

Lowell Film Fest celebrates the '30, when audiences found relief from the Depression on the silver screen

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LOWELL -- Bette Davis, Charlie Chaplin, Boris Karloff, Jimmy Stewart, Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable are on the guest list. Snow White, the Seven Dwarfs and the Marx Brothers will be there, too.

With an impressive lineup of Hollywood stars from the 1930s, the 3rd Annual Lowell Film Festival arrives Thursday, April 8, and runs through Saturday, April 10. It's free and open to the public.

This year's theme is "Hollywood and the Great Depression: 10 Cent Entertainment During Difficult Times." It recalls the era when people escaped the worries of the day, catching a double feature, newsreel and cartoon for 10 cents at their local movie house.

The theme is timely, given today's turbulent economy.

"People went to the movies to escape the down times during the Depression," said UMass Lowell history professor Bob Farrant. "Hollywood did well then and had its best year ever last year during the recession."

Suzz Cromwell, co-founder of the Lowell Film Collaborative and one of the festival's organizers, concurs.

"Given where we are now in the economy, and where film played such a huge part and offered people escape during the Depression, we thought it was a good tie-in," she said.

Farrant, also an organizer, helped to found the festival in 2008.

"We conducted a survey of students, faculty and staff in terms of the creative economy and what was missing in Lowell," he said. "At the top of the list was a movie theater to show documentaries and movies off the Hollywood mainstream that don't show up at the multiplex."

That survey led to the first festival, presented by the university and the Cultural Office of Lowell (COOL).

Early April is a good time to showcase films here for several reasons. It's a quiet month, without big events like the Folk Festival, Summer Music Series or Winterfest crowding the calendar, organizers say.

And, Bette Davis was born in Lowell on April 5, 1908. Festival organizers try to showcase a Davis flick each year. This year, it's Jezebel, with Davis in the Southern-belle role that won her an Oscar in 1938.

Farrant said organizers try to tie festival films to Lowell, either culturally or historically. Besides Cromwell, LZ Nunn of COOL and John Wooding of the division of regional economic and social development at UML help Farrant pick a theme, choose films and find screening sites.

The first festival focused on immigration and globalization, with historical and contemporary films shown. Last year, a food theme reverberated and several restaurants had screenings. This year, only films made in the 1930s will be shown.

"It's such a rich idea and amazing how the festival takes shape around the films," said Cromwell.

Eight films will be shown this year, down from 10 last year.

"It's more manageable with fewer films, but it is hard to pick and choose," said Cromwell, who noted that Citizen Kane, The Wizard of Oz and Gone with the Wind didn't make the cut.

A Marx Brothers marathon serves as a prelude to the festival. See Horse Feathers tomorrow and Duck Soup

Saturday at Dharma Buns Sandwich Company, 26 A Market St., with each showing at 7 p.m. On Monday, April 5, see A Night at the Opera at 7 p.m. at the Athenian Corner, 207 Market St.

The festival schedule includes Thursday's opening-night screening on Jezebel at the Lowell National Historical Park Visitors Center, after the opening-night celebration at Athenian Corner.

Five films will be shown on Saturday, April 10. The most historic in its depiction of the Depression is The Grapes of Wrath at 1 p.m. in the Boott Cotton Mills Museum Events Center. Preceding it is a panel discussion about Lowell and the Merrimack Valley during the Depression, featuring Charles Gallagher, who lived through it.

For family audiences, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs will be shown Saturday afternoon at the Pollard Memorial Library.

Dharma Buns shows Woody Allen's Shadows and Fog, an homage to 1920s and 30s filmmakers, at midnight Friday, April 9, and Freaks, Tod Browning's 1932 cult classic, at midnight Saturday.

Here's the full schedule:

Thursday, April 8

Jezebel, 7 p.m. Lowell National Park Visitors Center, 246 Market St. Come dressed in a 1930s garb.

Friday, April 9

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, 7 p.m., Lowell National Historical Park Visitors Center, 246 Market St.

Frankenstein 10 p.m., 119 Gallery, 119 Chelmsford St.

Saturday, April 10

The Grapes of Wrath, noon, panel discussion on Depression, 1 p.m. screening, Boott Cotton Mills Museum Events Center, 115 John St.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1:30 p.m., Pollard Memorial Library, 401 Merrimack St.

Modern Times, 3 p.m., Pollard Memorial Library, includes guest speaker UMass Lowell Professor Todd Avery discussing film's themes and Charlie Chaplin's ingenuity.

It Happened One Night, 7 p.m. UMass Lowell O'Leary Library, Room 222, 61 Wilder St. It swept the 1935 Academy Awards, winning Oscars for Best Picture, Best Actor (Clark Gable), Best Actress (Claudette Colbert) and Best Director.

The Bride of Frankenstein, 10 p.m., 119 Gallery, 119 Chelmsford St.

For descriptions and additional information, visit www.lowellfilms.org.