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DETROIT

>EXCLUSIVE

In once-  
**Conservative**  
Traverse City,  
the **Bush**-bashing  
filmmaker is  
suddenly a  
**Favorite Son**  
who counts  
**Republicans**  
among his new  
best **Buddies**.  
Could you be  
looking at...

## Mr. Nice Guy? Michael Moore

It's funny what happens when he throws  
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PICNICS &  
1 ISLAND  
ESCAPE**



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# michael moore's new scene // *take two*

*By Anthony Bozza // Photographs by Kai Regan //* Last year, in just eight weeks, renegade filmmaker Michael Moore transformed a grass-roots idea — screening under-the-radar films among friends, solely for the love of the medium — into a nationally acknowledged, unparalleled happening. In one week, The Traverse City Film Festival admitted more than 50,000 people and generated an estimated \$5 million in revenue for local businesses. Its second incarnation, July 31-Aug. 6, is poised to break those records and duly establish the festival as a tradition worthy of what Moore sees as the burgeoning cultural evolution under way in the Traverse City region. Moore, who lives on Torch Lake, talked exclusively with *Hour Detroit* about how a spontaneous gesture became, in the words of one local newspaper, the greatest event to hit the area “since the Ice Age.” And how, for the love of film, he’s willing to put politics aside. Seriously.



**h**ow did all of this get started, you throwing a festival Up North?

I love going to the movies, but it's harder and harder these days to find a good movie to see. I'm always looking for that feeling you get when you walk out of a movie theater, that feeling of exhilaration you have when you've just experienced something profound, something that made you really laugh hard or made you cry or really made you think. I want that feeling you get after you've just seen something that respected your intelligence, or after you've seen a film that tries something special creatively or strives artistically to try something challenging. Those days seem to be gone because of the mass-produced hokum that comes out of Hollywood each year.

**Hokum? That's rather diplomatic, especially for you!** Well, I *do* have to work with these people!

**It's no secret that the industry is flailing. The trade publications blame piracy, the Internet and a number of other factors for low audience turnout. What's your take?** There's a reason why the attendance at movies continues to drop every year. And it's not because of home video or because kids would rather play on their computers or because television shows are so great. It's because people are tired of paying \$8 or \$9 to go to the movies, plus what it costs for the popcorn and the babysitter, just to walk out of there time after time feeling that they've just wasted two hours. ... People do want to get out of the house; it's not that they don't. They want to go sit in the dark with a few hundred strangers and have a good time — that is still a desire, but people's patience is getting tested each and every time they go to the theater.

**So in a sense was this a protest against the limited choices available in non-art-house American theaters?** Well, I just got to thinking that maybe I could put on a little festival and bring some films that I really enjoyed — some of the films that I only got to see because I'm in the industry — directly to the American people.

Honestly, I had no intention of doing any kind of "proper" film festival at all. I had lunch one day with three or four friends about eight weeks before the first one happened. All we decided that day was to show some films in a couple of basements and maybe outdoors on the backside of a barn. That was it. It was going to be a very small thing, and no big deal at all. But the more we started putting it together and telling people about it, it just mushroomed in a matter of eight weeks from something



that didn't exist into the largest event the area had seen in years. After the festival was over, the local alternative newspaper, *The Northern Express*, said it was the greatest event to hit the region since the Ice Age left behind Lake Michigan. That was so cool! When I read that, I fell out of my chair!

**From a film industry point of view, why Traverse City? It's not exactly in the industry loop.** Why Traverse City? Very simple: because I live there. Why would I want to travel 1,000 miles to do a festival? Robert Redford lives in Utah; that's why the Sundance film festival is there. Utah would be the last place you'd think would have the premier film festival in America, but they do. I'm here, so the festival is here. But there are many other benefits to it being in Traverse City.

First of all, there is something happening up in northwestern Michigan that is very vibrant culturally, artistically, socially and politically. For example, Traverse City has three public radio stations. There's only like 20,000 people in the city, and they've got three separate public radio stations. Detroit doesn't have that. There also is a more diverse group of people up there than there used to be. It used to be a very conservative, Republican area. But Traverse City voted for Kerry in the last election.

So things are changing. Not that the politics have anything to do with the film festival, but just in my opinion, that fact is a clear indication that there's not just one homogenized voice going on up there

#### // FILM FESTIVAL FACTS

**LINEUP:** With more than 50 films and 80 screenings, the Traverse City Film Festival has something for all tastes. For a complete list of movies, times and venues, visit [traversecityfilmfestival.org](http://traversecityfilmfestival.org).

**TICKETS:** \$7 for all movies except opening and closing night films, which are \$50 each (tickets for opening and closing night parties are \$25). Tickets go on sale June 30. Order by phone (231-392-1134) or at [traversecityfilmfestival.org](http://traversecityfilmfestival.org). There is a \$2 mailing fee per order.

