

# SPLICE

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40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

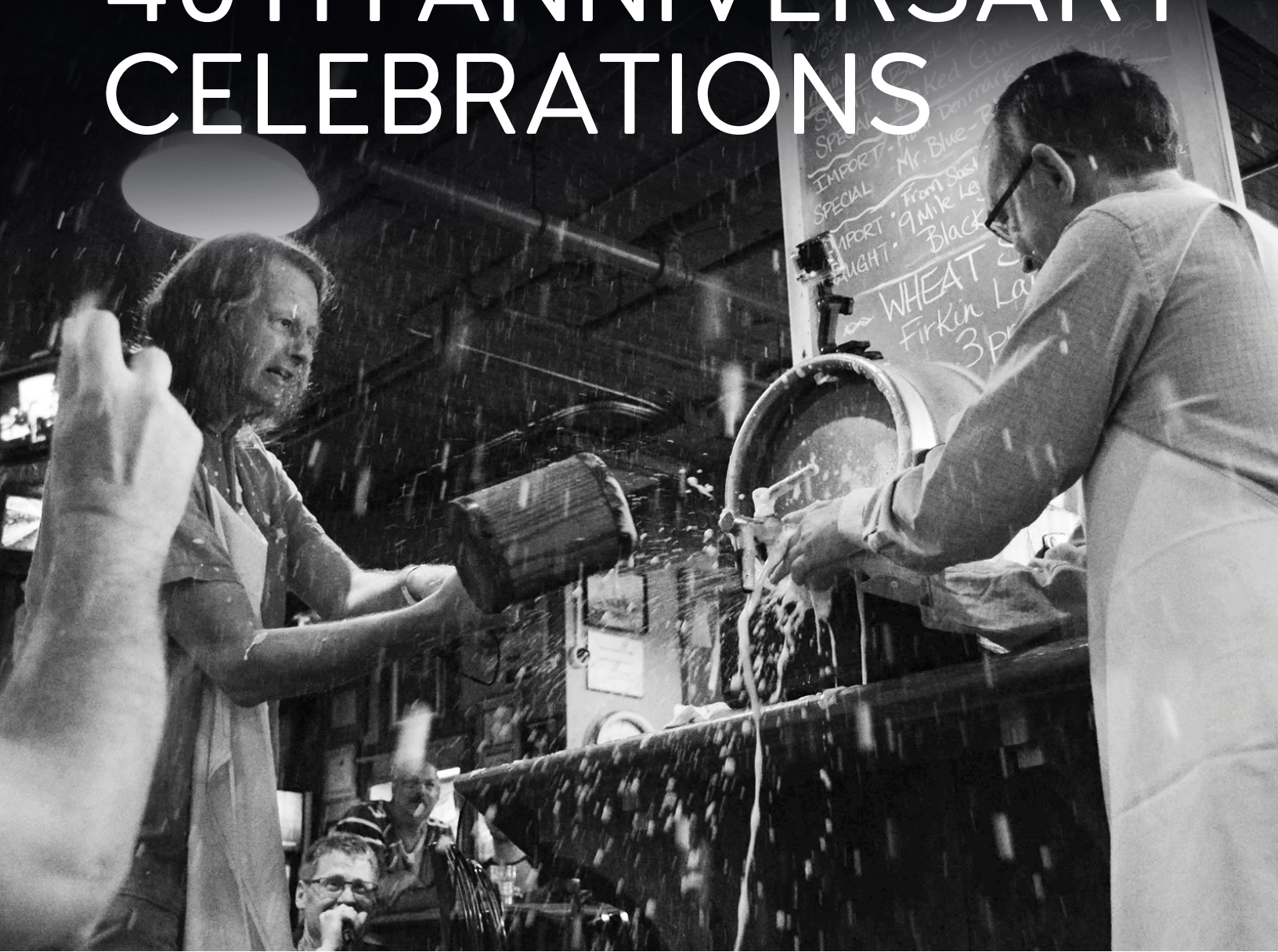
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# 40TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS



