The Cromarty Film Festival

*Review by film critic Karen Krizanovich in 2015*

Cromarty isn’t one of those dead or dying Scottish villages so poignant you want to rip out your own eyes. It’s lively. The shops are open and people are in them. There are folks on the street. Even at night, it’s alive. We arrived late in the evening, seeking a house called Fisherman’s Cottage. Driving up and down the tiny lane proved fruitless. So, we asked a lady out walking her dog in the falling snow. “Fisherman’s Cottage, oh yes,” she said, “I’ll show you.” “Great,” I sneered, eager for the loo. “We’ll be going two miles per hour waiting for her.” In weirdly sudden seconds, she had led us to the cottage.

That evening, the traditional Cromarty Film Festival braziers were lit, whisky poured, wine mulled and a film was projected onto the side of the lighthouse – the very same structure, represented in graphic form, that appears on the classic black Cromarty Fest t-shirts. Here, there’s a tendency to project a film onto any workable surface – lighthouses, sides of buildings, ship sails, a big screen. It’s a habit that meshes well with having a surprisingly good time. Drinks, snacks (I’ve eaten my bodyweight in all three flavours of Portlebay Popcorn this year) and real food like rich curries and wood-oven pizzas are plentiful. Warming fires and snug historic buildings shunt aside any terror of the Scottish seaside in the heart of winter. Cromarty is the coolest, warmest of festivals. It’s welcoming not gloomy or gloamy.

Compared to Berlin, Cannes, AFI, Toronto, Venice or any of the other big festivals and film markets, Cromarty keeps a tidy aim. Outside of special interest films for children, Scottish-content and historical films, Cromarty Film Festival emphasizes the one thing usually missing from the festival big boys: fun. It can screen Airplane!, This Is Spinal Tap and Duck Soup without qualms. Sure, we’ve seen them all before but – again a love of celluloid can’t be suppressed – watching them with a smart crowd, warm and happy, on a large screen revitalizes these films. They become hits all over again.

Some celebrities come to the Cromarty Film Festival but they’re not a made a fuss over – at least, not more fussed over than anyone else. Moreover, scheduling your day is made easier by all the films being marked with MFF (members’ favourite), C (children’s), SA (Scottish Archive) and D/P (Director/Producer).

The festival doesn’t want to get much bigger. It doesn’t want to bloat like Burning Man. Year after year, I find myself drawn to it. The harbour, the cottages, the good coffee and company; it’s convivial with a sense of old fashioned camaraderie. And this festival may only last for another few years, so, mark your calendars now. This is filmic Brigadoon. Be there next year.