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## Interview with John Pruitt, curator of the SummerScape Film Festival

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The annual SummerScape film festival is a jewel of programming for film buffs: the festival staff acquires all titles on real film (rather than DVD or other media) and projects them in Bard's exquisite Ottaway Film Center. The festival is curated by John Pruitt, an associate professor of film and electronic arts at Bard who also happens to be the nicest and most knowledgeable cineaste you'll ever meet. We caught up with Professor Pruitt last week, a few days before the screening of the first film of the season, Max Ophuls's 1995 masterpiece *Lola Montès*.

Q: How do you begin the process of assembling a list of films for the festival each year?

Pruitt: The first question we ask is, how we can come up with a theme or selection process that ties in with the rest of the summer programming, especially the composer who has been chosen as the main focus of the Bard Music Festival. Often we have a couple of optional approaches. We go to the festival planners for feedback, and then we choose the theme that makes the most sense to everyone. Sometimes this is very easy—such as when we chose to do a retrospective of William Wyler's American films when the Bard Music Festival composer was Aaron Copland. Wyler and Copland were near-contemporaries; they actually worked together on a couple of projects. Sometimes finding a solid connection is far more difficult.

Q: And then how do you narrow it down?

Pruitt: By and large we try to show films that have not been as recognized as much as they should, or films that have only recently been made available or restored. Best of all, each summer we try to offer at least one or two films that are unavailable in video—that is, films that can only be seen in a theater situation, with a 35mm print. We try not to be too arcane with our programming. We want the films to be attractive to a general film audience and not just to film historians like myself. Hence, we also resort to showing highly popular, acknowledged masterpieces if they fit the theme well. One of the reasons for our series is that we offer an opportunity for the audience members to see films the way they were meant to be seen: on a big screen with other audience members. Usually the pleasure of watching a film in such conditions gives one a greater appreciation of it. This is especially true of comedies, in which one needs the infectious experience of audience laughter to help make the comedy work. Often in old comedies, the screen timing takes that laughter into account.

Q: Regular festival attendees rave about the silent films accompanied by piano. How far would you like to push the live-performance aspect of this programming?

Pruitt: We would love to program more silent films, and this is a very likely possibility in the next two upcoming years when the figures of Berg and Sibelius offer an ideal opportunity to explore the so-called golden age of German and Scandinavian silent film. The live-music component is expensive, however, and the theater is small; those are also factors in our consideration.

Q: What film have you never shown at a SummerScape Film Festival that you secretly want to squeeze in?

Pruitt: There are just too many titles to mention. I would like to devote at least one evening in the summer to a kind of "alternative" program in which we celebrate a contemporary filmmaker—with the artist present—and show films that are wonderful and important but are rarely if ever seen by the general public. For instance, Robert Breer, perhaps the greatest living maker of short animated films, lives just an hour from Bard. I would love to introduce his films to the SummerScape audience.

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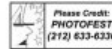
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I love old theaters that have been preserved and/or restored so that one can get a feeling of what moviegoing was like before the heyday of television and the multiplex theater. Three theaters come to mind, in order of preference: the Music Box in Chicago, the Senator in Baltimore, and the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood.



Unfaithfully Yours (1948)  
Directed by Preston Sturges  
Starring Rex Harrison, Linda Darnell (as Daphne De Carter), Rex Harrison (as Dr. Alfred De Carter)  
© 1948 20th Century-Fox Film Corp. © 2018 Century-Fox



This Sunday at 7 pm: Linda Darnell and Rex Harrison in Unfaithfully Yours, dir. by Preston Sturges, 1948. (c)20th Century-Fox.

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