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- Photo Gallery
- Art Scene
- Happy Hours
- Museums
- Events
- Theater, Opera, Dance
- Rock, Pop, Jazz
- Classical Music
- What's Best
- Reviews
- Sports
- Tours
- Farmers Markets
- Film
- How are we are doing?

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[Scene Home](#) > [Reviews Home](#) > [Downtown Gets Its Close-up](#)

Downtown Gets Its Close-up



Dan Castellaneta and... Downtown Los Angeles?

Film Festival Brings More Than 200 Features, Documentaries and Shorts to Seven Venues

by Julie Riggott DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES

Among the stars appearing in features and shorts at the Downtown Film Festival-Los Angeles are Don Cheadle, Guy Pearce, Harry Shearer, Andy Dick,

Yes, the Central City will prove to be a scene stealer in the inaugural festival that kicks off on Wednesday, Aug. 13. Twenty-three feature films and 180 shorts will screen over five days, and Downtown plays a starring role in several.

For festival co-director Greg Ptacek, the aim of the event is not only to showcase films, but also to spotlight the "fascinating" neighborhoods and cultural institutions as well as the flourishing business and residential communities that have spawned the oft-heard term "Downtown Renaissance."

Screenings, parties and related events will take place at 11 venues, including historic Broadway theaters, Los Angeles Center Studios and unexpected locales such as the Museum of Contemporary Art (see sidebar for highlights and a complete list of venues). Special events include a drive-in movie on Saturday at the Southern California Institute of Architecture and Sunday's Sustainable L.A. event, a free, daylong program with a farmers market and green panel discussions and screenings at Cal Plaza and MOCA.

Ptacek founded the Silver Lake Film Festival in 1999 and built it to the point where there were 250 screenings in 12 venues (only two of which were in Silver Lake). This year he, festival co-director Henry Priest and other key players such as Kate Marciniak and Roger Mayer decided that Downtown Los Angeles is where the series really needed to be (the Silver Lake event is on hold this year).

"Aesthetically it was easy to decide to come Downtown because of the wealth of interesting spaces to screen films," Ptacek said. "Downtown is redolent of the history of cinema."

In evidence of that fact, the opening night film, *In Search of a Midnight Kiss*, largely shot Downtown, will be shown in the Orpheum Theatre, built in 1926 as the final home for the vaudeville circuit.

"The film works perfectly with what we're about," said Ptacek, "because the audience gets to see the Orpheum and experience the theater where a scene in the movie takes place."

Actually, writer/director Alex Holdridge explained, the interior shots are in the Million Dollar Theatre because he couldn't afford to film in the Orpheum, even though the exterior appears in the movie.

"The guys who own the Million Dollar basically took pity on us and let us shoot in there for a



The guy who ran the million dollar basically took pity on us and let us shoot in there for a very cheap amount of money," he said from New York City, where he had traveled for the opening there. "It is so cool that we are going to be in the Orpheum.... I can't believe it."

Midnight Kiss is being described as "a love letter to Los Angeles" by IFC Films, and has drawn attention from the likes of *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. The lead characters, Wilson (Scoot McNairy) and Vivian (Sara Simmonds), meet on New Year's Eve and spend the day wandering Downtown because Holdridge, as a newcomer to Los Angeles who experienced many of the travails visited upon Wilson, was mesmerized when he happened upon Downtown via the Metro from Los Feliz.

"I really fell in love with Downtown," said Holdridge, who was especially affected by "the dilapidation mixed with underlying beauty.

"The architecture rivals anything you'll see in New York; the rococo buildings and the little carvings on the sides of the theaters - it just blows your mind. And it's adjacent to Skid Row.... These movie palaces are works of art in themselves, carved out and made into cheap electronics stores - it's hard to even understand."

'Dream Come True'

The *Midnight Kiss* screening is also a benefit for the Los Angeles Historic Theater Foundation, which partnered with the DFFLA, the Orpheum and IFC Films for the gala event. Holdridge described it as "a dream come true."

"If I had dreamed up the perfect scenario in which to premiere the black-and-white film print in Los Angeles, this would be it," he said.

LAHTF Executive Director Hillsman Wright said the organization - which spun off from the Los Angeles Conservancy and is dedicated to preserving and sustaining programming at Southern California's historic theaters - is one answer to Wilson and Vivian's (and Holdridge's) concerns about the Downtown theaters going unused.

"This film is a very special film for L.A., and we are honored to be able to give it the kind of sendoff we believe it deserves," Wright said by cell phone as he carried a roll of *Midnight Kiss* posters to City Hall.

Friday's Centerpiece Gala film also "speaks to the heritage and development of Downtown," Ptacek said. *Piccadilly* is a tribute to sultry Silent Era star Anna May Wong, who was born in L.A.'s Chinatown and became the first Chinese-American actress to make it in Hollywood (she has a star on the Walk of Fame) and Europe. The restored 1929 film will screen for the first time in decades in the 1931 Los Angeles Theatre.

There are other Downtown ties. A program of shorts at the Laemmle Grande on Sunday is dedicated to work about Downtown or by Downtown filmmakers, and two other features focus on the area: *A Beautiful Life and Emilio*, both part of the American Latino film series. Alejandro Chomski's *A Beautiful Life*, presented at the Laemmle Grande on Thursday, features Dana Delaney in a story about two teens, a runaway and an illegal immigrant, who meet in Downtown.

