

Dandy Good Time

at Inaugural Pioneertown Film Festival

By Rich Henrich

A festival that honored legends of the past and masters in the making would be denied no longer. Alas, the Pioneertown Film Festival shrugged off the dismay of a pandemic with a fashionable throwback to the ol' Wild West with Monte Hellman classics and a showcase of new films including "The Last Man Hunt," starring Jason Mamoia. Pioneertown was alive and well on Memorial Day Weekend. The audience embraced the fashion of the West with style and plenty of personalities making appearances, like Los Angeles Lakers owner, Jeanie Buss.

"You can't make great art without finding that delicate balance between being sophisticated and uncivilized - an elegant outlaw is the real artist," says founder, award-winning filmmaker, and true cinephile and horseman, Julian Pinder. The balance of his vision requires both film and audience to align in a dance of experience that becomes intertwined. The music curation with The Dandy Warhols - a personal favorite of mine - helped turn up the dial on this creative offering. Teaming up with Todd Luoto, a Sundance Film Festival programmer, the films held the balance of cool, retro, avante garde acid westerns to the modern interpretation of a time John Ford etched into cinematic history the world over. Indeed, the love affair of the Old West and Hollywood rejoiced in a waltz down an old dusty main street if only for a weekend.

As a festival producer and film programmer (Albuquerque Film Festival, Durango Film, AMFM Fest in Cat City) I know the challenges of launching a cultural experience. I once honored Monte Hellman for his impact on cinema, so have a special place in my heart for the programming at the inaugural Pioneertown Film Festival. The vision put forth is a gem in a cluttered landscape of entertainment offerings. There is a heart and soul that is at once enjoyed as it is simultaneously experienced and on multiple levels. The balance of indoor and outdoor spaces, utilization of venues repurposed for film screenings, and the all-out takeover of the Red Dog Saloon, where the curious and thirsty gathered, helped give birth to a vision turned into an intentional community.

The challenges that face any festival first require an audience to appreciate the cultural cocktail that is being served. What Pinder and his team have done is an extraordinary feat to overcome the problems bestowed upon us all during the pandemic and to unify people in a site-specific artistic entanglement of space and time. The theme could not have been more of an elegant love affair, with Pioneertown-meets-Hollywood in a refined couture celebration of a genre that refuses to die. This festival will grow, and it will become a challenge to balance the growth of audience with the growth of impact upon Pioneertown and the surrounding valley. There cannot be a year two of any festival without a year one. The first year is the hardest and many lessons will be learned as assumptions are



Jennifer Nicholson, Johnny Bowers, (VS)*

tested and new insights and local feedback gained. Festivals are as much entrepreneurship as they are artistic curatorship. This one deserves support and a little patience and proverbial watering to become the succulent cinema fest of the high desert.

I tip my hat to Julian Pinder and his team for giving us such a moment in time to come together, share stories and laugh and dance again, just like we did before the 'rona kicked us. The energy in The Red Dog Saloon was palpable and as beautiful and crazy as humanity can be on our best days. I give a special shout out to an old friend and board member, Melissa Hellman, for presenting the important work of her late father, whose impact will continue to ripple through the Western genre and beyond. Saddle up and hit the trail, follow these trailblazers. They'll take us to a new cultural watering hole and baptize us back to life once again. Giddyup!

Rich Henrich is an award winning film maker, professor of film, and creator/programer of film festivals. His current project is a comedy with Mickey Rourke.

