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LIIFE as Calling Card for Bellmore-Merrick Film Makers

DOUGLAS FINLAY

A quiet revolution moves throughout the LIIFE expo that aims to draw not only big-name world-class talent to the Bellmore Movies theater and present important independent films with themes that resonate with audiences, but also to attract local film directors, producers, screenwriters and actors from the Bellmores and Merricks to help showcase their works in their own neighborhoods and provide them a step into the professional world and business of independent filmmaking.

Even Bellmore and Merrick residents are finding themselves the subjects of independent films, as well.

“I consider Bellmore to be my second home, after Paris,” award-winning French director Arthur Joffe told *Your NewsMag* during a phone interview from Paris discussing his entry into this year’s Long Island International Film Expo in Bellmore about a woman from town with a definite flair for the artistic.



Titled “Sacred Fire,” Dina Morgan is the muse for his latest film, a filmmaker log book about the passion for filming against all odds. “She appears in my home in Paris after the first 25/30 minutes of the film and we see her often, crossing the Atlantic and in Bellmore,” Joffe, who has won at the Cannes Film Festival, said of her vital role in the film. “We also see briefly her parents Georgia and Danny Morgan in their home in Bellmore” as well, he continues.

Indeed, Morgan plays piano in the movie’s film score, he said. The film

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LIIFE A CALLING CARD

When looking for inspiration to land locally and present their works, local film talent often approach North Merrick's Debra Markowitz – and her LIIFE associates. As director of the Nassau County Film Office, she has been at the helm for over 25 years and has been able, over the past several years, to present her own works as director, producer, screenwriter and casting director.

"LIIFE is the 'calling card' into the independent (indie) film industry," she told *Your NewsMag* recently about its impact on young independent film makers, actors and others with film aspirations. "And, it's especially attractive when you have the talent to get into the festival and are able to show your film to your neighborhood friends" in the neighborhood theater for free, she said.

Those who can get into the festival can show other directors, producers and funding sources of their credibility in film making, she said, which invariably leads to new opportunities.

Noting newer faces from the Bellmores and Merricks either debuting or presenting films, or seeing Bellmore and Merrick talent as subjects of films, she said "Nothing makes me happier than to get such local talent into the festival." The general caveat: The quality of the work has to be undeniable to make the festival, she said.

Her latest, "By Blood," will be shown during the opening night block on Friday, July 15, at 6:45 p.m. It stars Jackie "The Jokeman" Martling, who has previously been an awards presenter at LIIFE, and who has held several one-man comedy shows within the Bellmores and Merricks.

Merrick born and bred Lee Kolinsky, a screenwriter who showed "Stand Up Guy" on Thursday, said the Long Island International Film Expo offers a great start for local film makers because of the "screenwriting, acting and fundraising workshops and seminars" that are hands-on, gritty and pull no punches about what film makers, actors and others need to know to achieve success in the independent film business – or at least obtain a complete working knowledge of it.

"And," continued Kolinsky – who went to Kennedy High School and now lives in Bellmore, local film makers, screenwriters, actors or directors can see their films in a local theater with a full house of moviegoers.

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Kolinsky's movie stars a "local hair dresser within the Bellmore-Merrick community" who plays a mobster that gets out of prison after 15 years and attempts to gain back "family business" lost during his incarceration

IN THE BACKYARD

Shari Umansky of Bellmore, a screenwriter and co-producer whose "Immunity" shows on Sunday, July 17, at 1:30 p.m., agreed with Kolinsky's examination of LIIFE in providing locals a chance to see their professional works through the prism of the community they grew up in. "I'm thrilled with LIIFE being in my backyard, I can walk to the theater from home to see my film screened," she told *Your NewsMag*.

Having recently worked with Markowitz on "Chosen" as screenwriter – starring Cathy Moriarty, who has been presented with the LIIFETIME Achievement Award – Umansky added that with LIIFE screening "Immunity" in her hometown, she wouldn't need to pay for a screening to promote the film.

Her film, set in Auschwitz in 1942, peers into the ages-old theme of whether humanity can exist when subordinated by pure evil. "Is evil taught, or is it inherent," the film pointedly asks.

Umansky attended Kennedy High School, and also attended the Long Island School of the Arts for musical theater.

Bellmore's Leslye Abbey, who won the LIIFE award for Best Documentary in 2014 with "Buffalo Nation," remarked that "independent filmmakers have a difficult time getting distributed and earning revenue on their works," so it is very gratifying when a filmmaker can see their films shown, especially at the neighborhood movie house, because it verifies their labors.

She told *Your NewMag* that "Buffalo Nation" was recently shown at a special screening to over 200 people in Washington, D.C.

A GRATIFICATION

Sal Del Guidice of Bellmore, who won Best Documentary two years running in 2011 and 2012, called LIIFE a very reputable film festival that is professionally run and is so much fun to be a part of. "LIIFE provides a sense of gratification and validation that is hard to earn anywhere else," he said.

He said the validation helps him continually strive to make art he feels is important to him, and perhaps to a generation as well. His latest

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documentary, "Walking Through Purgatory," examines the heroin epidemic on Long Island as seen through the eyes of a father with three addicted sons who has been released from jail. His film aired earlier.

Joe Ciminara, who has a film studio in Bellmore and will showed his award-winning movie "Venal" on opening day, said of the LIIFE that it does a great job of helping young film professionals network with others to learn where to distribute their films.

"I am lucky that I can distribute my films, but for independent film makers it can be a tough industry to break into," and the film festival helps get those contacts made.

He notes that he has made low-budget films for \$8000, in which executives have remarked at the creativity involved at so little a cost.

Robbie Rosen, Merrick' s charming Calhoun High School teenager who was a contestant on "American Idol" several years ago, will get a shot on the big screen at this year's LIIFE, to keep it close to home.

Rosen appears in Malverne film maker James Phillips' music video called "Chains" on Saturday, July 16, at 9:40 p.m. In an email to *Your NewsMag*, Phillips said "I met Robbie through his father who works in Malverne. His dad had seen some of my work from another film festival and introduced me to Robbie.

"He [Robbie] and Sarah Barrios, a Connecticut recording artist, had just recorded a unique duet version of "Chains" by Nick Jonas and asked if I'd be interested in shooting a video for the song.

"It's a very moody, dark, intriguing sort of song, which made the project even more interesting. I said yes of course. And that's how it all came about."

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