

Interview: Director Icon Peter Bogdanovich Honored at 52nd Chicago International Film Festival

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CHICAGO – If Peter Bogdanovich had only been a film writer and critic, he still would have made a major contribution to cinema culture. But he also chose to direct, and besides producing arguably one of the best American films ever made (“The Last Picture Show”), he continues to work and fulfill his creative vision.

Bogdanovich was honored at the 52nd Chicago International Film Festival with a Gold Hugo Career Lifetime Achievement designation, which was augmented with a magnificent documentary about a period in his career called “One Day Since Yesterday: Peter Bogdanovich and the Lost American Film.” The film tells the story of “They All Laughed” (1981), a post modern screwball comedy starring Audrey Hepburn, John Ritter and Dorothy Stratten. Bogdanovich was in a relationship with Stratten during the production of the film, and she was murdered by her ex-husband while the film was being edited. The tragedy, the prescience of the film and the times Bogdanovich lived through emotionally unfolds.



Peter Bogdanovich at the 52nd Chicago International Film Festival, October 16th, 2016

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Peter Bogdanovich was born in Kingston, New York, the son of Serbian immigrants. An early adapter of film scholarship, Bogdanovich kept a meticulous record of every film he ever saw from the age of 13 to his thirties. He began his career as a film writer, seeking out the titans of the early studio era in their old age, and revived scholarship on John Ford, Howard Hawks and Orson Welles. A chance encounter with producer Roger Corman led to his first directing job, “Targets” (1968), and his association with Ford and Welles (Orson actually lived with him for awhile) inspired him to create his masterpiece, “The Last Picture Show” (1971).

What he touched turned to gold thereafter, as his follow ups were the hilarious “What’s Up, Doc?” (1972) and the brilliant “Paper Moon” (1973). The next few films were not as well received (“Daisy Miller,” “At Long Last Love,” and “Nickelodeon”), but he came back in the mid-1980s with “Mask” (1985). He has made six films since that time, his most recent being the Owen Wilson-starring “She’s Funny That Way” (2014), and has plans for a new film, that he discusses below.

HollywoodChicago.com was honored to meet and talk with Peter Bogdanovich on the evening of and day after the conferring of his Career Achievement Award at the 52nd Chicago International Film Festival.

HollywoodChicago.com: The documentary about the making of ‘They All Laughed’ opened a Pandora’s Box of spirits that were released. What hope was left once that all was examined?

Peter Bogdanovich: It is about still making pictures. That was my hope.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you saw the final cut of the documentary, what insight do you think the filmmakers got about you, your career or 'They All Laughed' that you never expected when the project began?

Bogdanovich: What was gratifying were the comments that the other directors made in the film, like Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach. That was very nice, and the insight they had about the film was interesting, and touching, and I was moved by it.

HollywoodChicago.com: I was fascinated with your card catalog of films seen from 1952 through 1970. What became your go-to theater for a majority of those films, and can you tell me a film and memory associated with that theater that stands out forever?

Bogdanovich: I started that card file when I was living in New York City, and there was a theater nearby called The Alden. When the Lincoln Center was built, they tore down the RKO Colonial Theatre, and I used to go there a lot. The Museum of Modern Art film program was also a destination, my parents would take me there often when I was a kid. When I got older, there was the New Yorker Theatre, on 89th and Broadway, and I loved to go there.

HollywoodChicago.com: Of course, one of the famous trivia answers is that the film 'Red River' was the last picture show in your film 'The Last Picture Show.' Was that inspired by a 'last picture show' that you encountered in your movie-going life?

Bogdanovich: The reason I chose 'Red River' for that film is that we were shooting in Texas, and I wanted to show a film that had a sense of Western adventure. I was deciding between 'Wagon Masters' by John Ford, and 'Red River' by Howard Hawks. I chose the latter because it has the great sequence of the cattle drive that was exciting, and it was in contrast to the sad town in the story.

HollywoodChicago.com: I think about 'What's Up, Doc?' when asking this next question. How important is it for you to get the right character actors to establish a comic rhythm, and could you give me an example from that classic comedy?

