

HISTORY: Films on Thursday

Utica University has had a film series of one kind or another from its earliest days as Utica College in Oneida Square. The first known reference to a film series appeared on page 3 of the November 17, 1950, issue of the *Utica College Tangerine*. The “Coming Events” column informed students that an unnamed film would be screened at 3:00 PM on Sunday, November 19, in the campus’s Little Theater.

In November of 1963, eight students including sophomore and chairman Jurij Savycky formed a movie committee under the auspices of the Strebel Planning Board. Plans were announced to screen a feature film and a short film every three weeks, beginning at 7:00 PM on Sunday November 24 in the auditorium. The 1949 documentary, “The Quiet One,” along with the 9-minute short, “Dream of the Wild Horses” (“Le Songe Des Chevaux aux Sauvages”) were slated to begin the series but were later cancelled, and the series was officially launched on Sunday, December 8 featuring the 1954 classic, “On The Waterfront,” and the French short film, “In The Park,” featuring Marcel Marceau. Following Savycky’s graduation in 1966, Richard Pertz became chair until 1969, after which the series went on hiatus with occasional films being shown by various campus organizations from 1969 to 1974.

In September of 1973, Assistant Professor of English Scott McDonald announced a series of experimental films to begin on the Friday the 28th at noon, with George Kushar’s short film, “Hold Me While I’m Naked.” Peter Kubelks’ “Our African Journey,” and Ed Enshwiller’s “Thanatopsis,” were scheduled for the following alternate Fridays. McDonald had previously offered a series of several films over the course of two weeks in October and November of 1972 in connection with his Film 20 course, including Chris Marker’s “La Jetee,” and the Hollywood classic, “Stagecoach.” Screenings took place at 7:00 PM on Monday evenings in the Library Annex Auditorium (room 327). He then announced a film series in January 1975 as part of a Thursday evening course which featured nine films by Luis Bunuel plus “The Exterminating Angel,” “Nazarine,” “Un Chien Andalou,” “Simon of the Desert,” “Belle du Jour,” “The Milky Way,” and “Tristana.”

When Dr. McDonald retired in 1999, after hosting a regular Thursday night film series for two decades, a group of assistant professors: Jeff Miller (Communication Arts), Mark Metzler (History), Linda Zee (Spanish), and John Swanson (History), with assistance from Associate Dean Jerry Cartwright, assumed responsibility for the series. Drs. Metzler and Miller offered an Asian film series in the fall of 1999 and the following spring the series was rebranded “FILM@UC” under the direction of Dr. Miller. Spring 2025 will mark Miller’s twenty-fifth year programming the campus film series – renamed “Films on Thursday” in 2022 – to which he has brought an international focus with films from over seventy countries and territories.

Our continued offering of a campus film series carries with it a number of benefits. First, attending the campus film series provides students with entertainment and a way of relieving stress. Further, Professor Miller’s curation of the film series over the years has been driven by the core principle best expressed by the late film critic Roger Ebert, “Film is an empathy machine.” The film series affords attendees the opportunity to enjoy the films as works of art, while also becoming less parochial and better informed about the world; to help us “understand and identify with others.... [and] learn a lot about the complexity and diversity of the human experience.” The film series also contributes to students’ personal development by offering opportunities to increase cultural awareness, introduce students to other cultures, and increase their love for the arts. Additionally, the film series contributes to students’ overall satisfaction with their campus experience and provides a fun way to socialize and meet people. Members of the surrounding community who regularly attend the series also similarly benefit, as well as develop a more positive attitude towards the university; Films on Thursday affords

opportunities for the public to see films that would not be otherwise available at local commercial theaters, and in some cases, not even on streaming services.

In recent years the film series has not been without its struggles. Years of ineffective publicity have left the community unaware of the series; I have often been asked by members of the community whether “Scott MacDonald still shows movies there?” and more often than not people – including knowledgeable members of the local arts community – are surprised to learn that the series exists at all. Over the past twenty-plus years the institution struggled to get even perfunctory publicity in local media and have attempted to make up for this by purchasing ads in the local newspaper and spots on the local NPR affiliate, but lack of resources has consistently pushed arts and cultural events onto the back burner. When press releases were written and sent to local media outlets, more often than not they were written using little more than boilerplate text. Compounding the issue has been the lack of institutional assessment of efforts to promote the film series.

A number of staff members has offered invaluable support for the film series. The institutional website (www.utica.edu/films-thursdays) is reliably updated by Joe Perry. Attractive posters designed by Aimee Music are displayed both on-campus (in a frame across for the coffee stand in Gordon Science Center) and off-campus (in both the Tramontane Cafe and Cafe Domenico until it changed owners). David Dellecese and Adrienne J. Smith have provided weekly social media posts. Doug Croft has ensured that the series is publicized consistently on WPNR. Erin McCarthy and Yang-chun Ma have consistently provided invaluable support, including submitting invoices for film rentals to Purchasing and posting events to PioHub. Dr. Miller has maintained a Facebook group and, in recent years, has been advertising the film series on the Arts & Entertainment Calendar of CNY Arts (<https://cnyarts.org/events/>) in relation to grants he has successfully written to support the series’ budget. Over a period of years, Dr. Miller also advertised the film series on the digital sign located at the corner of Oneida Street and Memorial Parkway and administered by the Utica city government, but this did not appear to result in any increase in attendance and was eventually stopped. In the past year, and at Dr. Miller’s initiative, bollard sleeves advertising the film series were designed and placed outdoors on the concourse between the library and DePerno Hall on Thursdays.

The COVID pandemic severely impacted the film series, along with most other public events, and attendance has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. COM/FLM 310 (The Motion Picture) has experienced a steady drop in enrollment