

# Children's Film Fest at RISD Museum

**'Death: A Love Story' screened at Cable Car. Award-winning film makes first RI appearance**



Later this Winter, on the other end of the cycle of life, The Providence Children's Festival will enter its third year this February with high hopes and high expectations. Running Feb 16-24, the festival will show 18 feature films and more than 40 shorts at a number of local venues. Each film has an age range recommendation (from three years old to teen), and a number being shown at the RISD art museum are, thanks to RISD's sponsorship of the event, free to all audiences.

"These films are not necessarily made for children, but they speak to younger sensibilities and are generally appreciated by all age groups," says Brenda Shannon, president and one of the founders of the festival. "Our focus is on offering a non-commercial festival that brings families, teens and children the opportunity to see films they'll never get at the multiplex."

"They're great films that just don't have the marketing power or product tie-ins behind them that fuel so much of the mainstream family entertainment," adds Director of Programming Eric Bilodeau.

Although other local festivals may have a dedicated day or event aimed at younger viewers, the Providence Children's Festival is the only one the organizers are aware of in New England with an exclusive focus on family- and youth- oriented films. "It's the toughest programming challenge I've ever faced," says Bilodeau, who has been programming for 28 years at festivals of all kinds. "Programming for Children is far more complicated - you have to be sensitive to more issues, both for parents and for kids of different ages. That's why a lot of festivals don't tackle the children's films."

"We look for films that are entertaining, but also subtly or overtly provocative." Explains Shannon, "We want to provide material that makes viewers think and feel, that expands minds, but also that respects the perceptions of viewers without talking down to younger audiences." They are trying to disprove the general assumption that, "No child would watch a documentary when they could watch *Pirate Space Zombies 4*."

To help make the selections, the Festival has children of all ages on their selection Jury. "Kids play an important role in the selection of the films we screen," says Shannon. The participating young cinephiles fill out comprehensive scoring sheets. "It's a great reminder that kids do see things differently," says Bilodeau, who notes that he cut one of his favorite films from the line-up, because of its less-than-enthusiastic reception among the young judges, "Adults who think they can genuinely see a film through the eyes of a child are kidding themselves. They see more in places, less in other places - it's hard to predict."

The festival has grown in scope and attendance each year, last year adding teen films to the oeuvre and boasting about 3,000 viewers. Some previous entries have gone on to prominence, such as *The Secret of Kells*, later nominated for an Oscar, but the festival is also proud of proving that there is, in fact a young audience for genres that are typically dismissed by mainstream venues. Last year, a Sri Lankan documentary sold out its showing and took third place in audience voting. "That film was a

documentary, and it was foreign, with subtitles. Conventional wisdoms says young people would never be interested – but they loved it,” Bilodeau says.

Films this year include animated, live-action, stop-motion and documentary work from the US, Taiwan, Germany, Sweden, Africa, and other parts of the world. Some highlights include: the German opening night fantasy, *Sandman and the Lost Sand of Dreams*, a feature length stop-motion film executed in the tradition of Christmas specials of yore like *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph the Reindeer*.

“I’m expecting diverse reactions from different generations, some of whom grew up with this style, and some of whom may have never seen it before,” Bilodeau says. The French entry *Tales of the Night*, by Michel Ocelot, also takes a unique technical approach, using shadow-puppet inspired silhouettes and sometimes psychedelic backgrounds to tell a creative story; And the documentary, *Man on a Mission*, by Mike Wolfe about Richard Garriott, an entrepreneur and second generation astronaut who made millions in video gaming, tried and failed to join the NASA space program, and then purchased a seat in the Russian space program, is much anticipated for its look at the inner workings of the Russian Space Program, and its amazing cinematography around the Space Station. “Kids raised on special effects will love that this is the real thing,” Bilodeau says.

You can learn more about the festival at [www.providencechildrensfilmfestival.org](http://www.providencechildrensfilmfestival.org)

## **Death: A Love Story**

When her husband was diagnosed with a terminal illness, Rhode Island filmmaker Michelle LeBrun instinctively gravitated toward the camera as an expressive and comforting aide for herself and her husband during the difficult times that followed.

Now, *Death: A Love Story*, the award-winning film that resulted, receives its first Rhode Island screening, almost a decade after it was shot.

The film picked up top honors at Sundance, Santa Barbara Film Festival, San Francisco Film Festival, and the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival. In the intervening years, it has also been used extensively as a teaching tool in universities and programs that deal with end-of-life issues, and appears in over 300 University libraries around the world.

*Death: A Love Story*, will be playing at the Cable Car Cinema in Providence, Jan 23-26. Each screening of this intensely personal film will be followed by a QA session with the filmmaker, and a workshop built around the film will take place on the Jan 27 and Jan 28 at the Shambhala Meditation Center of Providence, led by LeBrun and Brown Medical School Professor Dr. Mitchell Levy, who has been using the film for years to help train medical students in dealing with end-of-life care issues.

Dr. Levy says the film, “describes, with clarity and tenderness, the struggle that patients and their loved ones experience during the process of illness, medical decision-making, and dying. Caregivers should see this film.”

LeBrun is an adjunct professor at Lesley University and teaches in the Film and Media Studies and Communications departments of URI. Dr. Levy is the Chief of the Intensive Care Unit at Rhode Island Hospital and an Acharya – a senior instructor – in the traditions of Shambhala Buddhism.

The film follows the emotional exploration undertaken by cinematographer Mel Howard and his wife, LeBrun, as they begin to build their life together, weigh treatment options, and ultimately confront his terminal prognosis and everything that comes with it. You can learn more about the film at [ww.deathalovestoryvideo.com](http://ww.deathalovestoryvideo.com)