from the Tree of Life.” JFilm 2023 also will boast a world premiere, as well as a few other films with Pittsburgh ties that may be of particular interest to Steel City cinephiles.

“I think one reason our audience has grown so much and includes people from all backgrounds is that the films just keep getting better,” Spitz Cohan said. “And you don’t have to be Jewish to enjoy them!”

Finding Light’



The documentary "Finding Light" will be screening during the 2023 JFilm Festival.
(Film Pittsburgh)

Film Pittsburgh wanted to highlight a local premiere of a documentary connected to one of the city’s most storied artistic institutions.

“Finding Light” is a film about using dance as a means of sparking conversations about human rights that was made with the involvement of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre. It [will be screening](#) April 23 at The Oaks Theater and will be followed by a Q&A with director Paul Michael Bloodgood, Ballet Austin choreographer and artistic director Stephen Mills, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre artistic director Adam W. McKinney, and former Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre dancer Christine Schwaner.

Much of “Finding Light” follows Mills’ quest to imbue his work with deeper meanings, like his “Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project” that Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre performed in 2009. Julia Erickson, a Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre dancer of 17 years before her retirement in 2018, performed in that 2009 production and is also interviewed during “Finding Light.”

Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre is sponsoring JFilm’s “Finding Light” screening, and McKinney urged those in attendance “to share their own stories connected to the themes of the film” during the Q&A.

“Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre has had a long commitment to using dance to bring light to difficult issues and histories,” McKinney said in an emailed statement. “Our artists’ involvement in ‘Finding Light’ exemplifies the company’s continued dedication to telling stories of redemption and repair. We are proud to partner with the JFilm Festival on this important and powerful project.”



The documentary "The Cure for Hate: Bearing Witness to Auschwitz" will be making its world premiere during the 2023 JFilm Festival.

(Film Pittsburgh)

‘The Cure for Hate’

Pittsburgh is getting the world premiere of a documentary about an unlikely evangelist for tolerance and love.

“The Cure for Hate: Bearing Witness to Auschwitz” [will be screening](#) April 25 at The Oaks Theater. It was originally a book called “The Cure for Hate: A Former White Supremacist’s Journey from Violent Extremism to Radical Compassion” written by reformed skinhead Tony McAleer. The JFilm screening will be followed by a Q&A with McAleer, writer-director Peter Hutchinson and Charles H. Moellenberg, Jr., president of the [Eradicate Hate Global Summit](#).

Like the book, the film chronicles McAleer’s journey from neo-Nazi leader and Holocaust denier to a man whose life mission has become eliminating hate in all forms. His atonement process included a trip to Aushchwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Germany, which the documentary captures along with the rise of fascism in the early 20th century and how folks are still getting into (and out of) violent extremist groups.

Hutchinson said in a press release that the way Pittsburgh displayed such a resounding “resilience of community in the face of horrific acts of violent extremism” is why it was chosen for the “The Cure for Hate” premiere.

“I can think of no more appropriate city to launch our film and educational campaign,” he said. “‘The Cure For Hate’ brings the all-important lessons of the Holocaust into the present as living history — as a means to inoculate against such senseless violence, and provide the seeds for change.”

In a separate statement to the Post-Gazette, McAleer said that he became aware of “tikkun olam” — a Hebrew phrase that roughly translates to “repairing the world” — through Tree of Life Rabbi Jeffrey Meyers. McAleer was “extremely moved by his words of hope” and has felt a kinship with Pittsburgh ever since.

“I have visited the Tree of Life twice now, met many of the survivors and their families, and attended the Eradicate Hate conference multiple times,” he said. “I feel I have a personal connection to Pittsburgh that makes the premiere and the launch of our anti-hate campaign here, in this city, so important.”



The documentary "Jack L. Warner: The Last Mogul" will be screening during the 2023 JFilm Festival.
(Film Pittsburgh)

‘Jack L. Warner: The Last Mogul’

JFilm will also be hosting the North American premiere of a documentary about one of the most prominent movie studios in Hollywood — which happens to have an origin story that can be traced back to Western Pennsylvania.

That would be Warner Bros., which was founded in 1923 by brothers Jack, Sam, Harry and Albert Warner. One of those brothers, Jack Warner, is the subject of the documentary “[Jack L. Warner: The Last Mogul](#)” that will be screening April 27 at The Oaks Theater. It was written and directed by Gregory Orr, Warner’s grandson. Orr and Don Priess, the film’s editor and co-producer, will be on hand for a Q&A following the JFilm screening.

Orr believes that his grandfather’s history in this area played a huge role in him eventually becoming an entertainment industry titan.

“Those early days were his forge ... as he dealt with theater owners, film suppliers, advertisers and marketers, all while watching the bottom line,” Orr said. “He still hoped to be an entertainer, but after several attempts performing in neighboring states, he was persuaded by his brothers to get off the stage and focus on the box-office where the real money was made.”

The Warners started out as movie-theater purveyors, and their first theater happened to be in New Castle, Pa. Pittsburgh is also where they started

their first film exchange, which they dubbed the Duquesne Amusement and Supply Company. Orr said that the company's original office was at 616 Fifth Ave. before later moving to the Bakewell Building on Grant Street.

It was at the Duquesne Amusement and Supply Company that, according to Orr, his grandfather transitioned from helping out with the New Castle movie theater to being an integral part of the Warners' fledgling film distribution operation.

"I think JFilm is the ideal venue for the North American premiere," Orr said, "because our film is not only a story of Jewish immigration and achievement, but Pittsburgh is where my grandfather ... was inaugurated into the film business."

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