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The Forest City Film Festival features three films featuring London actor, director, writer and producer Penny Eizenga



By Joe Belanger, The London Free Press
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Martin's Hagge, showing Friday at the Forest City Film Festival, was written by Canadian film icon Gordon Pinsent, directed by Penny Eizenga and stars Paul Braunstein and Sheila McCarthy. special to postmedia news

You can't accuse Penny Eizenga of being averse to risk.

She has worked as a nurse, then switched careers to become a sales representative for a pharmaceutical company, and now she's filmmaker — arguably one of the world's most difficult industries for women to break into and thrive.

Filmmaker is a catch-all for her work, which includes either acting, directing, writing or producing in three of the 46 films being screened at the second-annual Forest City Film Festival this weekend.

The fest begins Thursday at Wolf Performance Hall with the sold-out world premiere of Londoner Paul Culliton's full-length documentary, *Clearing the Way: Combat Engineers in Kandahar*. Among the guests will be Major-General Omer Lavoie, who was commander of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment during the period covered in the film, families of soldiers killed in Afghanistan and several veterans.

The official opening is Friday featuring *The Truth Is In The Stars*, by Stratford producer/director Craig Thompson of Ballinran Entertainment and starring William Shatner

Two films being screened earlier Friday are the short film, *Margaret Finds Her Mojo* (2012), written by Eizenga, who also acts in it, and the short film *Martin's Hagge* (2016), written by Canadian film icon Gordon Pinsent and directed by Eizenga. She also produced *Go Fish*, one of the three feature films competing in the festival and being screened Sunday.

Eizenga's most recent career flowed from her involvement in community theatre.

"I used to act with a London theatre company (Passionfool Theatre) and I just loved it and thought that this was all I needed," said Eizenga, wife of former London lawyer Mike Eizenga, who served as president of the Liberal Party of Canada from 2003-06.

"But something in me was just drawn to film. So, I quit my day job in 2006 and devoted myself to figure out how to be in front of a camera. Then I started to take courses in writing screenplays and that's how it started."

Eizenga is the first to admit her decision to change careers was made easier due to her husband's steady income "but I felt like if I don't do this, I would always have felt this sense of regret. Once I did it, I just knew that this is where my heart lies."

Today, Eizenga is considered by others in the industry as an emerging artist, a term usually reserved for younger talents.

"I think the important thing to say is that it shouldn't matter what your age is or your gender," said Eizenga. "It's just allowing people express their voices. It really behooves us to honour our own voices if you feel compelled to do something . . . to represent that voice of women of a certain age."

It's a voice Dorothy Downs, the festival's founder and artistic director wants to hear, especially from Eizenga.

"This is a woman to watch," said Downs of Eizenga. "She is just killing it. She's got such high-quality work in the festival. Just a very talented individual."

Eizenga was nonchalant about the various credits she has in the three films, noting the work was spread over more than four years

"In this industry, you have to be prepared to wear several hats to get anything done," said Eizenga. "But acting is not where my heart lies now. Now it's about getting the film done. I want to write and direct."

Eizenga said she's working on new projects, including her own feature film and with Pinsent, whom she met at an event and has since developed a friendship, meeting regularly over coffee to talk about characters, stories and projects.

Eizenga said the only way for the film industry to improve on its notoriously thin representation of women is to hire them to positions of power — writing, producing and directing.

She urged others to take the leap into the industry "if you don't feel you need to do it without starving yourself or your family . . . I was fortunate enough with (husband) Mike working and I just took the leap."

If you need to, work part-time, she said.

"But don't try to figure out what you think someone else wants you to say," said Eizenga. "You need to use your own voice because you really believe in it, you're going to follow through and do it."

Networking is another key ingredient to success.

"Do it — get out there and meet people and be seen so other people know who you are, that you're someone like-minded people can trust, so people have your back," Eizenga said.

“Everyone has their own trajectory.”

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IF YOU GO

What: Forest City Film Festival, featuring 46 films, including features and documentaries in full-length and short formats and eight animated films in competition.

When: Thursday, 6:30 to 9:15 p.m.; Friday, 10 a.m. to 9:45 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 a.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Where: Wolf Performance Hall, 251 Dundas St.

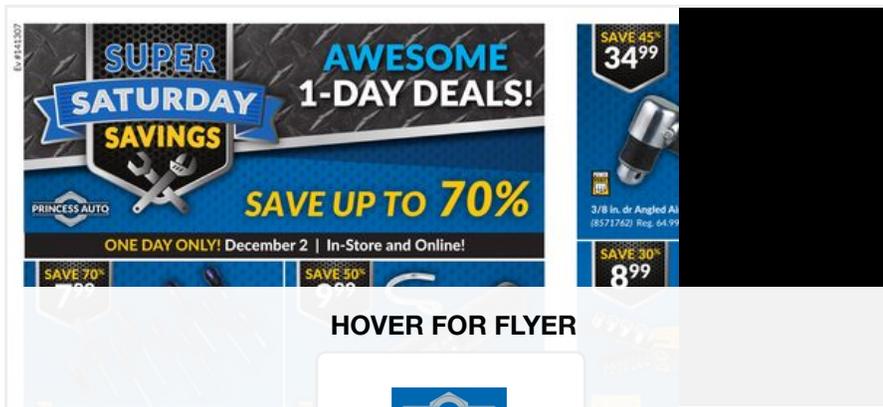
Tickets: For info about ticket prices to all events, screenings and workshops visit forestcityfilmfest.ca

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Penny Eizenga films at the Forest City Film Festival:

- *Go Fish*, produced by Eizenga, the story of a middle-aged woman trying to get the job of her dreams, being screened Sunday.
- *Martin's Hagge*, written by Canadian film icon Gordon Pinsent and directed by Eizenga, is about a “middle-aged despondent write who is burdened with Hagge, his wily personification of anxiety and depression, but after freewheeling Norah encroaches on his workspace, he learns apathy is a choice,” being screened Friday and Saturday.
- *Margaret Finds Her Mojo*, a short film written by Eizenga, who also acts in it, about an insecure, middle-aged woman who is convinced “the job of her dreams has already been taken,” being screened Friday and Saturday.

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