

[“A Little Wiggle” MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (VOICEOVER):

I’m Maddie Orton and you’re listening to the *Jersey Arts Podcast*.

Maggie Gyllenäl, Dionne Warwick, and Stephen Colbert are among the many artists and filmmakers participating in the tenth annual Montclair Film Festival, which opens this week, and runs through October 30th.

I spoke with festival founder and Board Chair, Bob Feinberg, along with Board of Trustees President Evie McGee Colbert--wife and collaborator of Stephen Colbert--about how the Montclair Film Festival has grown over the last decade.

I also chatted with New Jersey-based filmmaker Scott Morris, whose documentary, *American River*, will debut at this year’s event.

Here’s what they had to say.

[“A Little Wiggle” MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Let’s start off with just a little bit of quick background on Montclair Film Festival. So what areas of interest do you cover, and what’s the idea behind this particular film festival?

BOB FEINBERG, FOUNDER & BOARD CHAIR, MONTCLAIR FILM FESTIVAL:

So the Montclair Film Festival is really a community festival... When we started the Montclair Film Festival 10 years ago, we wanted to create a community event drawing from film--local, and national, and international. And the idea really was to engage the community, bringing filmmakers, and talent, and other speakers, and bringing out really the community--not people who are in the industry, but just people who are interested in visual storytelling through film. And that’s really what we did.

MADDIE ORTON:

And Evie, you were one of the first people to jump on board to help build the festival. Why was this of interest?

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT, BOARD OF TRUSTEES PRESIDENT, MONTCLAIR FILM FESTIVAL:

Several reasons. One, both my husband and I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, where we grew up with an arts festival in that community, The Spoleto Festival. And so we witnessed and experienced firsthand the impact an arts festival can have in a community. And I felt that, you know, Montclair already was sort of a--it was a perfect place for it, right? It’s already--it’s a community full of media people. Some people say half the *New York Times* lives here. We have the Montclair Art Museum, we have a university, so it’s a community that seems already

receptive to the arts. And even though--at the time when we came up with this idea, the recession had still hit Montclair and things were shuttered, things were closing. So it seemed like a good idea to basically have an economic shot in the arm for this town, as well as bring artists to a community that we thought would be receptive to their work.

MADDIE ORTON:

The programming really speaks for itself in terms of the success that you've had. You have Maggie Gyllenhaal there this weekend, Dionne Warwick, numerous talk backs. What is the excitement around the festival and the growth that you see, you know, going into this year and these big names?

BOB FEINBERG:

I think our staff, our executive director, Tom Hall, really has done an incredible job of increasing our profile in the industry. This will not come as a surprise, but there are a lot of people in the film and television industry who are very happy to have the opportunity to sit and chat with Stephen Colbert, and that has, uh, that has certainly been a tremendous, tremendous help.

MADDIE ORTON:

I imagine that's helpful.

BOB FEINBERG:

Yeah. It's just great. And I'll also say the move of the festival, you know, festival had been in May for many years. We thought May was really the best time to show off the town of Montclair. And we moved to October last year because of the pandemic and we decided to stay in October. And in fact there is a seasonality to the release of films, and particularly independent films. So what we've found is that being in October, there's just, there's a lot more I guess what I could call product out there for us. So, you know, opening night with Wes Anderson's *French Dispatch*, for example. Really just great, great films.

And you mentioned Maggie Gyllenhaal coming out to support her film. We're really excited because, you know, we're, we're coming out of, hopefully we're coming out of, festivals in the pandemic. So to have these folks come out and to see the ticket sales, which are nicely robust, I think speaks volumes about the festival.

MADDIE ORTON:

So how do you winnow down the submissions? I assume there's some kind of jury process?

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

We have a programming committee. So we have--Tom is the head programmer and artistic director, and executive director, but we also have--he has two people who work under him who, one sees all the shorts, another, they handle a lot of the programming. And then we have a committee of programmers. We have a wonderful board member, Brian Clarkson, who watches tons of movies for us. And lots of other people on the program committee who will give everything a first look. I think Tom says that everything is seen by at least two people, so there's

not one person with the power to say “no.” So at least two sets of eyes look at everything. But it’s a lot!

