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'Wizardry' under the stars

Long Beach's alfresco movie series opens with the classic movie journey to 'Oz'

By Phillip Zonkel
Staff Writer

For five consecutive Fridays, starting this week, Marina Green Park in downtown Long Beach turns into a giant screening room, projecting films digitally onto a 22-by-30-foot screen.

Audience members can bring low-sitting lawn chairs, blankets and picnic baskets, or purchase food, ranging from full meals to snack and junk food, from a variety of vendors.

The Long Beach Outdoor Film Series premieres its first season with the 1939 masterpiece "The Wizard of Oz."

The series is produced by two Long Beach residents, Darren Held, 32, and his business partner, Amanda Jones, 28, through their company Studio805 Entertainment and in affiliation with Partners for Parks.

"I found it odd that in California, which is the film capital and has good weather almost year-round, they didn't have a (big outdoor film series)," Jones says.

"Open-air film series are a throwback to the drive-in movies but with more of a community feel to them, like the concerts in the park," Held says.

The showings are free, but a suggested donation of \$5 for adults and \$2 for kids under 12 benefits Partners of Parks, a community service group supporting a variety of environmental, cultural, sports, and educational programs throughout the city.

Before the dusk screening of "Wizard of Oz," two original cast members -- Jerry Maren, who played the middle Munchkin "Lollypop Kid" who hands Dorothy the oversize piece of candy, and Margaret Pellegrini, who wore a flowerpot costume -- will be on hand to sign autographs.

The remaining films will be "Austin Powers -- The Spy Who Shagged Me," "Casablanca," "Pearl Harbor" and "Shrek."

Though new to the Southland, in the past 10 years open-air cinema has come into vogue. Across the nation, for instance, Seattle, Chicago, Atlanta and Boulder, Colo., all



LONG BEACH OUTDOOR FILM SERIES

Where: Marina Green Park, Shoreline Drive, downtown Long Beach

When: 6 p.m. Fridays; through Sept. 13

How much: Free, but suggested donation of \$5 adults and \$2 kids under 12

Information: (888) 563-4567 or www.outdoorfilmseries.com

SCHEDULE

Friday -- "The Wizard of Oz"

Aug. 23 -- "Austin Powers -- The Spy Who Shagged Me"

Aug. 30 -- "Casablanca"

Sept. 6 -- "Pearl Harbor"

Sept. 13 -- "Shrek"

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have outdoor summer film festivals.

Flicks alfresco in New York City's Bryant Park, launched in 1991, average 7,300 people per feature. Outdoor movies in Bethesda, Md., which have been going since 1997, draw more than 6,600 to each showing.

In California, the gatherings have been smaller. The San Diego Museum of Art, which started last year, pulls 300 for each of its 13 screenings, while Marin County's Film Night in the Park attracts 400 per show for 30 showings.

"For a lot of people, it doesn't even matter what the movie is," says Tom Boss, director and co-founder of Film Night in the Park. "It's just an excuse to go outdoors with blankets and the family and neighbors and spend a night out with a picnic dinner watching a movie.

"We don't fence the place off or have security. It's pretty much the honor system. We're not out to make money," Boss says. "If we were, we'd have rules, but it's a community service. Everybody that's involved does it for fun and a labor of love."

Held and Jones, while attending New York University 10 years ago, first saw the big screen outdoors in New York City's Bryant Park. When Jones moved to Long Beach two years ago, she and Held, who noticed the phenomenon growing across the country, visited 12 outdoor fests, gathered ideas and brought the trend to the area.

"It's wonderful fun," Jones says. "People just go to hang out with their friends, and it's about their relationship with the movie. It's really a collective experience."

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