

Neringa Film Festival

Lights, camera, action!

DARIUS RAZGAITIS

This year, after the summer campers were packed up and back to school, Camp Neringa hosted its first-ever film festival at the Lithuanian heritage center in rural Vermont, screening a specially curated set of movies, accompanied by engaging discussions and a trip to Brattleboro's historic Latchis theater.

The film festival, which doubled as a fundraiser, is part of Neringa's strategy to provide cultural programming for the Lithuanian American community outside of the children's and family sleepaway camps that form the core of the nonprofit's activity. Following the summer camps each year, Neringa organizes events supporting its mission to provide a nurturing experience rich in Lithuanian heritage and Catholic faith that encourages positive character development. These events include a rotating schedule of weekends for Nature and Mushrooming, Lithuanian Culinary Heritage, Lithuanian Folk Art and now a Neringa Film Festival.

The festival brought together Neringa alums, parents and grandparents of current campers, and film enthusiasts from Maryland to Maine. Camp Neringa alumni directed three of the six films screened during the festival. The Neringa Film Festival (lovingly nicknamed NerFF) kicked off with a screening of *Legenda apie geležinį vilką* (*The Legend of the Iron Wolf*), directed by Neringa's dearly departed Antanas Kulbis and released in 1990. Vytautas Gediminas, who played the lead role of Grand Duke Gediminas in the film, was on hand at the festival. He shared a presentation about how the film came together and walked through a behind-the-scenes making-of video, complete with movie posters and original props from the film. It was a fitting way to kick off the festival as the world celebrated the 700th anniversary of Vilnius, Lithuania's capital city, founded by Gediminas.

The festival's opening night also featured a film written and directed by another Neringa alumnus, Tomas Vengris, the 2019 drama *Gimtinė* (*Motherland*). The audience enjoyed a video address from Vengris, who called Neringa "my favorite place in the entire world," and ended the evening with an extended debate about the characters and the semi-autobiographical story of returning to Lithuania from America to reclaim land lost during the Soviet occupation.

A third Neringa alumnus, Vincas Sruoginis, was on hand for a screening of *Invisible Front*, the documentary he wrote and directed in 2014, chronicling the life of famed Lithuanian partisan fighter Juozas Lukša. Sruoginis shared multiple stories about the team's filming challenges, the historical context of the Forest Brothers, and his conversations with Nijolė Bražėnaitė, Lukša's widow, and former Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus, who



Audience members at the historic Latchis Theater in Brattleboro, Vermont. The theater screened Marius Markevičius' *Thug Rose* (2022) as part of the Neringa Film Festival. Photo Nina Jankauskas

both appear in the film.

A highlight of the weekend was a group trip to downtown Brattleboro to watch Marius Markevičius' *Thug Rose* (2022). The historic Latchis Theater provided the perfect backdrop for watching the documentary about Lithuanian American Rose Namajunas, the world-champion mixed-martial arts (MMA) fighter and concert pianist. Following a spirited discussion about the film, the group patronized several local businesses, including an art studio, bookstore, vintage shop, distillery and nearby cafes.

The remaining two films elicited laughter, tears and more discussion. Aldona Watts' documentary *Dainava: Land of Songs* (2016) followed five endearing women who work to preserve ancient Lithuanian singing traditions. The group at Neringa couldn't help but break into song immediately after the screening. They continued singing throughout the day, moved by the heartwarming stories of the women in the film.

Return to the Dreamland (*Kelionės namo*) concluded the festival and left few dry eyes in the house. Ramunė Rakauskaitė's 2019 film, which portrays Lithuanian emigres visiting Soviet Lithuania, resonated with the audience. The viewers of diverse backgrounds and varying degrees of connection with Lithuanian heritage engaged in an emotional discussion about Lithuanian identity, post-trauma experiences, and the significance of traditions.

The weekend wasn't exclusively about movies! The group also enjoyed an introduction to mushrooms led by a mycologist and spent time foraging for black trumpet mushrooms in Neringa's fungi-filled woods.

Thanks to the generous support of several festival-goers who donated well above and beyond the suggested rate, Camp Neringa was able to cover the film festival's expenses and contribute to the various costs of keeping Neringa running year-round.



Invisible Front director Vincas Sruoginis in discussion with Darius Razgaitis. Photo Nina Jankauskas

NerFF, alongside adult-oriented events such as Neringa's Cultural Weekend (held on August 23-27), Walk-A-Thon (October 6-8), Winter Festival (held in January), and Women's Weekend (held in spring). These events and virtual meetings, like Neringa's Cooking Club and Fireside Chat series, provide opportunities to increase awareness of Lithuania's cultural heritage, traditions, faith and contemporary issues. They offer a chance to meet new and old friends and support the future of this treasured Lithuanian-American center.

Darius Razgaitis is a Coordinator of the Neringa Film Festival.



Mycologist Jūra Strimaitis examines Neringa's fungal haul. Photo Nina Jankauskas



Film buffs gathered at Camp Neringa for NerFF – the first Neringa Film Festival. Photo Nina Jankauskas