Emilio, which screens at L.A. Center Studios on Saturday, is the directorial debut of Kim Jorgensen, who founded Landmark Theatres and produced numerous films, including *Out of Africa*. Jorgensen also wrote the screenplay, which has dialogue in both English and Spanish, about a young man who comes to L.A. looking for his kidnapped sister.

"We shot this a year and half ago, a period when [Downtown] looked quite different than it does today, so it's kind of a nostalgic piece already," Jorgensen said. "We wanted to premiere the film at the Downtown Film Festival because we couldn't think of a more perfect place to do it."

All of the changes, along with the edginess of Downtown, were an inspiration for Mayer, who is the DFFLA programming director. A fifth-generation Angeleno, he spent 12 years in New York and other cities before returning. He said if he hadn't discovered Silver Lake and Downtown, he never would have come back.

"I love New York, and I feel that Downtown," said Mayer, who lives at the Barker Block, which is also the festival's headquarters.

"It was so easy to do the festival here," added Ptacek, "because it's so much fun Downtown. The time was definitely right."



Highlights & Hot Spots

With more than 200 films over five days, the Downtown Film Festival might seem a little overwhelming. Here's a guide to a few of the highlights of the 23 features and several series of short films, as well as the parties and other events, scheduled Aug. 13-17 in various Downtown venues.

Wednesday, Aug. 13

7:30 p.m.: The festival kicks off with a screening of IFC's *In Search of a Midnight Kiss*, written and directed by Alex Holdridge, at the Orpheum Theatre. Ticket sales (\$15) will benefit the Los Angeles Historic Theater Foundation. The post-screening gala (\$30 includes screening) will be held at the Pacific Electric Lofts penthouse.

Thursday, Aug. 14

7 p.m.: Shorts Program II is a series of eight short films at the Laemmle Grande. Some feature big names in comedy: Harry Shearer and Shelley Long star in *A Couple of White Chicks at the Hairdresser*, and Andy Dick and Will Sasso have cameos in *Just the Worst*.

7:30 p.m.: *A Beautiful Life*, featuring Dana Delaney, is part of the American Latino series. It screens at the Laemmle Grande.

9:30 p.m.: *Remembering Phil*, also at the Laemmle Grande, is a black comedy starring Nicholas Turturro as a man whose identity starts to disappear. Dan Castellaneta plays the psychiatrist who doesn't even remember him.

9:30 p.m.-midnight: Your ticket from the American Latino film series gets you into a party at the Barker Block, the festival's headquarters.

Friday, Aug. 15

7 p.m.: The critically acclaimed South African film *Confessions of a Gambler* has its L.A. premiere at L.A. Center Studios. Part of the *Afrique 360?* series, the film follows a Muslim mother who strays from her devout life after discovering a casino.

8 p.m.: The Centerpiece Gala Screening of *Piccadilly* at the Los Angeles Theatre (\$15) includes an after-party at the Roosevelt rooftop terrace. *Piccadilly* is a 1929 silent film starring Anna May Wong, Hollywood's first Chinese-American movie star.

Saturday, Aug. 16

1:45 p.m.: The documentary *Faubourg Trem?: The Story of Black New Orleans*, at L.A. Center Studios, details the district of New Orleans adjacent to the French Quarter that became an epicenter for black culture, where jazz was born and early civil rights victories were won.

5:30 p.m.: SCI-Arc events begin, including Digital Arts Shorts, SCI-Arc Shorts and a drive-in screening of *Mock Up on Mu* by avant-garde filmmaker Craig Baldwin.

7 p.m.: *Traitor*, an espionage thriller starring Don Cheadle and Guy Pearce, screens at L.A. Center Studios.

9:30 p.m.: Part of the American Latino series, *Ernilio* screens at L.A. Center Studios.

Sunday, Aug. 17

Noon: The free, all-day Sustainable L.A. event begins at Cal Plaza, with a farmers market, green panel discussions, screenings of documentary shorts at MOCA and a documentary feature at Cal Plaza. (See the Don't Miss List on page 25.)

6:30 p.m.: Downtown Cinema Shorts at the Laemmle Grande are films either by Downtown filmmakers or about Downtown L.A., everything from a dark comedy to an experimental documentary.

Tickets are \$10 unless otherwise indicated. Festival passes are \$100. For a full schedule, tickets and more information, (213) 221-7685 or dffia.com. (Also see Film Listings on page 30.)

The Hot Spots:

- The Barker Block, 510-530 S. Hewitt St.
- Cal Plaza, 300-350 S. Grand Ave.
- The Edison, 108 W. Second St.
- Laemmle Grande, 345 S. Figueroa St.
- L.A. Center Studios, 1201 W. Fifth St.
- Los Angeles Theatre, 615 S. Broadway
- MOCA, 250 S. Grand Ave.
- Orpheum Theatre, 842 S. Broadway
- Pacific Electric Lofts, 610 S. Main St.
- The Roosevelt, 727 W. Seventh St.
- SCI-Arc, 960 E. Third St.

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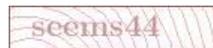
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