

# Cinema Returns to Pawtucket

Pawtucket, like all cities, once had a theater-studded city center. One online archive has 11 movie palaces listed for Pawtucket. All of them have now faded into the history of the early 20th century of the city, the last one demolished in 1998. Now to see a film in Pawtucket, one has to go to the Visitor Center, itself on the site of one of the cinema halls of old. It, too, is listed on CinemaTreasures.org, to the disgust of its commenting community. But every year for the last 14 years, the Visitor Center has hosted the Pawtucket Film Festival.

The Pawtucket Film Festival is one of the closing acts of the Pawtucket Arts Festival, rounding out the month of September with two days of films and musical performances, with the opportunity to get up close and personal with the filmmakers. Festival organizer Rick Roth started the festival 14 years ago when he moved his t-shirt printing business, Mirror Image, to Pawtucket. "I saw that the beautiful little theater in the Visitor Center was very much underutilized," Roth said via email, from the former Soviet Republic of Georgia where he was helping organize a youth film and musical festival, One Caucasus.

The theater, which is usually used to screen a continuous loop of historical footage about the Blackstone Valley, holds some of the relics of Pawtucket's film past. It is decorated with some of the interior decoration from the Leroy Theater, the last of the Pawtucket film houses to be demolished.

"The basic purpose of the Festival is to bring some art and culture to Pawtucket, and particularly to bring film to Pawtucket," Roth said in email. "It is also, above all, to show that Pawtucket is a genuinely artist-friendly place."

The basic structure of a film screening at the Pawtucket Film Festival opens with a reception for the artists and the attendees, followed by 20 minutes of short films, then 30 minutes of live music, then either another batch of short films, or a feature-length film, followed by a Q&A with the filmmakers. Film festivals usually focus on the director, but Roth explained that the Pawtucket Film Festival tries to buck that trend. "We don't necessarily just invite directors; we like to have a variety of artists who have worked on films. Our presenting artists have included musicians who scored the films, actors, producers and even the distributor of a film, besides the traditional director presentations," he explained.

Another distinguishing feature of the film festival is the selection process. Filmmakers don't submit their films in hopes of being approved for the festival; instead, the organizers of the festival invite various artists to contribute to the Pawtucket art scene. "We have a longstanding commitment to try never to reject a film or filmmaker. It is difficult enough to make a film, no arduous application, additional cost or rejection is necessary in the world of film and we strenuously avoid receiving applicants," Roth wrote.

The artists are not paid much to come share their work. The Festival is run entirely by unpaid volunteers on a shoestring budget, but they are compensated for travel costs. Roth said that the Festival views the artists' visit and display of their work as a contribution to the arts community of Pawtucket.

The Festival has hosted a variety of genres of both film and music, from documentaries to fiction, and singer-songwriters to rock and rollers, such as the Blackstone Valley Sinners, the Dresden Dolls, Matt Height and Paper Tiger Television, and Karen Aqua. Some of the cinematic highlights include RI-centric films *Federal Hill*, *Buddy* and *The Werewolf of Pawtucket*.

Roth, a graduate of the Harvard Divinity school, said that his connections in the filmmaker world were part of what urged him to establish the Festival. But Roth is also a committed social justice activist. He joined Amnesty International in 1981 and has been an active member since. He also worked on the board of Students for a Free Tibet. In August, he spent time in Georgia, in a village called Tserakvi, working with volunteers to host a youth music and film festival called One Caucasus. The borderland program is working to create a space where Caucasian youth can meet and share experiences through art.

The Pawtucket Film Festival takes place on the last weekend in September, 27-28. For more information, check out their website at [thepff.com](http://thepff.com)