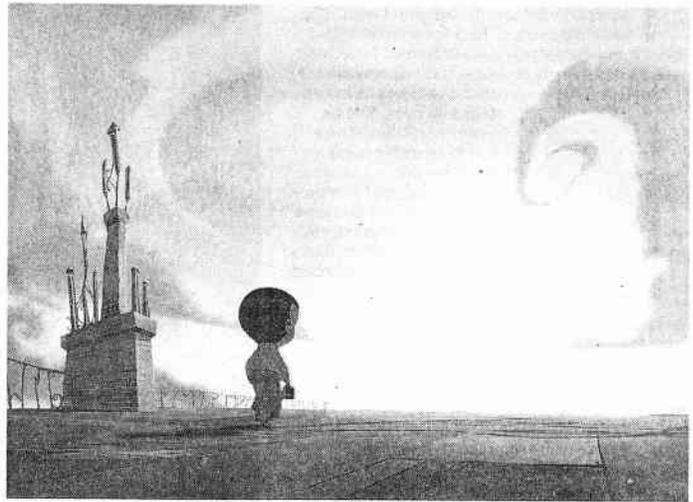


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THE NEW YORK KIDS FILM FEST

GROWS UP

It's now three weeks long and more popular than ever BY MICHAEL GILTZ



The 11th annual New York International Children's Film Festival runs from Feb. 29 through March 16, and one thing is clear: This kid's version of Cannes is really growing up.

The NYICFF has expanded from one weekend to three weeks. Its popularity has exploded from selling about 600 tickets that first year to an expected 21,000 or more this year. The fest will host more than 100 new films in competition and showcase loads of premieres, retrospectives, workshops and filmmaker Q&A's.

And according to festival director Eric Beckman (who shares that title with Emily Shapiro), it's all based on one simple idea: Yes, kids love big-budget fantasy films, but if you give them a chance, they'll also embrace documentaries, shorts, independent films, foreign-language movies and experimental works -- in other words, all the types of movies that adults love.

"In the grownup world of film, there's a huge range of movies that are made, from little niche films to big blockbusters," Beckman says. "But for some reason, for kids there is just that one basic kind of film that gets made over and over."

Not at NYICFF, which will be showing films at four venues this year: IFC Center, Symphony Space, DGA Theater and Cantor Film Center. "The short film program is great," says Beckman, who helped reach out to a celebrity jury that includes actors Susan Sarandon and Matthew Modine and director Gus Van Sant.

"We had 2,500 submissions this year. You'll see a film from Norway, from Canada, from Spain, from Vietnam. You'll see animation and live-action and experimental bits. You've got your ballots so you get to share your thoughts, and at a lot of the screenings

the filmmakers are there," Beckman says.

"In terms of the features, 'Owl and the Sparrow' is a lovely live-action film from Vietnam I really like. It's a sweet film and you get to see the streets of Saigon. And it's a true indie film. It was shot in two weeks. 'Nocturna' is a beautiful, gorgeous animated film that's a co-production from Spain and France. It has elements of 'Alice in Wonderland,' and it all takes place at nighttime, when kids are sleeping."

Whether it's mature subject matter dealt with in a simple, direct way or the simple fact of choosing a foreign-language film, Beckman says whenever he wonders if a film may be too sad or difficult for kids to appreciate, those are invariably the ones they like the most.

"When we started, people said, 'Kids will never read subtitles,'" he says. "That's utter [nonsense.] So we're trying to redefine what people think about when they think about films for kids. And the festival has grown very fast and has become the biggest festival of its kind in the country and perhaps the world."

Now the challenge is to expand the reach of NYICFF, and the organizers have got several ways of making that happen.

"One of them is an online festival, which is going to be launched Feb. 29 at

**a program
for everyone**

See the full New York
International Children's Film
Festival schedule at

[NYDailyNews.com/
entertainment/movies](http://NYDailyNews.com/entertainment/movies)



Opposite page: "Nocturna," from Spain/France, has its U.S. debut at this year's film fest. Above: "32A" is about a 13-year-old Catholic schoolgirl's life in 1979 Dublin.



The French animated feature "Max & Co." tells the tale of a fox and a cat who discover a corporation that breeds mutant insects and then sells special fly swatters.

www.gkids.tv and that is going to be a place where kids and families and adults can watch cool short films," says Beckman, who is married and has watched his three kids grow up with his festival. (As with the actual fest, all films online are rated and detailed, so parents can choose appropriate titles for all ages.)

"We toured the festival last year for the first time and visited eight different cities," Beckman says. "We're going

to significantly expand that. And we've started ongoing weekend matinees at the IFC Center in New York throughout the year, and we've expanded that uptown to Symphony Space. And we're going to go to some additional locations outside the city and expand that nationally." ♦

(The New York International Children's Film Festival runs Feb. 29 - March 16; for info, visit www.gkids.com. Tickets are available at www.ticketweb.com)