

Greater Phoenix Jewish Film Festival expects largest attendance in event's history

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The Greater Phoenix Jewish Film Festival (GPJFF) is a little more than a week away, and the event's 22nd year promises to be its largest yet, with organizers predicting more than 10,000 attendees over 15 days.

"It's just incredible when you think about how it started with two couples on either end of town doing independent Jewish film festivals," said Barry Singer, co-executive director of the GPJFF, which was created in 2009 with the merger of the Phoenix Jewish Film Festival and the East Valley Jewish Film Festival.

Singer explained the daunting task of screening and selecting the final 21 films for this year's fest. Two people serve as initial screeners, watching roughly 150 films, a process that's already begun for 2019. Each film that receives at least one positive vote advances to the next round of screenings, which are conducted by larger groups, one for each of the festival locations.

Based on pre-event ticket sales, the most popular film this year is "Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story." Directed, written and produced by journalist Alexandra Dean, the film traces the life and career of the Hollywood siren, particularly exploring her lesser-known work as an inventor.

Lamarr was a lifelong tinkerer, developing everything from a dissolvable tablet for turning any drink into a carbonated beverage to advanced weapon systems.

Lamarr's most notable invention was created during World War II in collaboration with composer and pianist George Antheil. Lamarr had learned that the U.S. Navy's



Photo courtesy of the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles

'They Played for Their Lives'

'They Played for Their Lives' director and producer Nurit Jugend, left, with survivor Hellmuth Szprycer and Aaron I. Butler, the film's co-director/producer and editor.



Dean explained that for the Austrian-born Lamarr, fighting the Nazis was about more than patriotism — “it was a personal vendetta.”

“During the day, [Lamarr] filmed with Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy and Jimmy Stewart — probably the three most well-known leading men in Hollywood at the time — while at night, she would leave the soundstage and go home and invent things to help the Allies win the war against the Nazis.”

In addition to her decades as an inventor, the film also covers Lamarr’s acting career, including her somewhat scandalous participation in the 1933 film “Ecstasy,” in which she swims nude.

The film features interviews with directors Peter Bogdanovich and Mel Brooks, the latter of whom was an admirer of Lamarr despite being sued by the actress for a character featured in his 1974 Western-Comedy “Blazing Saddles,” who was named “Hedley Lamarr.”

One director/producer who will be attendance at this year’s festival is Nurit Jugend, whose film “They Played for Their Lives” traces the story of eight Holocaust survivors who used music to persevere and as a crucial bargaining tool in dire moments.

Jugend, herself a composer and musician, said she was compelled to make the film in part because many members of her mother’s family died in the Holocaust. Also, as a composer and musician, she was interested in “examples of music being used in situations of extreme trauma” and the question of “whether there was music-making during those horrific circumstances.”

She learned there had been music composed in such places, and even got to listen to some it being performed by Holocaust survivors.

“It is so beautiful that it’s hard to imagine it was composed in such a place,” Jugend said. “The beauty of it was a trigger during that time in my life that kind of just brought these two parts of me together.”

Jugend will speak at a matinee on the first day of the festival on Feb. 11 at Harkins Shea 14. She will be accompanied by Hellmuth Szprycer, one of the eight survivors featured in the film.

The other two locations where the festival is holding screenings through Feb. 25 are Harkins Theaters Tempe Marketplace and Harkins Theaters Park West in Peoria.