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'WE GET AWAY WITH THINGS THE BIG GUYS CAN'T'

For 28 years, the Oldenburg Film Festival in northwest Germany has carved out an iconoclastic niche by fearlessly embracing the kind of movies most global film events ignore: 'Being outside the spotlight has its advantages' BY SCOTT ROXBOROUGH



When COVID-19 shut down most global film fests in 2020, Oldenburg found a workaround by holding screenings in locals' living rooms.

Like the fiercely independent cinema it has been championing for the better part of three decades, the Oldenburg Film Festival has never had enough money or enjoyed much mainstream recognition. For 28 years — the 2021 festival runs Sept. 15 to Sept. 19 — Oldenburg has been operating under the radar from a small city (population 170,000, about the size of Garden Grove, California) tucked away in the northwest corner of Germany.

"We're not in a big city and we're not a big festival — we're not Cannes, we're not Berlin and we're always underfinanced. It's a struggle, it always has been," says Oldenburg Festival founder and director Torsten Neumann. "But being outside the spotlight has its advantages. We can get away with things the big guys can't."

Take 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic shut down film festivals worldwide. Cannes rolled up its red carpet. So did Tribeca, Telluride and South by Southwest. But

Oldenburg found a way to hold gala premieres under COVID-19 protocols. Instead of screening its 2020 lineup in packed cinemas with hundreds of guests, Oldenburg went intimate, with private galas at local homes.

"We called them Living Room premieres, because that's literally what they were — we'd have the director and stars of the film presenting their movies to people in their own living rooms," Neumann recalls. The galas were streamed live for the rest of the city's locked-down audience to enjoy.

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“We’d drop into to these apartments, or to homes on the outskirts, basically in the middle of nowhere, with the red carpet, the floodlights and the photographers,” he recalls. “We looked like alien invaders.”

For Oldenburg, that’s a good look.

“It was actually perfect. The Living Room premieres fit our whole image, that we’re a festival for the real fan. We do things a bit differently here.”

“Different” is a bit of an understatement.

While Cannes and Venice this year used their lifetime achievement awards to honor Hollywood royalty — Jodie Foster and Jamie Lee Curtis, respectively — Oldenburg’s list of lifetime honorees, which have included Seymour Cassel, Keith Carradine, Tim Blake Nelson, Amanda Plummer and Bobcat Goldthwait, has been pure indie. The biggest star to grace Oldenburg’s Walk of Fame — 2016 lifetime achievement winner Nicolas Cage — is, in Neumann’s words, “more indie than superstar. He still risks doing the crazy stuff.”

And risking the crazy stuff is what



The offbeat romance *Puppy Love* starring Paz de la Huerta (left) and Hopper Penn opened Oldenburg in 2020 before going on to win the fest’s German Independence Award for best film.

Oldenburg is all about.

While most second-tier festivals draw up their lineups by dutifully following the lead set by the big A-list fests, reprogramming a best-of selection from Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance and Toronto, Oldenburg prides itself on screening “true independents” — films from directors proudly outside the mainstream, often without distributors or sales

agents on board. Movies like the 2020 opening-night film *Puppy Love*, a seedy romance tale starring Hopper Penn and Paz de la Huerta. The feature debut of Canadian music video director Michael Maxxis, *Puppy Love* had its world premiere in Oldenburg and went on to win the festival’s German Independence Award for best film and the best actress prize for de la Huerta.

THE MAESTRO: ‘MR. HOLLAND’S OPUS MEETS TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE’

Starring and scripted by Somtow Sucharitkul, one of Thailand’s foremost composers, this horror outing about a murderous music conductor is pure Oldenburg

If a mad scientist were to design the perfect Oldenburg Festival film in a lab, it might look like *The Maestro*: a B-movie horror tribute from Thailand about a frustrated classical music conductor who, struggling to complete an epic composition, goes insane and starts killing his students.

“It’s basically *Mr. Holland’s Opus* meets the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*,” jokes Somtow Sucharitkul, the 68-year-old screenwriter, and star, of *The Maestro*. “I play the murderous, mad conductor. Some might call that typecasting.”

