

Interviews: Programmers at 2011 Chicago International Film Festival

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- [Chicago International Film Festival](#) [2]
- [Docufest](#) [3]
- [Education](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Interview](#) [6]
- [Lee Ferdinand](#) [7]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [8]
- [Penny Bartlett](#) [9]
- [Rebecca Fons](#) [10]
- [Short Films](#) [11]

CHICAGO – Behind the scenes at the 2011 Chicago International Film Festival is a corp of programmers who determine what films, documentaries and special events will take place during the run of the festival. Their views and passions are the basis for the success of the two week film extravaganza.

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to three of the programmers – Penny Barlett on short films, Lee Ferdinand of documentaries and Rebecca Fons, who directs the education program.



Lee Ferdinand and Penny Bartlett of the Chicago International Film Festival
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com

Penny Bartlett, Programmer for Short Films

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your definition regarding the art of the short film?

Penny Bartlett: One approach that I really like is a variation on the Ernest Hemingway metaphor regarding short stories. It's the tip of the iceberg, where you show a small segment of a relationship, a world or a story and in the way it's done it tells us so much more about the life under the surface. One film in the fest this year is 11 minutes ["The Shower" from Chile], and it shows a couple's break-up. Although you don't know much about the circumstances, through their interactions you gauge a lot about their dynamic and what might have led them to that situation.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you watch so many of the short film format, do you have an instinct immediately for what is working?

Bartlett: I give every film a fair chance. There are so many elements to take into consideration – script, production values, story, characters, originality –It's fair to say that if I see a film that rates high for any of those elements, I'm going to stick with it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Is there any particular country that is doing some interesting or exciting short film work, and why do you think they

do so?

Bartlett: There are some great films from Sweden and Belgium. Also I'm seeing some fantastic filmmaking from Australia and New Zealand. Last year our top winner was an Australian film and this year we have a film called 'Meathead'" from New Zealand, which is really exceptional. All those country examples have government funding for their film programs, and really strong film schools.

HollywoodChicago.com: How has the digital revolution changed the short film in the last ten years?

Bartlett: It's interesting, because it's both good and bad. More people are familiar with the short film form, because they're watching stuff online all the time. On the other hand, because they see it everywhere, it's harder to entice them into a festival setting. That is where creative programming comes in, and we put together presentations where the films compliment each other, and that's what the festival can add to the short film viewing experience.



Lee Ferdinand, Programmer of Documentaries

HollywoodChicago.com: What surprised you when you were going through the process of winnowing down the documentaries for the Docufest portion of the film festival? Were there trends from any particular countries?

Lee Ferdinand: There wasn't any one country that stood out this year. What struck me when it was over, and I had made my picks, was that how many were directed by women. I teach film studies on the college level here in Chicago, and one thing that becomes painfully apparent is after I see so many students over the years, there is a shortage of women in the business. That's always an issue. So to see these incredible documentaries in the hands of women, was reassuring and refreshing, and points toward a growing trend that maybe the way that women approach the non-fiction stories that is starting to spark with audiences.

HollywoodChicago.com: How will this trend translate to the broader film universe, in your opinion?

Ferdinand: To use an example of a film in this year's festival, 'Love Always, Carolyn' [directed by Malin Korkeasaio and Maria Ramstrom] about Carolyn Cassady, she begins the film by noting that the only reason people are interested in her is because she was married to Neal Cassady and she was a lover of Jack Kerouac. There is a realization that there is depth to this woman's life, and behind her eyes, and it is sustained slowly. By the time you get to those comments in the film, you're completely in love with this woman, and you hate every beatnik on earth for screwing her over. It was a beautiful story, and she's a beautiful woman. I think the holding back, the nuance and the patience in the story might have had an advantage because it was directed by women.

HollywoodChicago.com: What excites you the most about the power of the documentary?

Ferdinand: The director Luis Buñuel put it best when he said, 'If the white eyelet of the screen were to reveal its proper light, the universe would go up in flames.' Documentaries come closest to that, because it was the first instinct of cinema. Film wasn't invented to make blockbusters, it was invented to see how the natural world works, a pure quest to understand our role in the big stories in life. Documentaries are like that, they're like the Old Testament of the cinema.



Rebecca Fons, Education Program Manager

HollywoodChicago.com: How important is film culturally to teach us about ourselves, and how do you apply that to the education program?



Rebecca Fons, Education Program Manager
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Rebecca Fons: Now, more than ever, since film is so accessible to people now, it needs to be considered as an educational tool. Like a textbook, a sonnet or a painting, a film teaches about both other cultures and ourselves. When you hear music or see a painting that moves you, film has that same power. It teaches our students so much about other cultures that they would never have been expose to otherwise, and how they relate to those cultures. I'm always asked how am I going to show an Indian documentary to a group of Chicago Public School students. I answer it's about everyone. Every story is about us and every story can relate to the student's lives.

HollywoodChicago.com: How does that compare to a typical field trip of the past, that wasn't necessarily seeing a film?

Fons: I went on a lot of field trips when I was a kid – ballets, Broadway shows, the botanical center, the science center – and that was all valid.

Field trips for films and screening are just as important, because it does create a well-rounded curriculum for those participating students.

The 47th Chicago International Film Festival is October 6th-20th, 2011. For more information and to purchase tickets, click on ChicagoFilmFestival.com [12]



[13]

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- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/patrick-mcdonald>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/penny-bartlett>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/rebecca-fons>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/short-films>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/www.chicagofilmfestival.com>
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