

Opening Night at the Festival

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The opening of the Film Festival last week in Toronto was a big hit. No, not *that* festival – the Cabbagetown Film Festival. Sure, the big one opened at the same time, if you prefer that kind of thing: shallow and glitzy, with frantic people ogling stars and making deals. The Cabbagetown Film Festival believes that small, local and unpressured is better. The films ran for one night to a full house in the barroom of the Winchester Hotel, a local dive. “Our lineup is just as good as theirs,” asserted Gina Dineen, the co-ordinator. “Maybe better.”

Ms. Dineen’s event kicks off the annual Cabbagetown Fall Festival, a whirlwind of activities in this unique central Toronto neighbourhood. Citizens of all incomes and colours live side-by-side here, in expensively restored Victorian row houses and crumbling city housing, in a huge high-rise complex that caters to new immigrants and in low and mixed income co-op housing. At the heart of the community is Riverdale Farm, a replica of a nineteenth century working farm complete with Clydesdale horses, pigs, sheep, goats, cows and Dusty the donkey. It’s a joy known only to Cabbagetowners, surely, to live ten minutes from the financial and commercial centre of a great city, and yet smell fresh manure wafting in sweetly from next door.

This year, the list of Cabbagetown Film Festival films, none more than nine minutes long, included *Barbie and Ken Go Parking*, in which Barbie and Ken are “having a sexual encounter when Barbie gets abducted by aliens;” the tender *Amy*, this year’s First Prize winner, about the filmmaker’s lifelong attachment to an unrecognizable stuffed animal; and a film directed by a local high-school student about a band of vicious, marauding cabbages. Ms. Dineen, who has a Julia Roberts smile, provided commentary and gave out prizes. The Second Prize winner, in a brief speech, explained the genesis of his oeuvre: “If you want to make a film, go for a beer to Sneaky Dee’s, talk to a friend and a week later it’ll be done.”

A number of celebrities attended the festival, most notably a world-famous opera singer, a famous violinist and two soon-to-be-famous movie actors who had flown in from L.A. for the occasion; they happened to be, respectively, Ms. Dineen’s mother, father, sister and brother. A lot of beer was consumed, and the younger members of the audience felt free to abscond with the balloons, which had provided a festive air.

“You just send out invitations and see what comes in,” said Ms. Dineen afterwards. “It’s just like throwing a big party.”