Classical music fans know Somtow as the pioneering composer of operas and symphonies including *Requiem: In Memoriam 9/11* — commissioned by the government of Thailand as a gift for the victims of the 9/11 — as the artistic director of Opera Siam and as the founder, in 2010, of Thai youth orchestra the Siam Sinfonietta. The Sinfonietta has performed in Carnegie Hall and Bayreuth, and won Austria’s Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival in 2012.

But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Thailand, lockdown protocols banned live music performances and any gatherings of more than 20 people. It was impossible for the Sinfonietta to rehearse. Somtow

worried about his students, about their musical growth and the impact on their mental health.

Cue Paul Spurrier. The British-born, Thai-based director, an old friend of Somtow, was also concerned about the damage lockdown was doing to those in the film industry. He wanted to get them back to work. And he’d spotted a loophole in the COVID-19 regulations.

“The government had banned public gatherings, they’d banned orchestral

rehearsals and concerts, they banned eating in restaurants,” says Spurrier. “But, provided you exercised caution, you could still make a film. So if we made a movie about an orchestra, we could have them rehearse and perform a concert, within the film.”

Somtow continues, “Paul pitched me his idea — about this frustrated conductor who abducts a youth orchestra and takes it to a mansion in the middle of nowhere and goes mad. It was so insane I fell in love

with it. I went home and wrote the script basically overnight.”

Adds Spurrier: “I told Somtow I only had one condition: that he had to play the composer.”

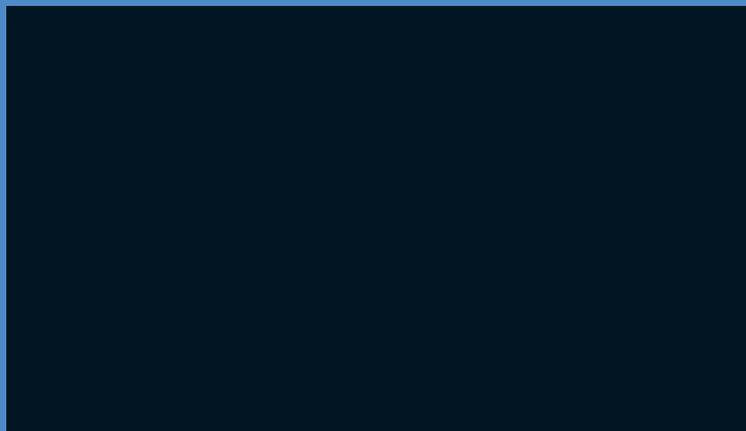
The choice is not as out there as it seems. Before becoming his country’s most acclaimed classical composer, Somtow Sucharitkul had a successful career, under the pen name S.P. Somtow, as a writer of sci-fi, horror and fantasy novels. He even wrote a few B-movies.

“I wrote a script for [schlock movie legend] Roger Corman, called *Bram Stoker’s Burial of the Rats* [1995],” Somtow recalls with a chuckle.

The result, judging by the trailer for *The Maestro*, is pure midnight movie madness.

The film’s style — when the conductor begins to go insane and turn musical instruments into assault weapons — is full-on and over the top. With, for the maestro himself, a note of wish-fulfillment. “There are times when you’re conducting that you really want to shoot someone,” Somtow admits.