Bogdanovich: All the actors in that film were good at comedy. It was Madeline Kahn's first film, and I had met her in New York City. Kenneth Mars I'd seen in Mel Brook's 'The Producers' and thought he was hilarious, that's why I used him. Barbara [Streisand] of course had done stage comedy, and we sort of taught Ryan [O'Neal] how to do it.

HollywoodChicago.com: If you could take a time machine back to the point right before 'The Last Picture Show' was released, what advice would you have given your younger self and would that younger guy taken that advice, since it is you?

Bogdanovich: That's a complicated question. [laughs] I would tell that younger guy to 'stay calm.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Orson Welles once told you, 'I started at the top, and have been working my way down ever since.' In the context of being a filmmaker, does that generally ring true?



Still from 'One Day Since Yesterday: Peter Bogdanovich & the Lost American Film'

Photo credit: Chicago International Film Festival

Bogdanovich: With Orson, it wasn't true, he was just being modest. He had a particularly hard time, because he was too f**king smart, too much for the people in the industry. Every career is different, you can't really go by one and say it pertains to another.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your mindset on the work of Bob Fosse, especially in the context of how he interpreted the events of the

period described in the documentary, in his film ‘Star 80’? Does that alter your view of his overall achievements?

Bogdanovich: Well, it didn’t help. I thought ‘Star 80’ was a piece of shit. It was badly made, and had nothing to do with the real people involved. Bob had never met Dorothy, and had no clue as to what she was actually like – he made her a generic blonde. The whole thing was in bad taste, it never should have been made.

HollywoodChicago.com: In what circumstance did you actually watch the film?

Bogdanovich: I had to see it because Dorothy’s family was thinking about a lawsuit against Warner Brothers. So I watched it, and I told Louise [Stratten, Dorothy’s sister] and Dorothy’s mother Nellie what I didn’t like, specifically a couple lines of dialogue. We got them to cut those lines, and they paid the family a settlement.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you know Bob Fosse before that all went down?

Bogdanovich: Yes. When he made the film ‘Lenny’ in 1974, he asked me for some advice for shooting in Black & White, and I helped him with it. I actually called him when they announced they were making the film, since it was in such bad taste. I asked him why he was making the film, and he told me it was a good story. I told him I don’t even know the whole story, how the hell did he know it? Then I concluded the conversation with, ‘Bob, if this had happened to you I wouldn’t make a movie about it, that’s all I have to say.’

HollywoodChicago.com: In the period where you rediscovered and brought to light many of the studio era filmmaking titans, which one shocked you in the sense of how the world was neglecting them at that point and why?

Bogdanovich: I remember at the time saying, ‘why am I working and John Ford is not?’ I couldn’t quite figure that out. He certainly could have made a film during his later years. Hollywood is a ageist town, and the hot new thing is the thing. However, it was worst back then than it is now. Clint Eastwood is still working. All of those titans you refer to, they all should have worked to the end.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has falling in love been redefined for you as your life has evolved, with all the high profile and tragic circumstances you’ve had in association with falling in love?

Bogdanovich: I think I discovered what falling in love was for the first time with Cybill [Shepard], and in a much stronger form with Dorothy. When I made ‘They All Laughed’ I was defining what real love meant to me, and Dorothy was the inspiration.

HollywoodChicago.com: If there was somebody who has passed away that you could call on a celestial phone, who would it be and what would tell or ask them?

Bogdanovich: Probably Orson.

HollywoodChicago.com: What would you ask Mr. Welles?

Bogdanovich: Help! [laughs] He was a complicated guy, in contrast to Howard Hawks, who I found to be much more centered. Of all the directors from that era I knew, Orson was complicated, Jack Ford was a bit reckless and Howard was centered.

HollywoodChicago.com: I’m very happy to conclude this talk with this question, what is next for Peter Bogdanovich?

Bogdanovich: It’s a ghost picture, and I hope to make it this upcoming year. It’s a comedy/drama about a film director like John Cassavetes, a director/producer/writer type. He’s been married six times, and has six daughters. It’s an interesting story, and it’s based on something I started working on 30 years ago. It’s an ensemble piece, and I want a lot of current movie stars in it, as many names as I can. It will help the audience understand who everyone is, because there are lots of characters in this one.

The 52nd Chicago International Film Festival will take place October 13th to October 27th, 2016. [Click here](#) [19] for film schedules, information and to purchase tickets.



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