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Empty lot incubates uncommon film fest

Dorchester Projects, Chicago Film Archives team for movie nights

July 09, 2011 | By John Owens, Tribune reporter

There are more than 175 movies-under-the-stars screenings scheduled for Chicago's parks this summer. Most will feature standard Hollywood fare, from "Meet the Parents" at Fulton River Park July 26 to "Shrek Forever After" at Smith Park Aug. 11.

But perhaps the most unique outdoor film festival in the city will take place in July and August on an empty lot in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood.

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Here, on an 8-foot-by-8-foot white fabric sheet suspended from a brick wall outside 6918 S. Dorchester Ave., an audience can take in rarely seen nonfiction films from the past, all with Chicago connections.

Over four nights, the free film fest will play films about the thriving blues and jazz scene on the South and West Sides from the 1950s through the 1970s, as well as a documentary about community organizer Saul Alinsky in the Woodlawn neighborhood in the 1960s.

There also is an early 1960s documentary about the Vice Lords street gang, and curiosities that range from a 1978 look at the Maxwell Street Market to a 1958 wrestling event at the South Side's International Amphitheatre (a facility that closed in 1999). And for the finale, home movies, some provided by those in attendance, some dating back decades.

The Greater Grand Crossing venue is owned by internationally known artist Theaster Gates. The films are mostly from the Chicago Film Archives, a film restoration group led by Nancy Watrous. The CFA is teaming with Gates' Dorchester Projects group to present the festival.

"What's exciting for me is that there are these layers of the South Side and layers of the city (in the films) that people my age or younger may not have known about," said Gates, 37. "And they're not being shown at the Newberry Library or some formal institution. My neighbor walking by can say, 'I want to see this movie.'"

Over the last six years, Gates bought three homes in the 6900 block of South Dorchester Avenue, with the intent of using them as cultural hubs within the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood. He stocked them with items of cultural interest, such as a half-century-old collection of 60,000 glass lantern slides donated by the University of Chicago, where he is a director of Arts Program

Development (Gates also is a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design).

The houses themselves are like art installations, crafted with the community in mind: They were refurbished with recycled materials from the Chicago area — such as salvaged wood from a long-shuttered Wrigley gum factory located nearby and a bowling alley on the West Side. The intent for the nascent Dorchester Projects was to present artistic events in the low-income Greater Grand Crossing area that could succeed on their own terms. Thanks to a grant from the Propeller Fund, Gates and the Dorchester Projects were able to host the movie series as well as five artists-in-residence.

"Our model suggests that any old two-flat could be both a place where people live and where cultural activities happen between friends and neighbors," Gates said. "We're not a gallery — we have houses where cool cultural stuff happens."

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The movies-under-the-stars series is an extension of that idea, Gates said, with home movies that serve as cultural artifacts for the neighborhoods.

"Video and film documentation for things like your kid's birthday party and the 1970s 'Soul Train' line that you did at your wedding — all of these things are in fact the same acts of culture that we would go to museums for," Gates said.

It was not surprising that Gates turned to Watrous to provide the films for the program. Watrous started the Chicago Film Archives back in 2003, when she was able to land 5,000 nonfiction films through a donation from Chicago Public Library archives. Now the Chicago Film Archives has 11,000 films in its collection, many of which are of locally produced industrials, documentaries, educational films and corporate training films from the 1940s through the 1980s. And the collection also includes hundreds of home movies donated to the Archives by Chicagoans. So the outdoor movies series seemed to be an ideal event for Watrous and her group.

"Our mission is really similar to Theaster's," Watrous said. "We want to have communities think about film and how it relates to themselves. And we wanted to spread some of the documentation and history that we've been collecting over the years."

The nonfiction films screened at the event will be shown via video projection or a 16 mm or 8 mm movie projector on an 8-foot-by-8-foot poplin fabric sheet, which was suggested by CFA volunteer Michelle Puetz, a professional projectionist best known for her work at the Sundance Film Festival.

Watrous said they wanted to create a casual atmosphere for the festival. "It will allow our neighbors to wander in at their leisure," she said. "We want to be inviting and inclusive."

The films presented at the Dorchester Avenue location vary by week and theme:

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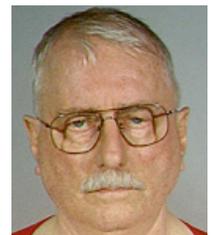
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