

BEST

of

92

DISCOVERIES,
CONTENDERS,
and WINNERS

Chicago

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BEST UNDER-THE-RADAR FILM SERIES

Midwest Independent Film Festival

When we're not busy supplying corn to the rest of the United States, Midwesterners produce some pretty great movies. Mike McNamara should know—he's acted in a bunch of them. A well-known face on the local film scene, McNamara put his connections to use four years ago by starting the Midwest Independent Film Festival, a year-round showcase of the latest and greatest in docs, shorts, indies, and features from the Great Lakes region. We love the series, which happens the first Tuesday of every month at Landmark's Century Centre Cinema, because McNamara knows that an excellent slate of movies is only half of what makes for a good festival—the other half being good networking potential. His screenings—which might include everything from award-winning docs to John Cusack's *Grace Is Gone*—draw the top dogs of Midwest film production, and McNamara makes sure people have plenty of opportunity to mingle. The place to be and be seen for seasoned pros and up-and-comers, the festival also hosts a well-stocked bar for social lubrication.

BEST WATCHDOG

Rich Miller

For a long time, Rich Miller, a Kankakee-born Illinois politics junkie, cranked out a modest newsletter that reliably kept tabs on the inner workings of the Springfield Machine. Called *Capitol Fax*, the newsletter—faxed daily when the legislature is in session, for an annual subscription fee of \$350—attracted a tiny but influential audience of politicians, lobbyists, operatives, and journalists. Now also a blogger (thecapitolfaxblog.com) and columnist, Miller reaches even more fans with writing seemingly impervious to political spin. “My subscribers and my readers are more plugged in than I am, and many are more educated and smarter than I am,” says Miller, 46, who lives in Springfield with his wife. “So in order to keep them interested, the bar is very high.” Working almost constantly, Miller frequently breaks news after many journalists have gone home. “For a lot of journalists, politics is a beat they cover,” Miller says. “This is my whole life, essentially.”

BEST DIRECTOR

David Cromer

Bleak life, death, and disappointing afterlife: In the hands of David Cromer, 43, they've become things of deep theatrical beauty. The Skokie native has spent decades percolating in Chicago theatre, and this year's string of successes has put his versatility and artistry on full display. His meticulous direction earned him a prestigious Off Broadway award in May for the dark musical *The Adding Machine* (born at Next Theatre, Evanston; now running in New York). Cromer is so obsessive about his vision that he cast himself as the Stage Manager in his unsentimental, revelatory production of *Our Town*; the show will play again in September after a sold-out spring run. Also upcoming: directing *Perfect Mendacity* at Steppenwolf Theatre's First Look Repertory of New Work series this month, *Picnic* at Writers Theatre in September, and *The Glass Menagerie* at Kansas City Repertory in January. Don't worry that success is giving him an optimistic outlook, though. “I absolutely see myself working in Starbucks in two years,” he says.

Three's a Crowd

BEST HANDCRAFTED COCKTAILS

Of the many places now making precision cocktails completely from scratch, which one shakes up the tastiest drinks?



THE VIOLET HOUR

1520 N. Damen Ave.; 773-252-1500

Everything you've heard about this ersatz speakeasy is true: The vibe is contrived and fussy; the high-backed chairs cut you off from the action; and the wait at the door is near intolerable during prime time. The handcrafted cocktails, however, are incomparably refreshing and perfectly calibrated. We recently inhaled the NY Sour (Plymouth gin, rosé wine, egg white, orange flower water) and the Spring Sidecar (a tart take on the sweet classic), but the menu bursts with enticements—all \$11 apiece, nowhere near the most expensive in town. The bar opens at 6 p.m., so go early, sit at the bar, and focus on your drink.

RUNNERS-UP: *Sepia* (123 N. Jefferson St.; 312-441-1920). Excellent versions of enduring classics. We wish the bar itself and the cocktail menu—offering just 12 creations—were bigger. *Otom* (951 W. Fulton Market; 312-491-5804). Perhaps the most creative in Chicago, the cocktails here are complex, layered, near-culinary creations that intrigue but demand perhaps too much attention.