MADDIE ORTON:

That’s really amazing.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

It is! And I, I listen and I’ve raised my hand before and said, “I’d be happy to,” and every year, I think, “Oh God, I don’t have time.” It’s a lot. There’s a lot of, you know, watching movies late at night. And I don’t know. Tom’s got an incredible brain. He can see like six films in a day and keep them straight. I can’t.

MADDIE ORTON:

Wow!

[“A Little Wiggle” MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON -- VOICE OVER:

While neither Evie nor Bob consider themselves full-fledged film buffs, they love getting to see new work.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

I will give a plug: last night, Stephen and I watched *The Lost Daughter*, which is the new Maggie Gyllenhaal film, because he’s interviewing her before the screening, so we had to watch it. It’s beautiful. It’s gut-wrenching. As a mother, I found the film incredibly emotionally draining. We finished and I said to him, “I feel like it was like a spy thriller. I thought people were going to kill each other the whole time because of the emotional tension in the film.” It’s quite beautiful. So I just feel lucky that we got to see it, and I hope everybody has a chance to see that one. It’s really beautiful.

MADDIE ORTON:

Is this the film with Olivia Coleman?

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh, I love her.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

Yeah. Oh, she’s amazing. And Dagmara Domińczyk, who lives in Montclair and is also a member of our advisory board, is also in that film and is wonderful. She’s so funny.

MADDIE ORTON:

What other tent pole events should people look forward to? What are you two most looking forward to?

BOB FEINBERG:

Well, the opening night is always a lot of fun. That's at the Wellmont. That's the Wes Anderson film.

MADDIE ORTON:

The French Dispatch.

BOB FEINBERG:

The French Dispatch. We have a documentary about Dionne Warwick, who, as you know, is a New Jersey native, and she's going to be here. And I'm excited about that.

I'm excited that we're relaunching *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Montclair, which is going to be every, I think, twice a month at the Claridge going forward. But we're going to be showing it, I don't know, Halloween Eve, I think, during the festival?

MADDIE ORTON:

Not to show my cards as a former high school *Rocky Horror* nerd, but I believe they used to do it in Montclair right regularly.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

Yes, yes. Yes, they used to do it at the Bellevue years ago.

MADDIE ORTON:

That's so great. What are you most looking forward to?

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

Well, a lot of the, a lot of the ones that Bob mentioned. I'm also really excited about seeing--we have a film, Kenneth Branagh's new film, called *Belfast*, which is set during--in Ireland during The Troubles, and basically, it's semi-autobiographical. I'm very interested in seeing that.

In terms of New Jersey films, we have a film called *American River*, which is about the Passaic River, and it documents a woman's journey down the river. And I'm fascinated to see that.

AMERICAN RIVER TRAILER -- VOICE OF MARY BRUNO:

You know, when we were kids, my mom would tell us, you know, 'Don't play by the river,' but she didn't even have to tell us that because it was so obvious that this is not the kind of place that you're going to go wading in, or swimming in, or even dipping your hand in. It was that scary. But there came a time when I was compelled to find out what had happened to the river of my youth.

SCOTT MORRIS, PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR, *AMERICAN RIVER*:

I'm Scott Morris. I'm the producer, director and editor of *American River*. Currently getting ready to premiere at the Montclair Film Festival this Saturday, October 23rd.

I was inspired by reading this book by this woman, Mary Bruno, who had kayaked the entire Passaic River...as part of her exploration of the river where she had grown up. She grew up in a particularly polluted part of the river, and always imagined--related to the river as being a very scary presence, you know, very terrifying thing. And her mother said, "Don't go near it. You can't go swimming in it." Nobody would go swimming in it. There was no boats on the river anymore. And then of course she leaves home.

