

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Films make noise at Silent River

By [JONATHAN WINSLOW](#)

2013-10-14 20:04:16



It's often said that a picture is worth a 1,000 words, but how many do you think a movie is worth?

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis – a filmmaker, actress, poet and Irvine resident – says 90 minutes of film can express more than a stack of 90 books. This belief led her to found the Silent River Film Festival, a four-day celebration of independent films, filmmakers and the ideals that drive them.

Silent River, now entering its third year, will begin Thursday. This year's festival will feature 82 films from 17 countries, the majority of which will be screened at the Edwards Westpark 8 Theater. The festival, which will run until Sunday, will begin with a ribbon cutting and close with an awards ceremony at the Irvine Civic Center.

Cinemas for causes

The Silent River Film Festival is not the only name in town when it comes to celebrating independent filmmakers. The Irvine International Film Festival is also approaching its third year.

Singh-Chitnis says what makes Silent River stand out is its fierce dedication to the causes behind the featured films. She says independent films are typically more message-driven than feature films, and Silent River is presenting films that promote calls to action.

One such ideal-driven film has its roots right here in Irvine.

"Through the Heart of Tango" is being shown at the film festival and follows the journey of eight people learning to tango – three of whom have autism and one of whom has Down syndrome.

The film's executive producer is Irvine resident Liza Krassner, who also happens to be the chief administrative officer of the Program in Public Health at UC Irvine. Krassner has been dancing the tango for years and found that what she learned about the movement enabled her to greatly improve her relationship with her son, who has autism.

Through a series of mostly accidental events, Krassner came to be the executive producer of the film, which she used to spread a message to improve her son's future, and the future of other children with autism.

"There are things that they can do, they just need that opportunity," Krassner said. "This is a workforce development project. This is part of a larger effort to show that people can work on beautiful projects like tango."

East meets West

One of the main themes of the Silent River Film Festival is bringing East and West together, cinematically and ideologically. The documentary "Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World" represents the West, and the feature film "Josh (Against the Grain)" represents the East. These two films, to be shown Thursday, tackle enormously different topics. The first is a look at global issues, inspired and narrated by Prince Charles, while the second is a tribute to victims of retribution crime in feudal Pakistan. It tells the story of a

person dedicating her life to other people.

These two films were chosen to represent the different viewpoints that the festival is attempting to bring together.

Is two too many?

With limited support and financial difficulties facing Silent River, one is forced to ask the question: Are two festivals too many for Irvine? It might seem surprising that Irvine has its own platform for independent films. Krassner has a theory to explain this.

She said Irvine embraces a very educational mindset, and its residents are always trying to become more "complete." She said this mentality results in a remarkably receptive approach to new concepts, such as the ones these films are presenting.

"We educate people to get good jobs. Jobs will put food on your table, but art, that's food for the soul," Krassner said. "You can't be whole without both, that's how I see it."

Singh-Chitnis says independent filmmaking is on the rise, and she is committed to providing a platform for their messages in Irvine, even if she has to pay for it herself.

Donations can be sent to the Silent River Film Festival at indiegogo.com/projects/silent-river-film-festival-cinema-for-causes.

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis has spent half of her life on one side of the planet and half on the other, all the while immersing herself in the arts.

Singh-Chitnis lived in India until she was 24, at which point she came to the United States. She lives in Irvine.

Singh-Chitnis spent her early years training herself in as many arts as she could, dabbling in poetry, painting and dancing. But those mediums weren't enough for her to convey the message she wanted to send, so she turned to filmmaking.

This experience contributed to her goals with the Silent River Film Festival: She wants it to bridge the two sides of the world that she has called home.

Silent River is entering its third year but is facing difficulties with

lagging support and skeptical sponsors, some of whom she says are unsure about films from certain regions being shown at the festival. This has proven frustrating to Singh-Chitnis, who has resolved to keep Silent River going, even if she has to pay for it herself.

Q. What got you into filmmaking in the first place?

A. Since I've known myself, I've found that I have a need to express myself. I started to explore things. I learned dancing, painting, acting, poetry. I've done all of those things since I was very young.

When I was 14, my writing started to get published in magazines, and when I was 18, my first poetry book won a prestigious award in India. Before 20, I had three books out in India.

But no matter what I did, I felt there was something that remained unsaid, that I couldn't fully say. I realized that film is the only medium that combines all the art forms, and it becomes so powerful that no other art form can beat it. Sometimes my father would say I was a jack-of-all-trades but a master of none. I told him that a jack-of-all-trades could become a master of filmmaking, because that's what you have to be.

Q. How did you go about getting the festival off the ground?

A. I went out and contacted community leaders. I told them I'd like to do a festival if the city could help. They told me that the city priority wasn't to support art; it's not that they don't support it, but they don't have funds for it. They told me if I did end up doing something, then they would support me.

So, I looked at my credit card and said, 'Well, I'm going to do a festival!' I'll keep going regardless of who

comes with me or not. When I start something, I see it finished in front of my eyes. It was the same way with the festival.

Q. A major theme of the festival is bringing together East and West. What do you feel the big differences are between Eastern and Western cinema?

A. It's more about the perspective on things and how we look at them. In the East, there's a unique way of telling the story, whereas in the West, people have a very different perspective on life, so their storytelling is very different.

One thing I see in common on both sides is that we're all human beings. We have the same emotions and desires; we're looking for the same happiness in our lives. That can't be denied, no matter what part of the world you're in or what story you're telling.

I feel like if we're patient and cross that language barrier or the bias, we can learn something.

Q. Do you see yourself having difficulties putting this on every year?

A. Right now, we can use all kinds of support. We're short on paying some of our bills. My friends and I may have to pitch in again to salvage this festival.

I don't want to use strong words for anybody, but how can you close your eyes from the reality that you are being dismissed, for whatever reason? I've had complaints from the Indian community; they're thinking that I'm a Korean or a Chinese cinema showcase. They're not looking at me as an artist.

Q. Do you find it frustrating that, considering your festival is trying to bridge these gaps, you're being looked at as taking sides?

A. Exactly. It's hurtful. It's beyond my comprehension. I never thought that I would come into this situation.

The challenge I'm facing is that Orange County is not very open to what I'm doing. I'm sad. I don't want to hide my sadness. Sadness doesn't make you weak. It makes you stronger.

If your eyes are washed with tears, you'll see the message clearly. Every time I'm pushed, I fall one step ahead of the person who pushed me.

jwinslow@oregister.com

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Liza Krassner, an Irvine resident who works at UCI, is the executive producer of "Through the Heart of Tango," a film which will be shown at the Silent River Film Festival.

JONATHAN WINSLOW, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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