



Feel overwhelmed by SIFF? Here's a film-fest survival guide

The annual Seattle International Film Festival opens Thursday (May 19) and runs more than three weeks. Here are some practical tips and a sample "cinematic study" to help you get the most out of the largest film fest in the nation.

By Pamela Biery

May 18, 2011.

The 37th Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) opens Thursday (May 19), running through June 12. The largest film festival in the country, it features more than 440 films, along with multiple galas, tribute events, live music, and parties.

Congratulate yourself on living nearby, and take the opportunity to scratch your itch for independent cinema — or begin to explore an art form you haven't before. Find edgy films. Mix it up and see a range of works. And remember "international" is in the name for a reason: Beyond the worthy local selections are gems from around the world.

The amazing mash-up that makes a film festival a film festival is not just the film, but the events, parties, and sweet buzz of celebrities and special guests showing up to share, inspire, and inform on the process of filmmaking.

This year's festival program categorizes the films in several ways, to help attendees shape the combination of films and events they want to see. In addition to listing films by venue, for example, it sorts them into 10 thematic "pathways," which are described as loosely structured genres — like "Love Me Do," which has a smattering of drama, romance, and romantic comedy.

Take some time online to explore options. From www.siff.net, go to "The Festival" (high on the screen), and then select "Siffter." That is a program that sorts films by genre, country of origin, venue, day, or time. Check out the "Updates" section to download the 2011 Program Guide and the 2011 Programmer Picks, a quick guide and set of informal reviews by SIFF staffers that offers a good sense of the films' range and sensibilities, as well as an insider vantage.

Because SIFF has grown so large as to seem overwhelming, here are some tips to help you make the most of good thing:

1. Pick up a catalog and go online to choose a few films that look appealing. Reserve early if you can, be flexible if you can't.
2. Take public transit or carpool. It's pretty much a sure thing that there will be lines and extra traffic, so stay cool and save money by busing it.
3. Don't be daunted by lines or sold-out shows. Lines are an inevitable part of showing back-to-back films; people have to wait for one show to empty before the next audience can enter. Even sold-out shows often have some tickets 10 minutes before screening time.
4. Get social and mobile. Pick your favorite social outlet to keep up with the latest and add your say. Download the SIFFter app for your iPhone.

5. Pick at least one film with a visiting filmmaker, actor, or special guest. SIFF brings over 150 guests to the festival each year — an often memorable, always unique and enriching, perspective that festival junkies get hooked on. (Keep watching online for guest appearances, as the schedule can change throughout the festival.)
6. Inside/Out. Check out neighborhood parties and regional openings. Get out of the theaters and mix it up — cinema is a social art form.
7. Embrace eccentricity and don't expect Hollywood. While some films may have polished screen values, many independent and smaller films don't — appreciate the texture and quirky paths of indie films.
8. Design a theme for your cinema experience. Whether you want to catch up on Ewan McGregor, LGBT, films on food, environment — whatever your choice — having context to compare and contrast your viewing selection deepens and personalizes your experience. Following is a sample theme.

Get More from SIFF: Build a Cinematic Study

This year, actor Ewan McGregor will be honored with a special tribute. While the Sunday (May 22) event is sold out, the opportunity to see McGregor's new work alongside some earlier films is still an option, and points the way to planning other focus studies.

"Ewan McGregor combines crush-worthy good looks with expert performances across all genres — making him a tour de force in the cinematic world," SIFF programmers wrote.

For McGregor fans, an appropriate "cinematic study" might look like this (film synopses excerpted from SIFF's guide):

"Perfect Sense," United Kingdom, 2011, 88 minutes.

In the wake of a mysterious epidemic, which causes people to lose their senses following intense emotional outbursts, a medical researcher embarks on an affair with a chef in an evocative blend of sci-fi, apocalyptic vision, and romance.

Genre: Action/Adventure, Romance

Director: David Mackenzie

Principal Cast: Ewan McGregor, Eva Green, Ewen Bremner, Stephen Dillane, Connie Nielsen

Screenings: Saturday (May 21), 9:15 p.m., Egyptian Theatre; Wednesday (May 25), 4:30 p.m., Egyptian.

"Beginners," USA, 2010, 104 minutes.

Two stories intertwine and illuminate when a young man's budding love affair floods him with memories of his recently deceased father, who came out of the closet at age 75 to live a full, energized and wonderfully tumultuous gay life in a deeply funny and transformative film.

Genre: Gay/Lesbian, Drama, Romance

Director: Mike Mills

Principal Cast: Ewan McGregor, Christopher Plummer, Mélanie Laurent, Goran Visnjic

Screening: Tuesday (May 24), 4:30 p.m., Neptune Theatre.

"Moulin Rouge!," USA, 2001, 127 minutes.

A young poet finds true love with a glamorous nightclub performer. Baz Luhrmann combines 19th-century Paris bohemian decadence with in-your-face pop energy and a score of popular late 20th-century tunes in a lush, musical extravaganza.

Genre: Romance, Romantic

Director: Baz Luhrmann

Principal Cast: Ewan McGregor, Nicole Kidman, John Leguizamo, Jim Broadbent, Richard Roxburgh

Screening: Sunday (May 22), 9 p.m., Egyptian

"The Pillow Book," France, 1996, 126 minutes.

A young Japanese woman with a fetish for calligraphy embarks upon a passionate relationship with a British translator (Ewan McGregor), using his body as a canvas on which to send work to her publisher, in a lurid tale of lust, hatred, jealousy, and revenge.

Genre: Erotic, Experimental, Romance

Director: Peter Greenaway

Principal Cast: Vivian Wu, Ewan McGregor, Yoshi Oida, Ken Ogata

Screening: Friday (May 20), 9:30 p.m., Harvard Exit.

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Comments:

Comment by **dukecat**, posted Wed, May 18, 9:05 p.m.

Helpful synopsis for navigating SIFF.

— **dukecat**

Comment by **bordercolliegirl**, posted Sun, May 22, 2:20 p.m.

This was very helpful, thanks!

— **bordercolliegirl**

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