30 years later, she comes back, now as an aquatic ecologist and an author who knows all about rivers and has traveled the world, with this urge to tell the story of her hometown river.

***AMERICAN RIVER* TRAILER -- VOICE OF MARY BRUNO:**

When I kayaked the upper river, I had no idea that that even existed. I had no way of even thinking about the Passaic as a pretty river.

SCOTT MORRIS:

The story was quite a revelation because, by kayaking the whole river, she discovered a lot more about it. Not only the fact that the area where she grew up is now actually considered the most polluted river in the country...

MADDIE ORTON:

Wow.

SCOTT MORRIS:

...It's an EPA Superfund site down near Newark, New Jersey. However, the beginning of the river--the headwaters--is this beautiful, pristine place in the middle of a wildlife refuge.

MADDIE ORTON:

Hm.

SCOTT MORRIS:

So over the course of this kayak journey, which is 80 miles long over four days, you slowly--the whole Industrial Revolution of America is revealed as you get more and more downstream, and you discover all these places that were, over our history, developed into industrial centers and whatnot, ultimately leading to this terrible industrial accident that happened in Newark.

MADDIE ORTON:

Wow.

SCOTT MORRIS:

Mary is a very dynamic person. I asked her if she would do the trip again for the film.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh, wow! Okay!

SCOTT MORRIS:

She agreed. She has a kayaking partner, Carl Alderson, and he agreed to do it again with her. And he's someone who knows every inch of the Passaic. He's a scientist and a river guide. You can't go out in the Passaic without knowing what you're doing, and you need to know it. And there's not really any outfitters on the river. You can't just say, 'Oh, I want to take a trip on the river. Let's find somebody to do it.' There is no one because nobody wants to go on it.

So we remounted this trip with Mary and Carl and I felt it needed to be covered in a grand way. Because we're showing incredible places, you know, wildlife refuges, the city of Paterson...

MADDIE ORTON:

Sure. Paterson Falls.

SCOTT MORRIS:

Yeah, and that was actually the hub of industry in America when the country was getting its independence from Britain, and that was one of the first places that Alexander Hamilton actually developed as a planned city. So we covered it with--I had 15 people on a crew. We had a camera boat going along with them, we had cameras leapfrogging ahead on the shore. We had drones, we had four GoPros--two on each kayak. And we split the trip into two, two day legs, so we had some time to sort of regroup in between over a week.

In between, we also did a lot of additional interviews. We went and talked to people, residents, historians, river advocates. So as you go along the river, you learn about all these different places, you know, in depth.

MADDIE ORTON:

Certainly there have been some concerning, well-publicized examples of health issues related to the Passaic River.

SCOTT MORRIS:

This is common knowledge, although in the film, it does shock people is that, you know, the agent orange during the Vietnam war was manufactured in Newark, and there was a by-product called dioxin that was dumped right into the river, and it's the most carcinogenic substance created by man.

People think, 'Well, why can't they just clean it up?' Well, you can't. It sticks heavy, and the bottom part of the Passaic river is a tidal estuary, so it never goes out into the ocean. It always just goes back and forth. And this has been there for 50 years.

So it's been the past 36 years that people have been focused on cleaning it up--particularly the EPA and the Superfund program, which is, you know, not as old as the pollution in the river. And then lately, the good news is, just about two weeks ago, they announced an expanded cleanup plan for the lower 17 miles, which is where the big problem is. And that was great news.

And my film at that point only took it up to the cleanup of the lower eight, but actually the news came out the day before, I was in New York at Postworks finishing the film for the festival, and I was able to actually bring the film up to date.

MADDIE ORTON:

That is a quick turnaround!

SCOTT MORRIS:

Well, just for the closing credit that sort of sets up what's happening, you know, now.

MADDIE ORTON:

I think it's interesting that this film plugs into the broader conversation around environmentalism, cleaning up, but is so New Jersey-specific and tells a story so unique to our state. Does the Montclair Film Festival provide you a unique space to tell that story?

