

OPINION

# Film festival

## Hitting its stride

The successful kickoff of the Windsor International Film Festival at an elegant gala at Caesar's Windsor last Friday validated two key things: the festival as an integral part of our local cultural scene and the importance of supporting the arts.

The festival — drawing an overflow crowd of 450 to the opening — has grown since it was launched four years ago. It now offers 33 titles over 10 days — its most ambitious schedule yet.

"There's no reason why Windsor shouldn't be the biggest annual film festival between Chicago and Toronto," says organizer Otto Buj.

Buj's optimism is justified. You don't have to be a Toronto or Vancouver to grow a premier cultural event. The mining town of Sudbury, for example, celebrated the 20th year of its international film festival — now recognized as one of Canada's five major film events.

"We started as a two-to-three day event in 1989," says Tammy Frick, festival director. "It is now a nine-day festival, attracting about 30,000 people and showcasing between 125 and 135 films." Frick estimates that the event pumps \$5.5 million into the local economy. With 20 per cent of the festival-goers from out of town, the event also benefits tourism.

Though the Windsor festival has seen its audience grow, corporate sponsorship has steadily declined. The Ontario government recently stepped up to the plate by announcing a three-year, \$121,000 Trillium grant. While the provincial money is welcome, more senior government support is needed to enable Canadians to tell their stories. "We should not look at culture as a luxury item," says Frick. "The economic impact of arts and culture is massive."

According to federal statistics, the direct impact of the arts and culture sector was close to \$40 billion in 2003-04, and employed about 300,000 Canadians.

Like Windsor, Sudbury has had its share of economic ups and downs, yet the festival continues to thrive. "Film is such an accessible medium," says Frick. "It's not hugely expensive, hence, least affected by a recession. It's a way to feel plugged into the community and world and enjoy stories through other people's eyes."

It's not too late to enjoy those stories. The festival runs to Sunday