

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, culture, books and more, edited by Karla Kane

Travel agency

The 23rd United Nations Association Film Festival takes you around the world, via the internet

by Peter Canavese

Even in a global pandemic, the nonprofit United Nations Association Film Festival endures, presenting entirely online this year (its 23rd) a program of 60 documentaries over 11 days, beginning Oct. 15. UNAFF Founder and Executive Director Jasmina Bojic continues to think globally and act locally with this year's array of offerings, including several films with a local connection as well as opportunities for discussion and networking via Zoom panels, salons, and outreach to schools and libraries, kids, seniors and veterans.

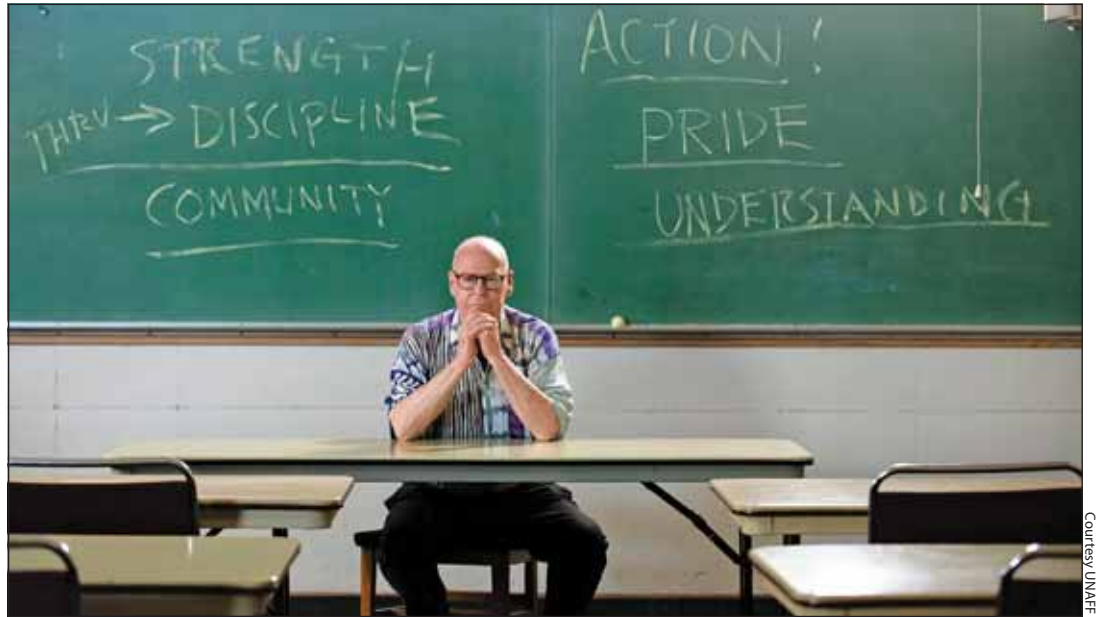
In a useful change, films will be available to screen any time during the day on which they're scheduled. Organizers hope that flexibility will also encourage festivalgoers to digitally mosey over to the fest's daily 6 p.m. Zoom sessions, where filmmakers and their subjects, as well as other special guests, will mingle amongst audience members for a combination of the day's highlights, Q&A and informal chat chat.

Of course, the real draw of the festival remains the films themselves. UNAFF 2020 — with its theme "The Power of Empathy" — covers ground ranging from A to V, Afghanistan to Venezuela. For a subject that's close to home, virtual attendees can begin with any of three films that profile area teachers. For the STEM-energized girl in your life (and indeed anyone interested in cutting-edge mathematics), there's the hour-long "Secrets of the Surface: The Mathematical Vision of Maryam Mirzakhani." This deep-dive profile of and tribute to Stanford University professor Mirzakhani features an impressive

array of interviewees singing Mirzakhani's praises as promising student, valued friend, loving wife and mother, energetic teacher, and genius-level, "superstar" mathematician, whose honors include being named the first female Fields Medalist in 2014. Animated segments help to bring the mathematical concepts to life in what's just as much the story of coming of age in Iran as it is a major American immigrant success story.

The oft-told story of Cubberley High School's infamous "Third Wave" lesson gets a fresh retelling from A+E's German arm in the hour-long "The Invisible Line: America's Nazi Experiment." Former Cubberley history teacher Ron Jones and several of the students from his 1967 sophomore World History class sit for new interviews recounting the week-long experiment Jones developed on the fly to answer an American student's never-more-relevant question: how did the German citizenry just allow fascism to claim their country? Jones' experiment proved all too effective, instructing students and teacher alike about the corrupting appeal of power and all-too-easy submission to self-preservation instincts.

Menlo Park residents may recognize the beloved yoga teacher of "Lolly Font, Yoga Rebel." This 14-minute short from director Liz Cane finds the cheery and spry octogenarian recounting how she discovered yoga at Big Sur's Esalen Institute and how she subsequently became "married to yoga" for life. To supplement the interview with Font, Cane talks with the teacher's starry-eyed pupils and takes us inside Font's yoga



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studio to audit her class.

With her 4-minute, 16mm black-and-white tone poem "Susana," produced in Stanford's documentary film M.F.A. program, Laura Gamse artfully examines the impact of ICE on the immigrant community as well as the determination of one woman to protect the vulnerable. Former slaughterhouse worker Susana returns to her erstwhile workplace — the American job site most frequently targeted by ICE — as she follows her heart (and sets an example for her teenage daughter) by protesting animal abuse and slaughter. UNAFF 2020 also features Palo Alto medical professionals in "Why Doctors Write: Finding Humanity in Medicine," a half-hour short examining the push to use writing as a tool of support and communication in clinical care.

The fest's most high-profile selection this year takes its message of empathy on a time-travel trip to the 1960s. Judith Ehrlich's "The Boys Who Said NO!" — presented in collaboration with the Mill Valley Film Festival — concerns anti-Vietnam War activism, serving as a brief history of the government's war strategies overseas and at home but more so as a humanizing account of conscientious objectors and the various forms resistance took: passive-resistance protest (including burning draft cards) as well as more aggressive activism (The Weather Underground, destroying government files). Prominently featured are Woodside resident and folk-music icon Joan Baez, whose presence on the scene kept spirits high by words and music, and her then-husband David Harris, who served a federal prison stretch for draft resistance that largely kept him apart from Baez and their newborn child.

Baez will be honored with this year's UNAFF Visionary Award,



"The Boys Who Said NO!" is a humanizing account of resistance to the Vietnam War.

"recognizing her life-long unwavering commitment to human rights, and her leadership, creativity, persistence, and vision, which inspired several generations to promote peace and a better future for all," according to the festival's press release. She will receive the award and participate in the final panel discussion on the festival's closing day, Oct. 25.

A nonprofit film festival always makes for a challenging proposition, in a good way for filmgoers

and a laborious way for dedicated organizers — never more so than during our current moment of multiple national crises. UNAFF is a Peninsula institution: use it or lose it. Losing it will leave us sitting in the dark, with only the memory of the projectors that used to help us see the light.

For ticket, schedule and access information, go to unaff.org. ■

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"Secrets of the Surface: The Mathematical Vision of Maryam Mirzakhani" profiles the late Stanford University mathematician.



"Susana" follows a former slaughterhouse worker who risks her safety to fight against animal abuse.