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In D.C., WORLDEAF presents a truly silent film festival

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By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

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Enlarge By Universal Signs Productions

Universal Signs: Sabrina Lloyd and Anthony Natale star in the story of a deaf artist (Natale) who finds a new love (Lloyd) after tragedy strikes. The main characters speak in sign language, so the film is subtitled.

WASHINGTON — It wouldn't be a film festival without a competition and prizes, so that's what's in store when the four-day WORLDEAF Cinema Festival 2010 opens at Gallaudet University here today.

Festivals to celebrate films by and for the deaf and hard of hearing are not new; such gatherings have taken place in such far-flung locales as Toronto, New Zealand, Milan and Hong Kong in recent years. But this festival will be the first time deaf filmmakers get to do what Hollywood does best: give each other awards, such as best documentary, best narrative and best film about the deaf experience by a hearing filmmaker.

More than 170 films by 132 filmmakers from 30 countries — some with audio, some not, all with subtitles — have been submitted for the competition, an opportunity to showcase the best of deaf films from around the world, says honorary chair and Oscar winner [Marlee Matlin](#), 45, the world's most famous deaf actor. She'll receive a lifetime achievement award at the fest.

"It's an opportunity to make some noise and continue to break down barriers," Matlin says via e-mail. "The hope is to highlight the long-overlooked richness and depth of talent among millions of deaf and hard-of-hearing filmmakers, screenwriters and actors."

Also in attendance: Shoshanna Stern, 30, a Gallaudet alumna known as the "next Marlee Matlin" who has had recurring roles in such TV series as *Weeds*, *Jericho* and *Lie to Me*. She'll be a presenter and lead a panel discussion.

"There can be no more honest cinematic experience regarding the deaf community than one that is motivated and inspired by actual observation and/or participation," Stern e-mails.

In Hollywood, deaf filmmaking is a small niche and one not well-known by hearing audiences, but maybe they're missing out. "I believe any filmgoer open to a different kind of experience could find satisfaction in seeing a movie that may not be specifically targeted toward their market," Stern says.

'Visual-centric' people

Certainly, it's a niche passionately embraced by deaf and hard-of-hearing people, says festival producer/director Jane Norman, an expert on deaf cinema and culture and a professor of mass communication at Gallaudet, the only liberal-arts university for the deaf in the world.

"Deaf people have a special affinity for filmmaking — it's a 'visual thing,' and we are a 'visual-centric' people," Norman e-mails. "We want to tell our stories in our own way while at the same time provide opportunities for our people to succeed in mainstream media."

COMPETING FILMS, PLUS ONE

A sampling of some of the nominated films in competition at the WORLDEAF Cinema Festival 2010 (Nov. 4-7) at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.:

Signs of the Time

Filmmaker: Don Casper
Nominated: Best film about the deaf experience by a hearing filmmaker
Description: Where did the signs of baseball come from? The film unveils stories of inspiration that transcend sports, and introduces two men at the center of the controversy.
[See the trailer.](#)

See What I'm Saying

Filmmaker: Hilarl Scarl
Nominated: Best film about the deaf experience by a hearing filmmaker
Description: The film follows four well-known deaf entertainers a comic, a drummer, an actor and a singer in their attempt to cross over to mainstream audiences.
[See the trailer.](#)

Gerald

Filmmaker: Mark Wood
Nominated: Best narrative
Description: Corey, yearning for kinship, discovers he has a deaf autistic grandfather; a twist of events leads to shocking truths.
[See the trailer.](#)

Anna's Silent Struggle

Filmmaker: Tom Linszen
Nominated: Best documentary
Description: A young deaf filmmaker searches for answers to what happened to deaf Jews

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during the war; he chanced upon the story of one of the few deaf persons who survived Auschwitz.

[See the trailer.](#)

Not showing at the festival, but due in 2011:

Hamill

Filmmaker: Oren Kaplan

Description: Based on the life of deaf UFC fighter Matt Hamill, it tells the story of what it takes to be a champion on and off the mat. The movie stars deaf actors Russell Harvard and Shoshannah Stern.

[See the trailer.](#)

By Maria Puente

Source: *WORLDEAF Cinema Festival 2010*

So what's the difference between a film made for a hearing audience and one made for a deaf audience? Technically, not that much, says Matlin, who points out that filmmaking famously began without sound and the greatest early stars — [Charlie Chaplin](#), [Douglas Fairbanks](#), [Mary Pickford](#) and others— appeared in movies without uttering a single sound.

"A main difference is shooting a story in a way that really captures the essence of a deaf person," Norman says. "In deaf film, the story is *all* about what you see, not what you hear."

One goal of deaf film fests is to spread awareness among hearing audiences of the quality of deaf films, says Gallaudet president Alan Hurwitz. Deaf people are fiercely proud of their history, language and culture, he says.

"Filmmaking allows us to preserve our language in ways that cannot be achieved through books, photographs or other art forms," Hurwitz says. "Like sign language, 'film language' involves much more than the spoken words of a script. An

actor's facial expression and deliberate body movements, which are also essential elements for communicating in sign language, are critical in conveying the full meaning of a movie line or a scene."

Uniqueness, diversity

Hurwitz says Gallaudet has sponsored other international gatherings to celebrate deaf culture, including Deaf Way I in 1989 and Deaf Way II in 2002. Both events attracted many hearing people who, he says, got to see how deaf people's contributions to the arts enrich all lives.

"The best filmgoing experiences are those which reflect diverse perspectives and tell unique stories," Matlin says. "Those of deaf and hard-of-hearing filmmakers and story lines reflect that diversity and deserve to be highlighted and told."

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