

## Films and Faith - Films and Life

*Two Brothers describe how films have been used in diverse ways to bring people together for reflection and discussion.*



*Clark Berge SSF writes:*

It began during a Bible Study. My friend the Rev. Molly Blythe Tiechert asked me what I thought of doing a festival of films and faith. "Not religious movies," she said, "but serious films that raise important spiritual issues. We could have an interfaith panel discuss the issues in the film and open it up to the community for discussion." I agreed immediately, and we began to talk about all the different things we'd like to try, people to involve.

"So where do we get the movies from?" I asked. "Do we have to pay for them?" Neither of us knew the answers, so we contacted Myrna Lee, from the local arts council, who came to our first meeting at Little Portion Friary armed with catalogues. But she raised more questions than she answered, like paying for the royalties, renting a screening space, coordinating with the Arts Council, getting in with the people at Theater Three, a beautiful old building in Port Jefferson where many films are screened. She suggested we create an interfaith committee to do the planning.

Our first meeting we were all over the place, talking about films, dues, schedules, panellists. The meeting was exciting and we all emerged with long "to do" lists. As the weeks went by we developed a simple model and an interfaith committee dedicated to making the festival a reality: Jewish and Christian groups were our first organizing committee. We each contributed according to our ability - royalties were our biggest expense. We discovered we had to pay even if we used the DVD from the library. Next we had to choose the films. We all proposed the last five films we'd really loved as perfect candidates. We soon realized we'd have to ask others for suggestions. Then we set about screening the ones we felt the most interest in. We wanted to screen out any gratuitous violence and foul language: none of us were interested in defending the use of the "f\*\*\*\*" word, and our Muslim panellist was very clear about what could and couldn't be depicted. We finally chose three films and invited Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist friends to view the film and prepare a three minute statement of the most important spiritual issue from their perspective.

Two films were screened at Theater Three in Port Jefferson, NY, and one at the First Presbyterian Church in Port Jefferson (Rev. Molly Blythe Tiechert's church). Different groups took responsibility for the reception that either preceded or followed the screening. We invited Jon Anderson, the Newsday film critic to be our keynote speaker at our first screening.

The Festival of Films and Faith of Greater Port Jefferson has continued for five years. The wonderful thing about it is that while film is very important, the community dimension is even more important. The interfaith relationships

have opened other areas of collaboration. Community members of each tradition take turns offering hospitality, and the receptions offer a wonderful chance to deepen relationships with others of our civic community. The film gives us something to talk about and the forum allows us to open conversations that are both appreciative of diverging points of view as well as significant areas that we have in common. Grass roots interfaith work like this is absolutely necessary in creating the necessary bonds of trust and affection that allow the communities of faith to widen and embrace all of humanity, to establish the foundations for trust and peace.

*Desmond Alban SSF writes:*

The occupants of an anonymous South London Housing Estate were fictional, but it was easy, a hundred miles away in outer-ring Birmingham, to feel that we'd met them before, both the characters themselves, and the issues they faced in their lives. The movie in which they featured was one of those used, often but not always featuring British urban youth, in the Year 11 Young Men's Group that has run as a course at Saint Clare's House, Birmingham for several years now. The six month programme usually began and ended with residential activity weekends based at Hilfield Friary, to provide motivation and reward, and to help to build up relationships of trust between the members of the group, formed of 15 and 16 year old young men and the two SSF brothers, Alan Michael and Desmond Alban, who were with them consistently throughout. Some of the young men were from the regular youth groups at St Clare's house, but many were drawn in particular from other groups run by Brother Alan in two local secondary schools to address issues of disaffection and anger management in that setting. Gathering privately with a limited group of invited individuals also made it possible to use films on DVD, purchased for the purpose, as the heart of our regular meetings.



Once the group had gathered together (a process that could take some time!) all settled down to watch the film. Concentrated attention to one thing for ninety minutes or more was a challenge for some, and all would be glad of the short break that followed, but the group then came back together for ten or fifteen minutes of discussion before the conversation continued less formally over the take-away meal that concluded the evening. Each particular film might highlight certain specific issues - identity, ambition, friendship, drugs, violence, crime, fatherhood, the sober reality of life in prison - and the discussion was sometimes facilitated by an exercise to draw that out. For instance, all of us were given a sheet of thumbnail stills of those South London characters and were invited to caption each with a short description of

what we thought of them. Reporting back around the circle began the discussion, whilst the papers themselves were kept as part of the evidence returned to Connexions (Youth Services) who had provided funding for the project. One word - sometimes the same one for half the group or more - seemed eloquently sufficient as a response to one or two of the characters! Though our usual rule at Saint Clare's House, "Respect each other and respect the place", still applied as much as possible, an easing of expectations around the appropriate use of language reflected the freedom and frankness of discussion that we sought, as well as the grittiness of the subject matter of many of the films. They never did believe us when we said that *The Sound of Music* would be next!

What was accomplished shouldn't be overplayed, but if one of the functions of art is to hold a mirror to ourselves, our likes and dislikes, hopes, dreams and attitudes, then cinema proved, for us, to be capable of functioning in that way.

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