



FILM FEST'S FIRST YEAR

Having made its debut in January 2007, the Baton Rouge Jewish Film Festival aims not only to entertain the Greater Baton Rouge community, but also to open people's eyes to the Jewish community's history and culture.

"We live in a world where people have solitary access to entertainment and knowledge, causing us to become very insulated," says Harvey Hoffman, BRJFF chairperson.

"Film is a wonderful way of opening people's eyes to a great many experiences. We see that having a Jewish film festival is an opportunity to expose people to a culture that perhaps they don't know a great deal about."

A retired furniture-company CEO, Hoffman and his wife, Paula, were approached by the Jewish Cinema South organization out of Jackson, Miss., who encouraged the couple to organize a Jewish film festival in Baton Rouge. The organization, which helps smaller communities throughout the South put on film festivals, had been trying to get a festival in Baton Rouge for a number of years, says Hoffman.

Harvey and Paula decided to establish the BRJFF, with the couple as co-chairpersons.

The four-day festival, which is under the sponsorship of the Jewish Federation of Greater Baton Rouge and funded by private and corporate sponsors, featured five films shown at the Manship Theatre in the Shaw Center for the Arts.

One film, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, focused on a brother and sister who were part of a resistance group in Nazi Germany that tried to get Germany to back down in the midst of World War II. The film, which was based on actual transcripts from the sister's interrogation once they were caught, was nominated for the 2006 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Another film shown, *West Bank Story*, won the 2007 Oscar for Best Live Action Short Film.

The festival also showed *All I've Got*, a film that was originally made for Israeli TV, and a documentary about lynching called *Strange Fruit*. Though some may be familiar with the Billie Holiday song "Strange Fruit," many might not know that the song was written by a Jewish schoolteacher in the Bronx. The film analyzes the influence of that song on the beginning of the civil rights movement, says Hoffman. The filmmaker even came from New York to discuss the film.

The film *Paper Clips* was shown to 1,000 Baton Rouge middle and high school students at the BREC Independence Park Theatre, says Hoffman. As part of the presentation, the assistant principal featured in the film spoke to the students and explained how the film came about.

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The films and festival proved to be "a terrific success," says Hoffman, because more than 1,000 seats were sold.

Hoffman has already begun planning the BRJFF for 2008, which he and his wife will again co-chair. They are looking for ways to increase the number of films shown during the festival.

"We have many more films to choose from than we have the opportunity to show," he says. In deciding which films to show, Hoffman tries to come up with a variety.

"We try to show a balance of films that are certainly enjoyable and good-quality films," he says. "Even if people didn't particularly like the subject matter, they all agreed that the films were well done."

What Hoffman would like people to walk away with after the festival is the feeling that they've been entertained. Secondly, he hopes that people were exposed to new ideas and that they learned something about a history and culture that has been in existence for 3,000 years.

"Jews have been very involved in entertainment and certainly in the film industry," says Hoffman. "Here, we saw an opportunity to bring something to the Baton Rouge community that other communities have had access to for many years. It proved to be a good idea." LH

opposite page: harvey hoffman, co-chairperson of the baton rouge jewish film festival.