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Film

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Going out to movies Gotham-style

New NYC screen scene heads outdoors

By ROBERT SCHWARTZ

New York forces moviegoers to endure a lot in exchange for two hours of escapism.

Tickets routinely sell out days in advance. In many theaters, the rumble of the subway becomes part of the soundtrack. And then there are the sightlines at Lincoln Plaza.

During the summer, however, Gotham movie lovers exult, as many of their town's famed public squares become screening venues -- at an unbeatable ticket price: usually free. Catching a screening in a park, on a lawn or even on a roof means the real estate required to enjoy a film is dictated by the size of one's blanket.

Screens have sprouted citywide, especially in recent boom times, from the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens to McCarren Park Pool in Brooklyn.

Three of the most notable series *en plein air* are HBO's Bryant Park Summer Film Festival, the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy and the indie scene known as Rooftop Films.

Bryant Park is the gold standard, filling the great lawn behind the Public Library for eight straight Monday nights from mid-June to mid-August.

The effort to find films to satisfy 8,000 people sprawled across 65,000 square feet starts early.

"It's a very tough process, so we start in December with 80 or 100 films and then whittle it down to 10," said Michael McMorrow, HBO's VP of event planning. Along with former HBO acquisitions chief Jim Byerly, McMorrow has spent 16 years building a series to woo those who stayed in town instead of escaping to the beach.

"Typically, we look for films with good prints where the cost isn't prohibitive," McMorrow said. "And generally, we really like to run films made before 1970." Dramas and musicals, with a generous dose of camp, usually work. Westerns don't.

The night's lineup is always the same: a trailer for an upcoming Warner Bros. pic, a classic Looney Tunes cartoon, then a crowd favorite -- a retro 1980s HBO promo that gets people on their feet to do what's been dubbed the "HBO dance." Finally, the feature presentation. A Gotham hook can be the cherry on top, but some obvious choices are ruled out.

"We've tried to book 'An Affair to Remember' since year one," McMorrow said, noting its shots of the Empire State Building (about eight blocks from Bryant Park), "but the print quality is awful and it's just



HBO's Bryant Park Summer Film Festival usually includes a Looney Toons trailer and then a classic film.

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not worth it."

Just across the Brooklyn Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy holds court with *Movies With a View*. Running eight consecutive Thursday nights beginning July 10, it offers a diversion should the movies themselves not prove sufficiently captivating: postcard views of the bridge and the skyline beyond.

The conservancy oversees the series, now in its ninth year, enlisting an all-volunteer group of 20 community members and film lovers to pick a yearly theme and compile a list of potential titles. Then comes a spirited (sometimes even rancorous) debate over what to schedule.

"We really try to mix it up," said Nancy Webster, director of the conservancy. "We really feel the need to schedule a comedy, a musical, a classic, an action film and, of course, something for children." This year's lineup includes "Being There," "Ace in the Hole" and "Pleasantville."

Each night's presentation begins with a short from an indie filmmaker. More than 200 submitted movies this year.

And when Gotham runs out of lawns and parks, New Yorkers will even climb up to a rooftop to see a pic.

Rooftop Films, which began in 1997 with an empty roof, a 16mm camera and a bed sheet for a screen, now draws 38,000 viewers to more than 38 events on roofs all over lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. Crowds come to watch a film and sometimes hear a live band.

Most of the movies are shorts or experimental features, and the roster of sponsors -- including IFP, IndiePix, B-Side, IFC Films and Scion -- proves we're not in Bryant Park anymore. While Rooftop is a nonprofit org, the films and events do carry an admission charge.

Even so, \$1 from every \$9 ticket sold and \$1 from every movie submission fee is given back as grants to filmmakers whose work has screened at the fest. Last year, that totaled \$12,000 -- roughly the cost of hair and makeup for a few frames of "Sex and the City," perhaps, but a decent down payment on more pics to unspool under the stars.

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