

Movies that get people talking

Film screenings and talks led by various experts in their fields inspire many Open Cinema aficionados to take action in their own communities

PREVIEW

What: Screening of *Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action*

When: Tonight at 7
(doors open at 5:30 p.m.)
Where: Hermann's Jazz Club

Admission: Donation of \$10 requested
Expert panelists: Andrew George, a hereditary chief from the Wet'suwet'en and his concerns about coal-bed methane development in Smithers; lawyer Will Horter of the Dogwood Initiative; and Dolores Borten, founder of Reach for Unbleached.

BY KATHERINE DEDYNA
Times Colonist staff

A mainstream flick, a mega-bag of popcorn, row seating and reminders to keep it quiet. Sounds like a typical night at the movies.

But 5,000 or so Victorians have been doing it differently for the last four years.

In keeping with their conversational bent and social conscience, they've turned out for documentary films with drinks, dinner and discussion.

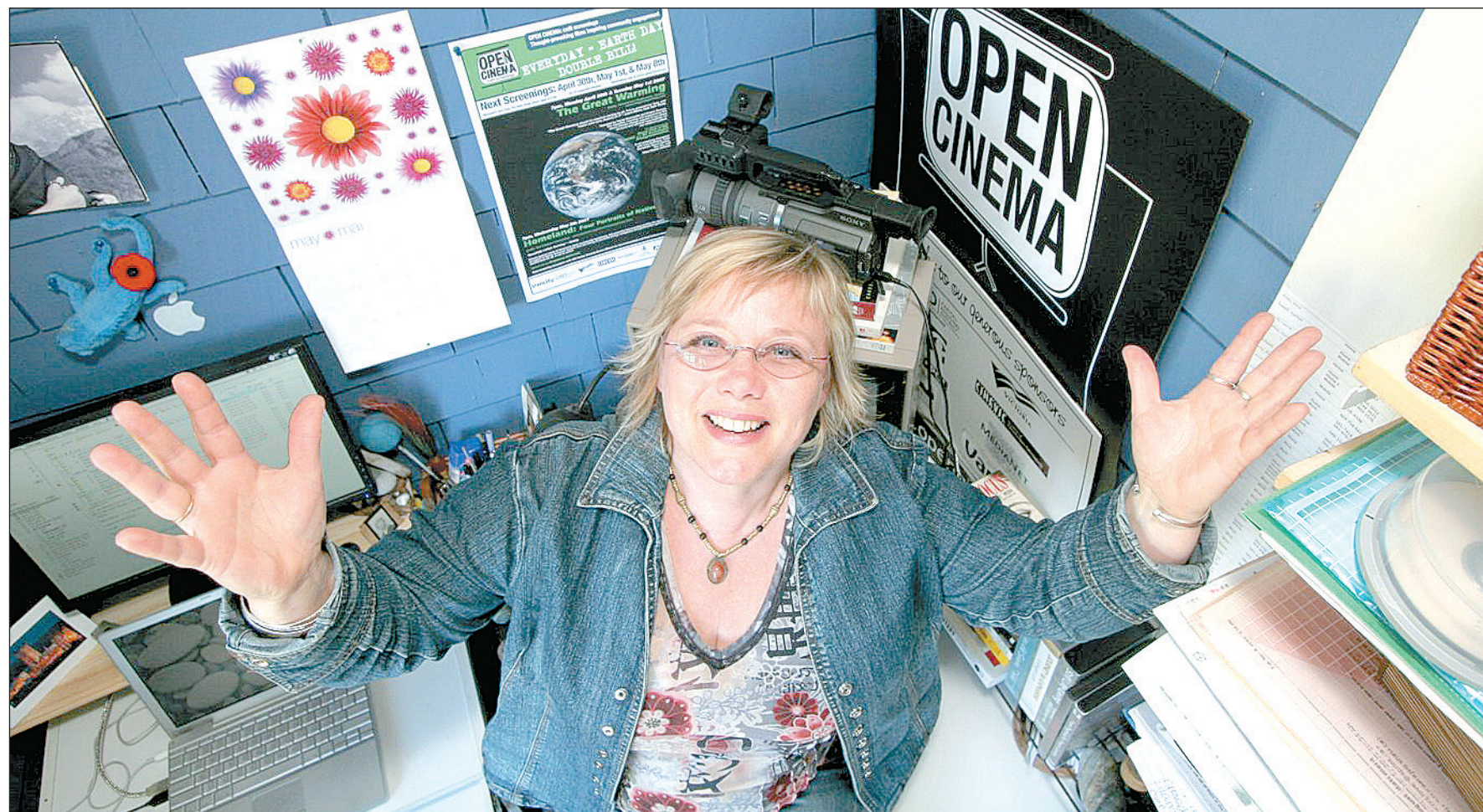
Called Open Cinema, it has been happening — mostly at Hermann's Jazz Club — as a way to combine community-building, films you might not see anywhere else and some serious enjoyment.