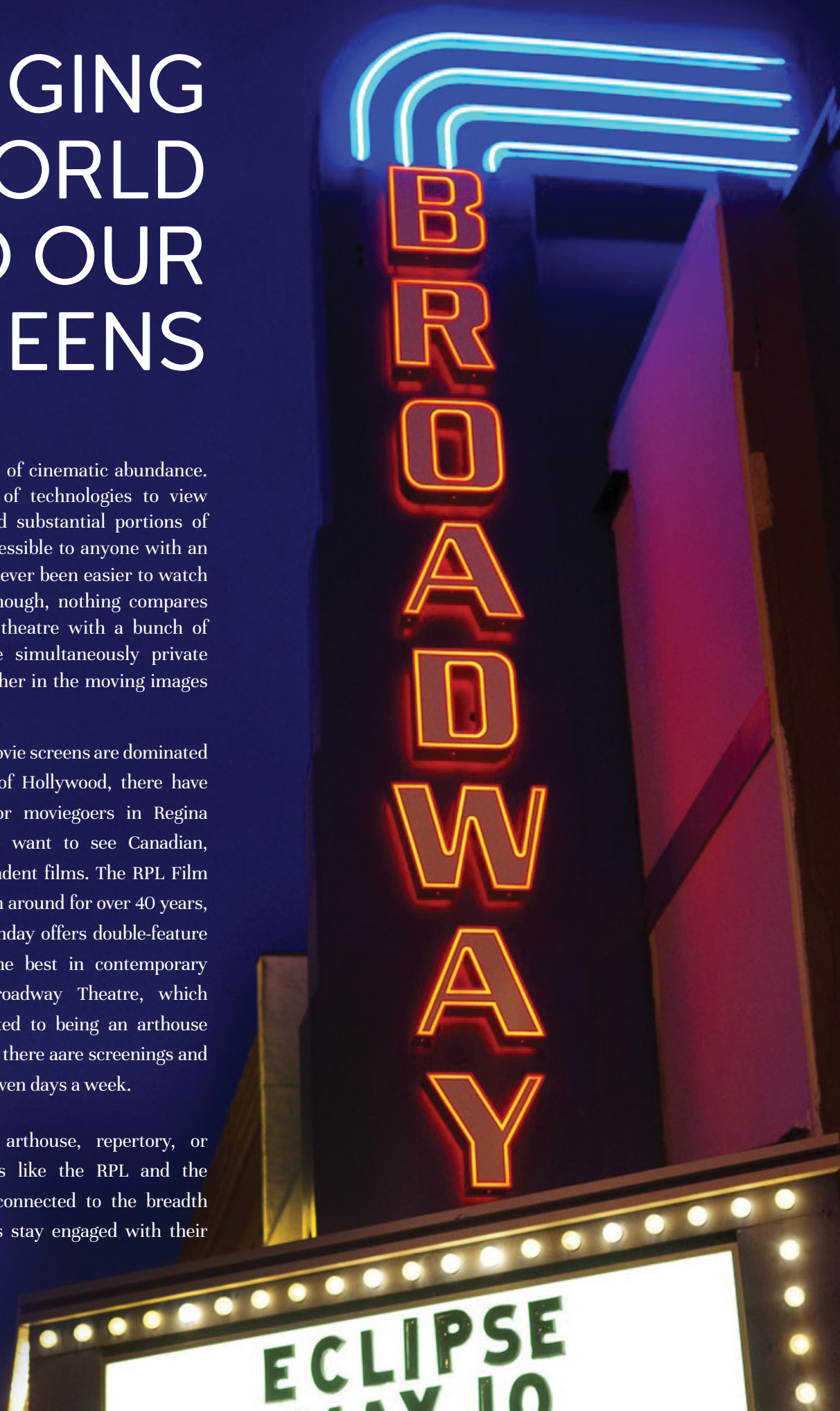
# BRINGING THE WORLD TO OUR SCREENS

BY MARK WIHAK

We live in a time of cinematic abundance. With a range of technologies to view movies on, and substantial portions of the history of cinema accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, it's never been easier to watch a film. For my money though, nothing compares to watching a film in a theatre with a bunch of strangers, an experience simultaneously private and communal; lost together in the moving images on the big screen.