**SPONSORS:** Affordable ticket prices means the nonprofit, 501(c)(3) festival needs sponsors to make ends meet. Operations Director Susan Brown says there are still plenty of opportunities, ranging from \$1,000 to \$75,000, and available for individuals or companies.

**VISITORS:** The festival happens during the height of Traverse City's tourist season, so you'd better move fast to find a room in, or near, town. The Traverse City Convention and Visitors Bureau will help you find a place to stay (and book the room for you) at [mytraversecity.com](http://mytraversecity.com). Other sites to check out: [laketolake.com](http://laketolake.com) and [bbonline.com](http://bbonline.com).

\\ In the business community up there, you generally have fairly conservative people — mostly conservative Republicans. And now, after just one year, they are our biggest boosters and supporters. ... They've gotten to know me as Michael Moore the human being, not as Michael Moore the fictional character created by the Fox News Channel.

anymore. Plus, the two coolest film festivals I've been to, Sundance and Telluride, take place in towns whose economy is based on tourism. They have old movie palaces and an opera house that's still open. It makes those festivals special, and those same factors exist in Traverse City as well — there are old movie palaces like The State Theatre and there's the opera house as well. Plus, we have this park that sits on Grand Traverse Bay where we inflate a 70-foot screen and show movies for free every night during the festival.

**There is also a built-in celebrity population in Sundance and Telluride. It's the same with Traverse City — you're not the only celebrity in the neighborhood.** There are people in the film and music business who have homes up there — I don't want to out any of them, but they are the people who discovered that area of northwest Michigan.

I've always loved the area. I used to go up there as a child and as a teenager. My wife's grandparents owned a cottage in the area too, so both of us had strong connections to the place. Essentially, we

decided to move up there permanently because we were both so attached to the area.

**Was your goal with the festival to give something back to the region by boosting the local economy?** It wasn't our intention at all, but according to the chamber of commerce guy who was quoted in the paper, one week of the festival brought in about \$5 million to the local economy. Downtown businesses on Front Street reported record sales that week, more than Christmas week or back-to-school week, more than any week in years, actually. They couldn't believe the amount of traffic the festival brought in.

**Traverse City is a pretty small town, though. How did the local community respond to an influx of 50,000 people?** In the business community up there, you generally have fairly conservative people — mostly conservative Republicans. And now, after just one year, they are our biggest boosters and supporters because of how much we helped the local economy. They couldn't care less in terms of my own political leanings so long as we are providing jobs and raising the cultural level of the area.

**Have you made any new Republican friends?** Yes, at least locally. They've gotten to know me as Michael Moore the human being, not as Michael Moore the fictional character created by the Fox News Channel. That's a bad thing for Fox, actually, because once people truly discover who you are, they realize that we might not think so differently from each other.

Those that got to know me as a person might not agree with me politically, but because of their experience of me, many have since gone to see or rented my movies. And what they get out of those movies now that they know me is that: number one, I love this country; two, I care deeply about our soldiers; and three, they end up having a good laugh while watching my films, too. They like that, the humor. Even though they might not end up agreeing with *everything* I'm saying, after two hours they do come away with what I mentioned earlier — that feeling that they've seen a good movie. You know that you have seen something worth seeing when you've been stimulated in some way, whether it makes you mad, or makes you happy, or actually makes you register to vote.

**So the film festival was the sleeper hit of the season. What's next?** My personal goal with the film festival is one of my life's missions, which is to save the art of cinema. I'm dedicated to saving this

## // FESTIVAL VENUES



### CITY OPERA HOUSE:

Chances are, you've never enjoyed a movie in a "theater" this beautiful. Built in 1891 as *the* entertainment destination in Traverse City, it was also the first building in town to have electric lights. Check out the ornate ceiling and paintings in the 730-seat house before they hit the dimmer switch.



### STATE THEATRE:

With its iconic marquee, elegant décor and single giant screen, the State ranks among Michigan's finest historic movie theaters. Built in 1918 as the Lyric Theatre, it endured two fires and was reborn as the State in 1949. It's undergoing another renovation, but the festival is giving it new life.



### OLD TOWN PLAYHOUSE:

A three-story former church built at the turn of the 20th century has been the home of amateur theater troupe The Traverse City Players since 1972 — and a popular spot to see movies since Michael Moore came to town last year. With just 358 seats, it's a cozy spot to catch a flick.



### OPEN SPACE THEATER:

Few film-going experiences compare with watching a movie at this outdoor venue, which boasts a 40-by-20-foot inflatable screen and a stunning view of Grand Traverse Bay. Bring a blanket and get there early. Last year, thousands gathered on the grass for *Casablanca* and other classics.