Patrons donate a suggested \$10 at the door (just doubled from \$5) and order off the menu. They discuss the show with the friends or strangers at their table. Experts are on hand to put the film in a local context. Anyone can talk. They might even take action as a result.

Open Cinema is the brainchild of Mandy Leith, a high-energy film fanatic bedecked in silver jewelry and blue jeans. She has yet to find anything quite like Open Cinema in her travels.

A transplant from the U.K. who ended up in Victoria in 1989, she's a believer in the potential of film to motivate people to make the world a better place. So the former editor at the BBC and the National Film Board of Canada founded Open Cinema to bring film and face-time together. "I have lived, breathed and slept film," says Leith, who also teaches at the Victoria Motion Picture School.

This is her baby. She isn't paid much — this year's budget for the non-profit



Mandy Leith, founder of Open Cinema, a non-profit society that uses film as a tool for community engagement.

Bruce Stotesbury/Times Colonist

organization is only \$20,000. But she's fervent about hunting down and screening films that can make a difference. She has just been nominated for a Leo Award (celebrating excellence in B.C. film and TV) for *Breaking Ranks*, a film she edited last year about U.S. military members seeking refuge in Canada.

These aren't films that have been retrofitted to what the mainstream money wants them to project, says Leith, 44. It's an outlet for passionate ideas people calling the shots.

And there's an enthusiastic local market. "We frequently sell out," she says.

Sherry Lepage, one of the chairs of the Victoria Independent Film Producers' Association, knows a labour of love when she sees one.

"I think Mandy is doing a really spectacular job and it's such an innovative and visionary thing to do," she says. She appreciates the variety of films — from war poetry to water security. (Her own work, *From Baghdad to Peace Country*, also made the grade.)

You can't get further apart than *A Rustling of Leaves*, about the Philippine revolution, and *Fix*, tackling drug use on Vancouver's downtown East Side.

Open Cinema launched with *The Friendship Village*, a film about a Vietnam vet who returned to support a community for children injured by Agent Orange. Tonight it finishes for the sum-

mer with *Homeland* — a take on the struggle by Native Americans against environmental degradation.

Some of the biggest hits have been *Webcam Girls*, about gals using the Internet to express themselves, and *Star Dreams* about crop circles.

Films about food, such as *Slow Food Revolution*, pack the house. And it's a house that Hermann's donates to the cause.

Having food and drink is important in bringing community together at Open Cinema. "It nourishes us while we receive challenging information — when we talk about problems," says Leith.

The evenings aren't escapism, but they're not a grim force-feed of bad news, either.

The atmosphere is "very convivial" — sort of like a cinema salon, says Dr. Mary-Wynne Ashford, past-president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, who has attended several times as a speaker or to take in the compelling film experiences.

"I think it's an amazing service she's providing."

The conversations and debates are as crucial as the films for Karen Hurley, a University of Victoria doctoral student. She has attended most of the screenings and has seen community-building in action.

Once she stood up and asked if any-

one wanted to help out with Haliburton Community Organic Farm, and found a new board member.

Alex Randell, 36, has been showing up since 2005. At first he just dug really good films. Then he saw *The Fires That Burn*, which followed a nun who taught meditation in prison. It moved him to seek training at Shambhala Meditation Centre with a view to doing the same thing around here.

Open Cinema is "great and it's not heavy," says Randell, a web developer who now volunteers as the non-profit's webmaster.

The films do more than just identify a problem. Leith manages to bring together local people to try to address it — usually in conjunction with other community themes at the time, such as Earth Week.

And it's a way to meet people. "Cute guys go there," she says.

There's also some cross-generational pollination — bringing together 20-somethings and 40-somethings.

But Open Cinema — just beginning its summer hiatus — is at a crossroads.

Leith can't continue donating much more time than she's getting paid for.

Local government grants have ranged from \$5,000 to \$30,000, depending on the year.

Van City Credit Union has been "an incredible supporter" — donating \$16,000 over the years, she adds.

JUST THE FACTS

Average Open Cinema audience: 100 plus

Number of films screened: 51

Number of patrons: About 5,000

Take at the door since 2003: \$19,000

This year's budget: \$20,000, of which \$11,000 comes from grants

Last year's budget: \$30,000

Wish list: A venue where the projector could stay put during the week; values-based business sponsors, printers and shippers.

For more information: call 385-3003, visit www.opencinema.ca or e-mail opencinema@shaw.ca

"We need to find financial support in one way or other — it's a transitional moment," says Leith. "We really need to develop our entrepreneurial edge in order to turn this not only into something that can be sustained in Victoria but can spawn other initiatives elsewhere."

The appeal of Open Cinema encompasses what John Grierson, the founder of the National Film Board of Canada, had it mind, Lepage says.

It's a way to reach beyond the malaise of spiritual weariness and, as Grierson is cited saying in this summer's *POV* magazine, "wake the heart and the will."