SCOTT MORRIS:

Well, the festival is a really great place to premiere the film. And in fact, we were hoping that, you know, it would be accepted, but you never know till close to the last minute, you know, and there's so much competition now, like a backlog of films.

The great thing about our story is, you know, it is, it is New Jersey-specific. Just to finish up on the Montclair point, you know, Montclair is located right smack in the middle of where the Passaic kind of loops around. From the high points, you can just look into two directions and see the river on either side because it goes north and south. So everybody there is aware of it. And the river also touches millions of people in dozens of towns, all along the river in this part of the state. So, in a way, it's relevant to a huge number of people in New Jersey. And I think a lot of people just do not know the story of the river.

AMERICAN RIVER TRAILER -- VARIOUS VOICES

"It's illegal to catch crabs at the whole lower 17 mile-stretch of this river."

"If you want to find the polluted areas, you can test the sludge, and test the air, and so forth, or just check out the economic level of the people who live there."

"We will not only fight for this, but we deserve this. This is a community that has been, for too long, separated and divorced from a connection to this river."

SCOTT MORRIS:

Over and above that is something that both Mary and I believe--is that the Passaic is an

archetype for rivers all over the country, and perhaps the world. That there's thousands of rivers--and this is not an exaggeration--that are facing similar reckonings, you know?

MADDIE ORTON:

Sure.

SCOTT MORRIS:

Have serious pollution problems. I mean, the EPA identified close to 3000 rivers where the water quality is unacceptable, considered poor. About half of those don't even support any kind of aquatic life, and they don't, they don't advise you to go swimming or catch anything in there. You know, it's, it's dangerous. So people should maybe become a little more aware of their rivers, you know? I mean, maybe--they definitely should become aware of the rivers near where they live.

MADDIE ORTON:

Right.

SCOTT MORRIS:

So the one thing I'm hoping is--and you never know with a film like this--but is that maybe it will reach out to a larger audience.

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON - VOICEOVER

Bob and Evie make sure that serving the state of New Jersey is a major focus of the festival in terms of entertainment, economics, and education.

MADDIE ORTON:

The festival covers so many areas of interest. You know, you have your "documentaries", your "shorts", "coming of age", "politics", and then you also have "New Jersey interest" and even "made in Montclair", which is incredible you can do that, and that there's enough art being created in this one town in New Jersey, that it facilitates that. Why is focusing on New Jersey subject matter and New Jersey art so important for the festival?

BOB FEINBERG:

Well, look, we're in New Jersey, right? And we're of New Jersey. There are a number of other film festivals in the Garden State. I'm proud to say that, I think for the last nine years running, we've been voted "People's Choice Favorite Film Festival in New Jersey."

So, you know, we really feel like it's our obligation to highlight local filmmakers. And we're very lucky because we're in Montclair, we're very close to Montclair State University that has a tremendous film program, and we have an emerging filmmakers competition, really for kids in grade school and high school, so we're really very happy.

We take this seriously that, you know, we have a role to play in highlighting New Jersey. And the state of New Jersey has been very supportive of the Montclair Film Festival--the State Council on the Arts, Essex County, Travel and Tourism.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

For the past 20 months now, I don't know, I'm a member of the Murphy administration's Restart and Recovery Commission, which has been a great honor and a great privilege for me to be a part of. And my particular hat that I've worn is as an advocate for the arts and culture sector of the state of New Jersey. It's really been a great privilege for me, and I think that New Jersey is a wonderful state in terms of gathering themselves together and supporting, supporting people to get through this pandemic and come out a little bit fairer and more equitable in terms of where we are as a state.

MADDIE ORTON:

To that end, you know, I was wondering, how did last year work for the festival in terms of COVID? That must've been quite a hit for a film festival.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

It was quite a hit. We, we basically, I mean, our staff is amazing. I don't know even how they did it. They had to educate themselves on a whole new technical side of their work in terms of having a virtual film festival.

