

MOVIES

DFT founder meets with film lovers

BY JUDITH DONER BEIRNE
SPECIAL WRITER

It's a sunny, summer, Sunday morning in Bloomfield Township. And 160 people are sitting in a dimly lit movie theater although no film is scheduled until afternoon.

They have come to the third session of the Film Lovers Club, co-sponsored by the AMC Maple 3 and Barnes & Noble Cafe.

Attendance has grown so that the monthly Sunday morning meeting has to be moved from the bookstore coffee shop to the theater on Maple just west of Telegraph.

This day Harvey and Nadine Miller, Diane Pomish, Irene Ambler — all coincidentally of West Bloomfield — are part of an audience that has come to hear Elliot Wilhelm, founder of the Detroit Film Theatre at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

"It's a real privilege to have the job that I have," Wilhelm tells them in his engaging, conversational manner. "For me to stand at the back of a theater and see an audience responding to a film on the screen is truly exciting."

Wilhelm, Detroit-born and bred, told of nurturing his love for film at the art film theaters of his boyhood — The Studio, Studio North, Studio 8 and Studio 4.

But from 1970 until Wilhelm formed the DFT in 1973, "there was no real theater that showed alternative kinds of film."

"The NEA got me the job I have," Wilhelm tells this audi-

ence, seated in heavily Republican Oakland County.

With a backdrop of a Republican-controlled Congress seeking to eradicate the National Endowment for the Arts, Wilhelm recites this experience:

In the early 70s, the NEA recognized the void in alternative film theaters that had developed in Detroit and other major cities.

Through a Regional Film Theatre Project, they gave money to museums, cultural centers and libraries to revive the showing of alternative films. And one of these was a \$10,000 grant to the DIA.

Wilhelm recalls the racial tensions that ruled Detroit in the early '70s and the question of whether the DIA was the right venue.

"In a major city, that's where culture happens." At the same time, "We recognized that it was a distinct possibility that it would fail. Would the suburbs come?"

The theater seats 1,200. And 867 came that first night. The theater has averaged between 850 and 1,000 each evening since.

And once theaters like the Maple opened, in 1976, the NEA withdrew the grant. The alternative film market was once more in place.

"The DFT's health is important to the Maple's health," Wilhelm says. "Together these theaters (together with the Main Art, the Abbey, etc.) are offering the public a much wider selection of films than they would otherwise

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Elliot Wilhelm

be seeing.

"We wish them all great health. When audiences' tastes are raised, they'll support them in the marketplace. It's a great cycle, the more and more you go to good films, the more will be made."

The next meeting of the Film Lovers Club is 10 a.m. Sunday,

Sept. 17 at the Maple 3. And the first meeting of the Real Talk film discussion group takes place at the Barnes & Noble Cafe at 9:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 6 after the 7:15 p.m. showing of the "Brothers McMullen" at the Maple 3. Call Ruth Daniels at (810) 855-9091 for more information.

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