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'Black Hand Strawman' proves strong in KC theaters

Whatever Terence O'Malley is doing, he's doing it right.

Three years ago his documentary about his fashion-maven relation, Nell Donnelly, took up residence at the Screenland Crossroads theater. Before it was over, "Nelly Don: A Stitch in Time" had played for more than six months.

Not bad for a movie pieced together on his home computer.

Now O'Malley's latest, "Black Hand Strawman," is threatening to do the same.

This documentary — which follows Kansas City organized crime from the early 20th century through Prohibition, the Pendergast machine and finally the local mob's lucrative skimming operation at Las Vegas casinos — opened last month at the same 100-seat house.

Business was so good that Screenland owner Butch Rigby and general manager Patrick Matthews decided to expand the run to their Screenland Armour theater in North Kansas City.

"It's been doing great business," Matthews said last week. "What we're seeing is that it's doing most of its weekend business at the Crossroads, which is only open on the weekends. But during the week we're getting a bump in attendance at the Armour, which is open seven days a week."

Who's coming to see this parade of charismatic bad guys from our local past?

"It's actually a very interesting cross-generational audience," Matthews said.

"We're getting lots of people in their 60s and 70s — basically the same bunch who love local history and came to see 'Nelly Don.'"

"But lots are young people. We're finding groups of people in their 20s and 30s who are fascinated by the whole Mafia thing. And, of course, we've got parents bringing their kids. ... These are people who often say they knew or knew of the mobsters described in the movie."

O'Malley said that given the sensitive subject matter, he's particularly pleased that "Black Hand" has taken off.

"I was sensitive to the fact that I'm telling what is in essence an Italian-American story," he said. "But judging by the e-mails I've received, there's a lot of gratitude that this story was told in a way that treats these people not just as criminals but puts them in a socio-economic-political context."

For show times and to purchase advance tickets, go to www.screenland.com.

Tips from the pros

The fifth annual Griffon International Film Festival gets under way Monday at Missouri Western State University and the East Hills Library, both in St. Joseph.

For a schedule of the films go to www.missouriwestern.edu/GRIFF.

The Griffon's strongest element may be its roster of film professionals giving free workshops for the public at 3 p.m. daily in the Black Box Theatre in Potter Hall on campus.

If you've ever thought about making your own movie, this is a cheap way to load up on info. The lineup:

- Monday: **Roger Rawlings** of Savannah College of Art and Design and writer/director of "Neurotica," with Amy Sedaris and Brian D'Arcy, will speak on "Making the Independent Narrative."
- Tuesday: KC native and filmmaker **Trey Hock** will discuss "Life on the Festival Circuit."
- Wednesday: Danish-born, Toronto-based director **Lars Pedersen Arendt**, who has made 11 short films in the last decade (including the award-winning "A Mind's I"), talks about "Directing the Actor: Getting the Performance YOU Want."
- Thursday: Independent documentarian **Taymar Pixley**, whose work has been heavily influenced by her childhood on a Navajo reservation, will give the lecture "Choosing Documentary Filmmaking."
- Friday: Film producer and educator **Andy Meyer** ("The Breakfast Club," "Fried Green Tomatoes") will give the talk "Breakfast With Fried Green Tomatoes."

'Sendler' premiere

Fort Scott, Kan., will host the world premiere of "**The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler**," a Hallmark Hall of Fame film about the Polish woman who rescued 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II.

The event takes place at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Liberty Theatre, 113 S. Main St.

This is the first film based on Sendler's story. It stars Oscar winner Anna Paquin as Sendler; also featured are Oscar winner Marcia Gay Harden and Goran Visnjic ("ER").

A decade ago a group of students at Fort Scott's Uniontown High School came across Sendler's little-known story and used it as the basis of "Life in a Jar," a stage play they wrote and performed.

Since then, "Life" has been mounted by students all over the planet. More than 60 schools in Poland have performed the play.

The movie, which was filmed in Latvia, will air at 8 p.m. April 19 on CBS.

Sendler was arrested in 1943 by the Nazis, tortured and sentenced to death but was rescued on the day of her execution by the Polish underground. She was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 and died last year at the age of 98.