Peace on Earth film fest fosters global goodwill

Three-day event showcases 40 titles from around the world

BY BILL STAMETS

If violent films cause violence, can peace-oriented films increase the peace? The Peace on Earth Film Festival may offer an answer. Presented by New Thought Chicago, this three-day event kicks off tonight at the Biograph Theatre.

The lineup consists of 40 shorts and features from Cambodia, Croatia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Scotland, Sweden, Tibet and Lawndale Academy High School. The fest’s agenda of leading by example is evident in documentaries about peace-seekers on journeys: American activists who travel to Nicaragua and Nova Scotia teens who trek to Serbia. One dramatic short was inspired by an Iraqi war vet who became a Chicago cop. There’s an animated film packing the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi into a “60-second sprint toward world peace.”

Besides screenings, the fest offers a filmmakers panel (4 p.m. Saturday), a peacemakers panel (4 p.m. Sunday) and an awards ceremony at 10:30 Sunday.

Nick Angotti, the fest’s executive director, is a teacher and counselor at New Thought Chicago. This “non-denominational, non-confrontational awareness group” holds Sunday services at the Theatre Building. The fest grew out of an earlier screening discussion series. Films can shape our souls, he believes.

Angotti, 64, recalls seeing “Sands of Iwo Jima,” starring John Wayne, when he was a boy of 6 in his hometown of Kenosha, Wis. Years later, he said, the film led him to join the Marines. When he left the military, he helped start the Kenosha chapter of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Angotti relocated to Los Angeles for a screen career, though his turns in “Cobra” (1986) and “Die Hard 2” (1990) got cut down to blink-and-miss bits. He yearned for roles more in line with his changing spiritual orientation. He cherishes his later parts in “CBS Schoolbreak Specials” where serious issues such as racism were handled without explosions and body counts.

“I believe children are born in peace and are taught to be violent,” Angotti said. “After-school specials were an opportunity to reinvigorate peace in their consciousness.”

The Peace on Earth Film Festival shares that vise. Diverse filmmaking styles suggest that peace-making is possible.

Capsule reviews of selected films and videos follow:

Tonight

8:40 p.m. “Dai Lama Renaissance”: Forty new age luminaries travel to the Himalayas of northern India, where they share ideas for fixing the world. But this documentary foregrounds their quarrels about how to run their workshops. Construction for face-time with their bemused host, Tibet’s Dalai Lama, proves more revealing than their spiritual remedies. Director Khashar Davarsh will appear. Special admission: $12; $9 for students and seniors.

Sunday

1:15 p.m., “Living in Landmines”: One of the fest’s most artful entries is John Severson’s documentary short about Cambodia, a country of 13.3 million people and 10.6 million land mines. Portraits of everyday Cambodians alternate with stark titles laden with statistics. A visit to the Cambodian Land Mine Museum in Siem Reap is unerving.

2:15 p.m., “A Child Will Lead Them”: John Edgerton, Terrie Lawrence and Rachel Lawson interview black first-graders who walked to school on Sept. 9, 1967, the first day of the desegregation of Nashville’s public schools. “I thought everybody went to school in a parade,” recalls one innocent pioneer. Belatedly implemented, the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education ruling is interpreted through young eyes. The polished short doubles as an essay on the memory of childhood as recalled by thoughtful adults.

9:10 p.m., “The Unwinking Gaze”: This feature-length documentary on the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, is the best that I have seen to date. Director Joshua Dugdale reportedly devoted a year to secure access to the exiled Tibetan leader. Then he observed him for 18 months on his international travels. Diplomatic dealings with China are the main focus. A setback occurs when the Tibetan word for “freedom” is mistranslated by the Chinese as “independence.”

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