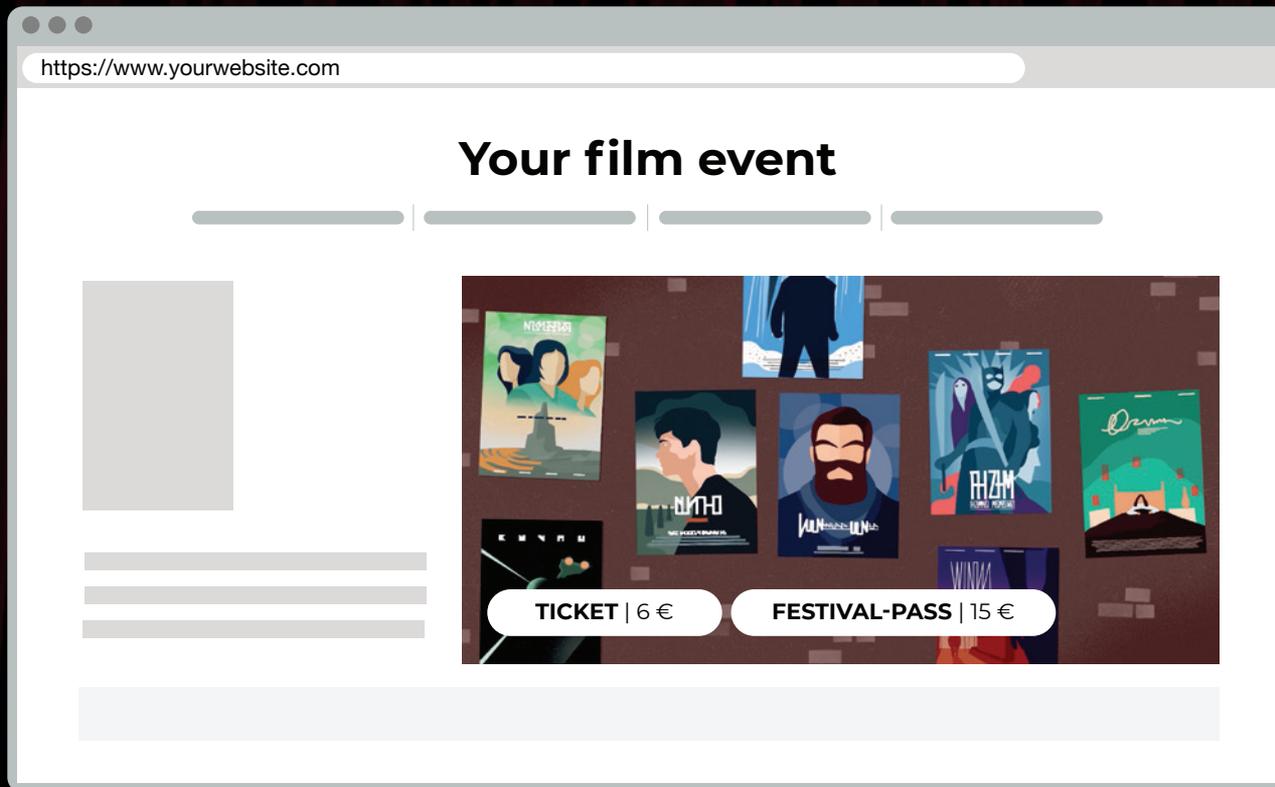
The local release of *The Maestro* will have to wait until the third wave of COVID-19 passes in Thailand. The international premiere will happen in Oldenburg this September. — S.R.



TAP TO WATCH THE TRAILER FOR *THE MAESTRO*

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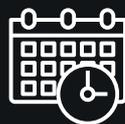
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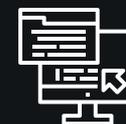
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One of the first films Neumann picked for the 2021 edition is *The Maestro*, a B-movie shlock horror tale from Thailand starring world-renowned composer Somtow Sucharitkul as a conductor/homicidal murderer. “It seemed to suit us,” says Neumann.

Instead of celebrating established stars, Oldenburg has put its focus on finding indie talent before they break big. The festival gave Noémie Merlant its best actress honor in 2016 for *Twisting Fate*, years before the rest of world discovered her in Céline Sciamma’s 2019 Cannes Festival hit *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. (Merlant returns to the Croisette this year as the star of Jacques Audiard’s competition title *Paris, 13th District*). A teenage Keira Knightley made the trip to Lower Saxony in 2001, for Nick Hamm’s British indie *The Hole*, six months before *Bend It Like Beckham* would make her a star. German director Jan-Ole Gerster took his breakout debut *Oh Boy* (also known as *A Coffee in Berlin*) to Karlovy Vary and Munich first, but it was as the opening-night gala of the 2012 Oldenburg Festival that launched his career. *Oh Boy* won best German movie, best acting honors for star Tom Schilling and the audience award for best film — en route to sweeping the German Film Awards, taking six Golden Lolas — and winning Gerster a European Film Award for European discovery of the year.

