

Premieres Open Film Fest

Songs, animated short launch fourth Syracuse event
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By Erica Littlefield
Contributing writer

Moviegoers witnessed three world premiere events Wednesday at the opening night of the fourth annual Syracuse International Film Festival at the Landmark Theatre.

The evening featured the world premiere of Mohican composer Brent Michael Davids' original score for the 1920 film "The Last of the Mohicans." The film, which was directed by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown and stars Barbara Bedford, Lillian Hall, Wallace Beery and Albert Rosco, is based on James Fenimore Cooper's novel of the same name.

"The Mohican tribe now is constantly living under the shadow of this fictional book," said Davids. "When this 1920 film came into public domain, I decided to score it as a challenge to myself."

The premiere was a collaboration with the film festival, the Society for New Music and the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra. The performance was conducted by Paul Hostetter and featured the Society for New Music's core ensemble, members of the SSO and Davids himself playing the American Indian flute and a handmade quartz crystal flute, which was fashioned by Davids.

Davids also premiered his song "Born to Say Thank You" with guest artist Susan Taffe. The song gives thanks to the Oneida people for allowing the struggling Mohican tribe to stay on Oneida land in the 1700s.

The final premiere event was "Raccoon & Crawfish," an animated film based on an Oneida Indian legend. In the eight-minute film produced by Four Directions Media in Oneida, a raccoon hungry for food meets up with a crawfish hungry for fame, and the crawfish learns a lesson about the dangers of seeking glory.

The evening also honored Academy Award-winning sound designer Ben Burt, who was born in Syracuse and graduated from Nottingham High School.

Burt won Oscars for Best Sound Effects Editing for "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" in 1982 and "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" in 1989. He also received two Special Achievement Awards for sound editing in "Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope" in 1977 and "Raiders of the Lost Ark" in 1981.

Burt said he has fond memories of seeing classic movies like "Jason and the Argonauts" and "The Wizard of Oz" at the Landmark when he was growing up.

"My love and passion for movies and sound was partly born in this very theater," said Burt. He said his visits to the

Landmark "gave me a love of movies, which led to a successful career in film."

This year, the festival will feature more than 120 films from 32 countries, including Korea, South Africa and Iran. Other events scheduled for the festival include a new filmmakers showcase, educational forums on special topics, and a drive-in theater in Armory Square.

One moviegoer, Jeanie Weisberg, 68, said she is glad Syracuse supports events like the film festival.

"It's so exciting to see people that are so talented come to Syracuse," Weisberg said. "Usually that happens in places like Los Angeles and New York. It's so nice to have them come here."