

JFilm Celebrates 30 Years



"JFilm began in 1994 as a volunteer-run Jewish film festival under the auspices of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh. I came on board in 2001 and had just four months to plan my first festival! Luckily, we had a strong base of volunteers, so we pulled it off. The support of really dedicated volunteers has carried us through the years, and we're so grateful for them," said Kathryn Spitz Cohan, executive director, Film Pittsburgh (presenter of JFilm).

This year JFilm is celebrating its 30th anniversary. "Things have really changed since the early days. In 2005, we started expanding our programming by showing some of JFilm's Holocaust films to area middle and high schoolers. That program, Teen Screen, has since been expanded to include films about social justice, human rights and other culturally relevant topics to encourage tolerance and understanding and is hugely popular with area teachers," said Spitz Cohan.

In 2015 they went out on their own and became Film Pittsburgh, a stand-alone nonprofit. That gave the group the resources needed to add even more events over the years, including a short film competition and three other film festivals: Three Rivers Film Festival, Pittsburgh Shorts and Script Competition, and ReelAbilities Pittsburgh, a festival that celebrates people living with disabilities.

"JFilm has expanded too," said Spitz Cohan. "The audience has steadily grown to more than 4,000 a year, though Covid has certainly affected that. But even in 2020 when we had to screen all films online, we had more than 8,000 viewers."

This year JFilm will present 20 films in person at three theaters across the Pittsburgh region: The Oaks, AMC Waterfront, and CMU's McConomy Auditorium, and stream four films virtually.

"We have so many great things planned. One film I'm particularly excited about is the festival premiere of *Jack L. Warner: The Last Mogul*. It's a newly updated movie about the founding father of the American film industry and his New Castle roots," said Spitz Cohan.

The film features interviews with Hollywood royalty and great, insider stories about Hollywood's heyday. "And we're thrilled to have Jack Warner's grandson, Gregory Orr, who wrote, directed, and produced the film, along with editor/co-producer Donald Priess, at the theater for a talk-back with the audience afterwards. I can't wait to hear their stories," said Spitz Cohan.

This year's films are *all* incredible and will appeal to everyone – you don't have to be Jewish to enjoy them. There are dramas, comedies and a musical romcom, *Our Story*; documentaries like the powerful *Cure for Hate*, which is a deep dive into how young men get into – and out of – hate groups, and the beautiful ballet film, *Finding Light*, that's followed by a talk-back with dancers and the new artistic director of the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre.

"It's Q&As like that and other fun events like our Film Schmooze discussions and bagel brunches that make JFilm an integral part of the local film scene. In fact, *Pittsburgh Magazine* recently rated JFilm as one of the top-three film events in Pittsburgh. And it's the largest Jewish cultural event in the region, so it's a must-see for many reasons. I hope everyone can join us April 20-30," said Spitz Cohan.

You can get more info about the films and tickets at FilmPittsburgh.org.

By Janice Lane Palko