While Neumann, and Oldenburg, have been blazing this iconoclastic path for 28 years now — “I’m 56, so I’ve literally been doing this half my life,” he notes — the 2021 festival feels like a turning point, and not just because *The Hollywood Reporter* will be the exclusive international media partner for the 2021 Oldenburg Festival.

The past year, we all know, has been devastating for traditional cinemas and for independent film. COVID-19-imposed lockdowns and theater closures combined with the rapid growth of global streaming platforms, starving cinema “of its livelihood as the actual home of film,” says Neumann. In this new world, where studios and mainstream directors increasingly bypass cinemas to release their films directly online, festivals like Oldenburg that celebrate movies outside the mainstream can bridge the gap between independent filmmakers and content-deprived theaters.

“If mainstream cinema continues to withdraw from the classic channels to its own online platforms, that is an opportunity for independent films and the cinema,” says Neumann. “This is exactly where the new cooperation between Oldenburg and *The Hollywood Reporter* will start.” **VHR**



Clockwise from top: Andrew (left) and Luke Wilson (center) at an abandoned elementary school in 2015; a pre-stardom Keira Knightley in 2001; Amanda Plummer (center) outside Oldenburg’s maximum security prison in 2016.

FIVE ‘ONLY IN OLDENBURG’ MOMENTS

From bowling with Nic Cage to screenings in prison, festival co-founder and director Torsten Neumann recalls five moments that sum up the event’s unique spirit

WHEN NIC CAGE MET THE BOWLING CLUB

Oscar winner Nicolas Cage is probably the biggest star to walk Oldenburg’s cobbled streets, but the 2016 lifetime achievement honoree quickly made himself at home. “I got a call from an Oldenburg dive bar: Nic had hit it off with a local bowling club and was buying everyone drinks. ‘You’ve got come down, Torsten!’ he said. I told him: ‘But I have this festival to run.’”

WHEN THE WILSON BROTHERS WENT BACK TO SCHOOL

Oldenburg’s “secret parties” — held every year at a different, one-time-only location, are a festival tradition. In 2015, when Andrew Wilson and Luke Wilson brought their directorial debut *The Wendell Baker Story* to the festival, the hot spot was an abandoned elementary school. “We

brought out the gym mats and threw them on the floor and passed around the beers.” The Wilson brothers, in a classic bit of childhood regression, even joined in for a round of spin the bottle.

BEFORE KEIRA WAS KEIRA

She had already shot *Bend It Like Beckham*, but before it hit theaters and made her a global star, unknown Brit actress Keira Knightley visited Oldenburg for the German premiere of 2001 horror thriller *The Hole*. No one at the festival remembers the film, but no one can forget her. “Every photographer said: ‘That one’s a superstar.’”

WHEN ‘HONEY BUNNY’ WENT TO PRISON

Oldenburg’s “jail screenings” — held at the city’s maximum security prison — are a festival highlight.

Only inmates on their best behavior can join the gala, but in 2016 when Amanda Plummer presented *Pulp Fiction* at the “Alcatraz of the North,” the guards almost lost control. “There was a moment when everyone went crazy, whooping and yelling. They just couldn’t believe ‘Honey Bunny’ was in the same room with them.”

MICHAEL WADLEIGH SPAKE THE RAVEN

“Tracking down [Woodstock and Wolfen] director Michael Wadleigh for our 2008 tribute was incredibly difficult — we finally found him via Jim McBride — Michael was the cameraman on Jim’s first film, *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967). He came down by car from Wales with his entire family — wife, two kids, dog and, I’ll never forget this, a raven. The raven stayed in the hotel with them the whole festival.”



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