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'Balloon' – a riveting true story at the Orinda Theatre



Photo provided

By Sophie Braccini

There is nothing like a well made movie based on a true story to make viewers feel and reflect on the extraordinary experience of ordinary people. "Balloon" is one of these movies, a historical thriller set in East Germany in the 1970s, when trying to cross the iron curtain meant risking death for those who dared to try.

In 1979 during the Cold War two ordinary East German families dream of moving to the West. They have a plan, build a hot air balloon and fly over one of the most guarded borders in the world at the time. And this incredible story is true.

Today, when visiting the Wall Museum in Berlin, visitors are struck by the amazing creativity of those who tried to leave Russian dominated East Germany to reach West Germany, including the craftiness and boldness of these two families who raced the clock to avoid being caught by the

fearsome political police to make their escape together.

The film, directed by Michael Herbig, is built on tension and keeps the audience on the edge of its seat from start to finish. It is suspenseful, orchestrated with precision, and played very effectively by a talented group of German actors. The human aspect is at the core of the movie; it plays on looks and subtle ambiguities, making the audience feel what it must have been like to live in a country where one was always at the mercy of denunciation and vigilante justice.

The scenario deals with the questions the parents ask themselves about their children: Do they have the right to put them through such risks? Hundreds lost their lives during attempted escapes. If caught, the repercussions on the families would be devastating. These people were not heroes, or at least did not think of themselves as heroes or hot-headed, but they had an

uncommon courage. One cannot help but wonder what they would have done in such circumstances. The movie can also make the audience reflect on immigrants today, and what some of them are going through in the hope to give a better life for themselves and their children.

This new presentation by the International Film Showcase is an American premiere. Aficionados of the Showcase will find similarities with "The Little Comrade," the Estonian film that was presented last month. It is a different period, a different country, but there is the same theme of what totalitarianism does to human beings, with those who passively submit, those who collaborate, and those who fight, sometimes risking their lives.

The movie will open Sept. 6 at the Orinda Theatre for at least one week. For more information, go to www.orindamovies.com/

Gold Coast Chamber 20th anniversary - Raising the bar of excellence



Dmitry Sitkovetsky

Photo courtesy Dmitry Sitkovetsky

By Sophie Braccini

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Gold Coast Chamber Players, led by Pamela Freund-Striplen in Lafayette. Over the past two decades GCCP has performed memorable chamber music, from baroque to contemporary, featuring composers from faraway lands to those closer to home – sometimes attending the American premiere of their creation – and always with groups of top-notch musicians invited by Freund-Striplen. This year of celebration will open on Sept. 14 with a memorable treat: the coming to Lafayette of world-renowned violinist Dmitry Sitkovetsky to perform an all-Schuman program with fellow musicians Grazia Raimondi (violin), Pamela Freund-Striplen (viola), Bernadene Blaha (piano) and Luigi Piovano (cello), who is returning from Italy to play again this year with Gold Coast.

Freund-Striplen was elated talking about being able to host Sitkovetsky for the opening concert of the anniversary year. She met with him in 1994 when she was called to substitute for one of the musicians of the New European Strings Chamber Orchestra that he founded. Since then, it has been Freund-Striplen's dream to work with Sitkovetsky again. His incredibly busy schedule had never allowed it, until serendipitously on this anniversary year.

Sitkovetsky's career spans over 40 extraordinary years that took him from Soviet Russia where he escaped, to playing all over

the world, often as a soloist, but also conducting the leading orchestras of our time including the London and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras, Academy of St Martin in the Fields, San Francisco, St. Louis, Seattle and Dallas Symphony Orchestras, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Santa Cecilia and the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. He is also famous for his transcription for strings of major work such as Bach's Goldberg Variations, and he has a varied recording career.

In a recent interview for the Piedmont News, he confirmed that he would be playing in Lafayette, and in Piedmont the next day, the Stradivari violin made in 1717 in Cremona that he has been playing for 36 years, and that many great musicians have played before him. Playing with him will be artists that both Freund-Striplen and Sitkovetsky have known and worked with for a long time, such as cellist Luigi Piovano, who Sitkovetsky considers his musical brother and who Freund-Striplen had already invited last year to her audience's delight.

The choice of an all-Schuman program for this performance was a common choice that will allow GCCP to feature all the musicians individually as well as together with the quintet. It includes the Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor, Op. 105, the Fantasiestücke, Op. 73 for Cello and Piano, and the very romantic and exuberant Piano Quintet, Op. 44.

For the rest of the 2019-20 season of the Lafayette-based chamber orchestra, Freund-Striplen promises a kaleidoscope of colors. For the first time a contemporary Chinese composer who lives in Ohio will be featured and will come to the concert. This is an example of what the director loves to do: introduce people to new and accessible music, bringing out different cultures and backgrounds and give them a nice showcase.

Another of this year's concerts will feature the Grammy-nominated Azury quartet, while another will present the Eicher quartet that Freund-Striplen calls a "hot new young quartet."

This year Freund-Striplen is also proposing a fundraiser on Sept. 21, which will be a pairing of music and food in a private home, featuring an Italian feast complemented with the music of Italian cellist Luigi Piovano. Freund-Striplen explains that as the level of the musicians keeps rising, funding for the program also needs to increase.

Details, as well as season and individual tickets are available at <https://www.gccpmusic.com/>

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