We basically figured out a platform with which people could download their films and then see them at home. And it was actually, it was wonderful. People, I think, participated. It's just the economic aspect is different. You know, you can't charge very much for a virtual film, and 10 people could watch it in one house, right? So you don't have the same way to get the same ticket revenue.

But we did do drive-in films. We actually showed a film that Stephen and I produced at our drive-in theater last year, which we were very grateful for. And the drive-ins were odd and in a sort of COVID odd way--very emotional, you know? At that time people weren't together, and yet we were together inside our own cars. And it was wonderful to do something.

But, you know, we took a huge hit in terms of revenue, but we programmatically learned a lot. We're still going to have a few virtual films this year because we reached people outside of the state. I think--I mean, Montclair Film is not unique. Arts organizations all across the country--and I can certainly speak for some of them in New Jersey--have reached people beyond their geographical borders. And that's an interesting place where I think arts organizations are finding, 'How do we keep that? How do we keep the people tuning into, say, the Philharmonic from London and still open our doors and have in-person concerts?' So there's, there's this interesting dynamic in terms of how I think arts organizations are reconfiguring themselves because you don't want to ever lose an audience.

But that doesn't, you know, it doesn't substitute for in-person and together. So we're thrilled to have people back together sharing a collective experience of visual storytelling, just like Bob said at the beginning. You know, to sit next to someone and have a collective response, I think is what makes the arts so powerful and film in particular, so incredibly powerful and moving.

MADDIE ORTON:

And the other headline there is that there is going to be a new--renovated new--theater space.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

Correct. Correct. Super exciting. Right across the street--The Claridge, also on Bloomfield Avenue.

MADDIE ORTON:

Tell me about that space, because The Claridge had been a mainstay for Montclair for quite some time as an independent, you know, art cinema, I guess? Is that the right way to phrase it?

BOB FEINBERG:

Yeah. It always showed independent films, foreign films. At the beginning of the pandemic, the current--the then-current operator, Bow Tie, shut down the theater, and left the space. And that gave us the opportunity to, uh, engage with the owner of the building.

And it's a historic building. The theaters--there are six of them now--it was originally one large sort of Vaudeville theater with a Wurlitzer organ to play music during silent films.

We're going to open on the second night of the film festival, and most of the screenings of the festival will happen at The Claridge. And immediately thereafter, we're going to begin operating The Clairidge as a full-run, independent art house movie theater.

MADDIE ORTON:

It feels like such a celebratory way to kick off your 10th anniversary by opening up your own art house.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

It does feel like that. I was there today, and I mean--I can't do cartwheels anymore, I'm too damn old--but I felt like doing cartwheels all across the lobby. It's so exciting. It's, you know, it is a natural extension of our mission, and it was actually also part of our five-year strategic plan to do this. None of us really thought we'd achieve it, and here we are.

We're very grateful to the landlord, Dick Grabowsky, who worked very hard with us to come up with an agreement that worked for both of us. And we're thrilled. It's a perfect way to come back after COVID with this newly-renovated space. And now it's a whole new part of our business. We'll be programming movies 365 days a year, you know, so we have a whole new staff we've hired, there's a new popcorn machine, it's all very exciting.

MADDIE ORTON:

Well, congratulations. This is tremendous. I'm so happy for you both, and I'm so happy for the Montclair Film Festival and I look forward to seeing what's next.

EVIE MCGEE COLBERT:

Thank you, Maddie. Thank you for your time and your interest.

BOB FEINBERG:

Thanks, Maddie.

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (VOICEOVER):

For more information on the Montclair Film Festival, visit: MontclairFilm.org

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The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey:
advancing a state of creativity since 1986.

This show is created in partnership with the New Jersey State Council on the Arts,
and receives additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This episode was hosted, produced, and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive Producers are Jim Atkinson and Koren Rife. Special thanks to Bob Feinberg, Evie McGee Colbert, Scott Morris, and the Montclair Film Festival.

I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.