While most of Canada's movie screens are dominated by the marketing might of Hollywood, there have long been alternatives for moviegoers in Regina and Saskatoon who also want to see Canadian, international, and independent films. The RPL Film Theatre in Regina has been around for over 40 years, and Thursday through Sunday offers double-feature screenings showcasing the best in contemporary film. At Saskatoon's Broadway Theatre, which opened in 1946 and shifted to being an arthouse cinema in the early 1990s, there are screenings and live performance events seven days a week.

Whether they're called arthouse, repertory, or independent, it's theatres like the RPL and the Broadway that keep us connected to the breadth of cinema. These theatres stay engaged with their



communities through the work of the keen cinephiles who program the films. I posed some questions about the pleasures and challenges of programming to the RPL Film Theatre's Belinda New, and the Broadway Theatre's Scott Hamilton.

### How did you get into programming films?

**BELINDA NEW:** I came at it sideways, from the creative side and from the filmmaker perspective, but also because I just watched hundreds of films! I was at the theatre virtually every weekend as a film student, along with all our film professors, so it was not possible to hide and not do your homework. If there was a film I missed or one that was playing in Saskatoon at the Broadway, friends and I would drive up there to catch it. I had worked for over ten years in the film industry when I came to the RPL Film Theatre part-time, and although I had done many events and festivals as well, the "job" of programming film was, and is, a great experience in terms of diversity, surprise, unexpected hilarity at times, and of course, challenges.

**SCOTT HAMILTON:** I'll admit to being a touch foggy on why I was asked on board outside of maybe being a local cinephile of note. Just before I joined the team, the Broadway's Executive Director Kirby Wirchenko had been making a lot of moves forward and branching into some non-cinema areas that some of the old guard were leery about, but that I was a pretty vocal supporter of, so he knew that while my heart was rooted in cinema, I also knew how to exercise some long view. Since the theatre was evolving so rapidly the programmer needed to be someone who would maintain eyes on the screen, but was still able to help push other facets of the business up the hill.

### What are you looking for when you put together a program?

**BN:** I'd like to say just...good movies! But it is more complex than that, thankfully. Anticipating what the community might enjoy, what might spark their curiosity or engage



Brenda New



Scott Hamilton

them, cause discussion or just plain entertain people. We exist to screen films yes, but it's the community that more or less tells us the kinds of things they want to see. I get many requests – the viewing community in Regina is pretty diverse and savvy in that they know what's coming, what's out there, what they want us to bring in. And we screen new films every week so we have the advantage of not being tied to obligatory runs of titles. That enables us to screen a lot of films, put on a larger number of innovative events and festivals, often with community partners, and serve a wide variety of tastes.



**SH:** The balance I'm always trying to strike when it comes to our calendar is demand and pride. There is too much great cinema out there to settle on curating something that isn't either culturally relevant or artistically vital. The former is obviously informed by my patrons, because even if I'm not completely enamoured with a particular title, their enthusiasm is nothing if not compelling. The executive-decision titles that I bring in are those that I want to establish an audience for, and those that I treat as projects.

### How do you find the films?

**BN:** Do the research! Keep up with the trends, the new films coming out. I follow all major and indie film festivals where films are likely to get North American distribution: Toronto, Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Sundance, Telluride, Tribeca etc. Staying in contact with national and international distributors is a critical part of the work.

With the advent of digital film and digital platforms, it's been much easier to acquire special films or programming by going directly to the source, at least for titles that don't have Canadian distributors.

With Canadian films, I try to keep track of what is in production as much as I can, and the work of indie filmmakers across the country. Quite a few filmmakers self-distribute, looking for screening venues across Canada, and they email us. I really enjoy it when we can accommodate a road trip, because I think it's an ambitious way to connect Canadians with their filmmakers – it's a

very grass-roots way to get a film seen, and it's admirable how many filmmakers actually do that. We love our local and national guests at the RPL Film Theatre and have hosted many filmmakers and their films – audiences just thrive on that interaction – it's special, personal, and always successful.