There is only one reason that General Motors and their subsidiaries have failed — the incompetence of upper management. They've failed to listen to the American consumer. ... If the head of [GM] had gotten behind the wheel of a Honda and taken a drive around the block 20 years ago, he would have seen the future and saved the company.

incredible art form, which essentially, with all due respect to the Lumière Brothers from France, is one of the two indigenous art forms in America, the other being jazz. We're a young country, so we have not contributed much to the culture of the world, but those are the two things we have given the world, and I guess you could add to the list the Broadway musical.

So if there's a lofty underlying mission behind the film festival, it's to declare that film is still a vibrant art form and that there are people making really, really good movies that you would have a blast attending.

**Do you see this becoming the Sundance of the Midwest?** That's what we'd like to see happen. We'd be honored to see that happen. I'm honored to say that next to the Chicago Film Festival, last year [Traverse City] was the second-largest film festival in the Midwest. And this is only going to be its second year. If you polled all the well-known film festivals and asked if they'd had 50,000 in admissions their first year, you'd be hard-pressed to find one that did.

**You completely outdid yourself out of the gate. What do you do for an encore?** Oh, I've got some surprises up my sleeve this year.

This year is the 50th anniversary of Stanley Kubrick's first full feature-length film; it's called *The Killing*, with Sterling Hayden, 1956. So I'm going to have what I believe to be the only complete retrospective of Kubrick's features in the country. We're going to show all the Kubrick films. Some of his family members are going to come from England. Malcolm McDowell has agreed to come and present *A Clockwork Orange*. Matthew Modine has agreed to come and present *Full Metal Jacket*; it's going to be amazing. I believe *Dr. Strangelove* will be one of the films we will show outdoors on the 70-foot screen with 5,000 people in attendance.

**Only a true Kubrick fan would dream that up.** Kubrick is my favorite director of all time, and *Clockwork Orange* is probably my favorite film of all time, so yes, you're right. We're also instituting the Michigan Film Maker award, which we will give out each year to a native of Michigan who has contributed to the art of cinema. Our first recipient of that is David O. Russell. He will be in attendance, and we will show some of his films, among them *Three Kings* and *Flirting With Disaster*. In my humble opinion, he is four-for-four with his first four films and he is one of the brightest directors working today.

We will also have a salute to Iranian film. There has been a growing and wonderful movement in Iranian cinema in recent years where, somehow, the filmmakers have been allowed to express themselves freely. What they've been doing has been quite an eye-opener. Personally, I also just think it's important to know people before you bomb them ... he said with a laugh.

**He did, indeed! When can we expect your next film and what can you tell us about it?** I'm making a film right now called *Sicko* that is about the health-care industry. It is a comedy about the 45 million people who don't have health insurance and the 100 million people who have crappy health insurance. It should be out around the holidays or early next year.

**How much have the warnings from your film *Roger & Me* come true?** Well, I made *Roger & Me* 16 years ago, and now with General Motors near bankruptcy, I can't help but wonder that if people had listened or paid attention back then, we might not be in the state that we're in, especially in the State of Michigan.

But people have a hard time getting their heads out of the sand and one movie sure isn't going to lift those heads out. It's a real tragedy. My dad worked for AC Spark Plugs, so I've seen, firsthand, the effects the decline of the industry has had on the people of Michigan.

There is only one reason that General Motors and their subsidiaries have failed — the incompetence of upper management. They've failed to listen to the American consumer in terms of the kind of cars they want. There are many things that could have been done a long time ago. If the head of General Motors had gotten behind the wheel of a Honda and taken a drive around the block 20 years ago, he would have seen the future and saved the company.

At this point, it is a dire state of affairs. The only advice I can think to give GM is very simple: Build cars that people want to buy. Be ahead of the curve, not behind it. Unfortunately, they're just so uncool now. Do you ever hear of a young person wanting to buy a General Motors car? No way! They've completely lost the cool factor, and they desperately need to figure out how to get it. It's not going to just happen because of a fancy commercial or a rock song, I promise you that. ■

Bozza is a former "Rolling Stone" staff writer and author of the bestseller "Whatever You Say I Am: The Life and Times of Eminem." [editorial@hourdetroit.com](mailto:editorial@hourdetroit.com).

**// ALL EYES ON KUBRICK**

Among the 50-plus films being screened July 31 through Aug. 6 at the Traverse City Film Festival, more than a dozen are the work of famed director and producer Stanley Kubrick. The retrospective coincides with the 50th anniversary of *The Killing*, his first full feature-length film. Among Kubrick favorites at the festival:



**Full Metal Jacket**  
(1987)



**The Shining**  
(1980)



**A Clockwork Orange** (1971)



**2001: A Space Odyssey** (1968)



**Dr. Strangelove**  
(1964)

**Other Kubrick films at the festival:**

*Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), *Barry Lyndon* (1975), *Lolita* (1962), *Spartacus* (1960), *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *The Killing* (1956).