

EDITORIAL: Messages and meaning at the Middleburg Film Festival

Description

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By Times-Mirror Editorial Board

In just four years, the Middleburg Film Festival has earned a place among such iconic film festivals as Sundance, Telluride, Tribeca, Toronto, Melbourne, Berlin, Venice and Cannes. The film festivalâ??s quaint venues â?? a converted ballroom at Salamander Resort, a performing arts auditorium at an elementary school, a library-museum for horse enthusiasts, a spartan reception hall in Upperville and the barrel room of a local winery â?? differentiate the festival from the glitz and glamour of Hollywoodâ??s showplaces.

Middleburg brings something more meaningful to the conversation about movies: an intimacy with the stories and the people of the movies.

The charming town tucked in Virginia hunt-and-horse country is more than just a setting for a cozy film festival. Middleburg is also a character in the movies shown there.

Over four postcard-perfect days, about 4,000 people traveled to what looks like a back lot for idyllic moviemaking. Film buffs took Route 50, the two-lane road that follows the rolling hills, stone fences and horse farms to the charming town in Loudounâ??s southern tier. Nearing the town, two oversized Trump banners greeted visitors from a private parcel of land on the roadside â?? seemingly out of place and out of character in a setting known for its style and discretion.

The wearisome soundbites of the presidential campaign become a faint echo at Middleburgâ??s one stoplight, a few hundred feet down Route 50 where it becomes Washington Street. Make a right turn, or a left, and you are at an unexpected venue for a movie. Or you can follow scenic side roads to the festivalâ??s more distant venues.

At this place, in this time, Middleburg is about movies. But something more, too.



"Loving," which screened at the Middleburg Film Festival on Oct. 23, tells the story of interracial couple Richard and Mildred Loving and their landmark case against the state of Virginia that went all the way to the Supreme Court. **Facebook/Loving**

In *Loving,*the quiet and courageous love story of Richard and Mildred Loving, the Virginia countryside is both prominent and familiar, enhancing the realism of rural racism in the commonwealth at the time. The movie follows the courtship and marriage of Mildred Jeter, a black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, who are arrested and sentenced to prison in Virginia in 1958 because their interracial marriage violates the stateâ??s anti-miscegenation laws. Exiled to Washington, they sue the Commonwealth of Virginia in a series of proceedings leading to the Supreme Courtâ??s unanimous decision in Loving v. Virginia, which holds that laws prohibiting interracial marriage are unconstitutional.

The film, scheduled for release in the U.S. on Nov. 4, was shown at the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington on Monday. But at a discussion following the screening on Sunday, Virginians were able to better appreciate the continuing relevance of *Loving* as its British producer and former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder gave the story context. Following the program, dozens of attendees swarmed Holder, the first African American to serve as Attorney General (2009-2015).

Middleburg also had a brief role in the screening of *Jackie,* Natalie Portmanâ??s riveting portrayal of Jacqueline Kennedyâ??s private grief as she coped with her public persona and the nationâ??s reaction to the assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy.

The movie would not have been screened in Middleburg but for a photograph of Jackie attending mass with JFK at the Middleburg Community Center, which now serves as the box office for the film festival. The distributors of *Jackie* had initially rejected the advance screening of the movie in Middleburg, a young festival with a relatively small audience in rural Virginia. But the photo provided a meaningful connection between Jackie Kennedy and Middleburg, where she spent private time away from Washington riding at her farm.

As Middleburg presented itself as a haven away from the front lines of the nationâ??s capitol 43 miles down the road, the film festival also provided a conversation that played to the politics of the moment. A conversation about presidents, politics and the movies quickly turned to â??the elephant in the room,â? • as CNN political analyst David Gergen observed: Donald Trump.

Who would play Trump in the movie about the current presidential race? Alec Baldwin, of course, came the response to a joke that was apparently known to all in the audience. Film clips from movies about past presidents then left attendees to wonder whether art imitates life or life imitates art.

Middleburgâ??s messages echoed beyond. *The Eagle Huntress* followed Aisholpan, a 13-year-old girl who trains to become the first female in 12 generations of her Kazakh family to become an eagle hunter and rises to the pinnacle of a tradition that has been handed down from father to son for centuries. While there were many old Kazakh eagle hunters who vehemently rejected the idea of a female taking part in their ancient tradition, Aisholpanâ??s father, Nurgaiv, believed that a girl could do anything a boy can, as long as she was determined.

That idea brought cheers from the denizens in Virginia that included local Girl Scout troops that came to honor Aisholpan. The girl and her father traveled from Mongolia to Middleburg to acknowledge the cheers and to demonstrate how ordinary people could do extraordinary things. The cheers came again when it was announced that Aishholpan would become a character in a super-heroes cartoon.

So we come to superheros and the deeper meaning of the Middleburg Film Festival. In just four years, Sheila Johnson has exceeded her dream of turning her passion for cinema into a festive gathering of fellow film aficionados in the chic yet comfy venues of Northern Virginiaâ??s horse country. The entrepreneur, philanthropist and film producer has made Middleburg a metaphor for creative endeavor with a social purpose. She has provided a lens to view the important films about our our culture, as well as perspective that is authentically Virginia.

But perhaps Johnsonâ??s greatest gift is bringing together movies and people who make us think, feel and belong. Devoid of cynicism, these are the stories of our times. Johnson presents them as a kindred spirit in a place called Middleburg.

(Source:www.loudountimes.com)



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