**SH:** For the newer fare I just try to keep my eyes on news coming out of festivals and trust a few key distributors who know our audience well enough to bring suggestions to the table. When it comes to rep-house programming I exercise a bit more direct outreach to try to figure out what our patrons want to see more of. As appealing as a more selfish-curatorial approach is, the screen needs to reflect the appetite of the community just as much as it needs to reflect my own whims.

### If you could program a double-feature of any films made in the past 120 years, what films would you pair?

**SH:** I'd like to see *Black Narcissus* and an uncut version of Ken Russell's *The Devils* together. I think they would play wonderfully off of each other and that's good enough for me. I'm sure our crowd would consider this obvious as I have a propensity for most anything with themes of faith in varying lights (in recent years for instance we've run *El Club*, *Ida*, *The Innocents*, *Beyond the Hills*, and *The Little Hours*).

**BN:** This is the most fun but most impossible question! So I chose two suspense movies I am still haunted by years later. One I saw here (RPL Film Theatre), and one I saw at a mainstream theatre. One forever changed everything I had learned about documentary form, and brought home to me the power of film to impact justice or expose injustice. And one changed forever how I thought about what really makes a horror movie scary, and the power of film to impact my carefree lifestyle! Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*.

I've wanted to do this for a while now, so maybe next year I'll curate a series of film pairings, because as an



audience member I really enjoy that concept. I always want to know why people choose the films they do especially if their choices, like mine, seem nonsensical. A number of years ago I had the good fortune to see the wonderfully biting satire *The Tramp and the Dictator* by Kevin Brownlow along with Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and I would love to screen those for our audiences.

### What's the best film screening you've been to?

**SH:** When I was 16 I skipped school and attended a student film festival at the University of Saskatchewan that featured back-to-back screenings of *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, *The Omen* and *Evil Dead 2*. The first three screenings were totally empty and I basically had the run of the auditorium, which I now recognize is a drag for a programmer, but at the time it felt like they were programming the afternoon just for me.

**BN:** There have been hundreds of films at the RPL Film Theatre over the years where I've just become a kid again and thought 'that was the best film EVER!' I've had that experience at many film festivals and mainstream cinemas too – that sense of discovery. But, I have to say, being a guest with film editor Jean Oser at the Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival) in 1997, watching the retrospective of G.W. Pabst films from the early 1930s – which Jean had cut – has to count among the most unforgettable experiences I've had. Prior to the screenings, Jean and I toured Berlin; it was remarkable – his memory of events, and detail was dazzling. He brought the early film era right into focus. In a capacity-crowd of several hundred people, watching these historic films was an intense experience, and I felt transported back to that era. Kind of like an old-school version of augmented reality, with Jean narrating scene by scene.

### What do you imagine film screenings will be like 20 years from now?

**SH:** I'll admit that most possible outcomes of that question terrify me. Most of the world's cinema-bucks are tied up in multiplexes full of people who spend half the picture

– that they've paid \$25 to see – with their faces in their phones. It's a bit of a mess. People who genuinely love the art form will continue to produce work, and exhibitors who are dedicated to film as an art form will hopefully continue to showcase it. Dedication to the medium will be the key.



**BN:** Technology always changes experience of the world and film is not immune. Cynical me thinks people will be watching epic films on some hideously small device, but I think it's been home theatre in general that has had the most impact on viewership. In the future, nobody will ever have to leave their house – for any reason, whatsoever.

I'm going to boldly suggest, or *hope*, film-viewing cycles back around to a less "isolating" experience and to a more publicly immersive one. There is still nothing like watching a great movie in a crowd, whether the crowd is large or a small group of like-minded individuals or contrarians even, coming together for a collective viewing experience and then a discussion. I think people still want to talk about movies, care about movies, and share ideas and opinions on subjects and content. That may sound naïve but I see it every weekend at the RPL Film Theatre and it's still exciting to be in on that experience. /S

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MARK WIHAK is a filmmaker and cinephile, who has spent thousands of hours dreaming amongst strangers.