

Photographer Dennis Stock, former Woodstock resident, focus of film (video)



Hannah Sawka stands in front of a poster for her movie, "Beyond Iconic." (AP photo)

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"A homecoming" is how filmmaker, director and producer Hanna Sawka describes Sunday's presentation of her film, "Beyond Iconic Photographer Dennis Stock," at Upstate Films Woodstock.

"Dennis was a longtime Woodstock resident," Sawka, a High Falls resident, said, "and the film was shot almost entirely in Woodstock."

Sawka said Stock, who died in 2010, happened into her life at her parents' dinner table. Sawka is the daughter of Hanka and Jan Sawka, the Polish dissident whose posters epitomized the Polish people's struggle for freedom. He died last year.

"Dennis came to dinner with a friend," Sawka said. "I was probably the first young person he had met in a while who was ga-ga over meeting him."



"Everyone recognizes Dennis' photos," she added. "Very few know the name behind them. I admired his stand on ethics in art and photography. I believed he had important things to say about philosophical and ethical issues in photography."

Sawka obtained a Bachelor's degree in English and theater from Smith College.

"That's where I learned to write," she said. "I built from there to tell stories in film."

Sawka obtained her Master's degree in filmmaking at the Polish National Film School in Lodz, which Polanski, Kieslowski and Wajda also attended. At the time she attended, it took 6½ years to attain the degree.



"In the last year, we needed to secure our own financing for our final project," she said. "The school wanted us to learn how to do that. I was fortunate to obtain funds from Opus Film, also in Ldoz, for my project.

For her thesis, Sawka made "Night Conversations," a narrative about two single parents who work the night shift as taxi drivers. The film was accepted into the Dok Leipzig Festival in Germany.

"I wish I had known at the time," Sawka said. "It was a big festival, and I would have somehow found the money to attend."

Sawka shot her first short, a 10-minute narrative, "That Sleepless Night," in 1999, completing it in 2000. She has since shot other shorts, both documentaries and narratives.

Sawka gained enormous experience, however, directing a weekly crime re-enactment show for three years on Polish National Television.

"These were actual cold cases that hadn't been solved," she said. "It was great experience in writing, filming and directing. I read the case ahead and wrote a brief narrative, including any new information, then we interviewed police and detectives, filming in one day. Sometimes, we shot two films in a day!"

One of the episodes she filmed led to an arrest and conviction in a cold case brutal rape-murder, according to Sawka. Police had no leads.

"The case was completely cold," she said. "I re-created a scenario, using information I had. Someone saw it and reported it to police, who created a suspect profile. With DNA evidence, police solved the case.

"It was a particularly horrific crime in a small town," Sawka added. "People were afraid.

"It turns out the perpetrator was not from the town. He already was in jail, but out on 24-hour parole. He took a train to that town, picked out the victim, who had gone out dancing, committed the crimes, took the train and got back to jail in time. He's now in jail, where he belongs."

Asked about the title, "Beyond Iconic," Sawka smiled and said, "Dennis and I used to joke about the overuse of the word. People might think the film is more iconic than iconic, but it really goes beyond that superficiality. Dennis was so much more."

The film took several years to make, Sawka said. She started research in 2006 and shot the main footage in 2008.

"I am so grateful I had the time to spend with Dennis selecting the photos for the film," she said. "There are thousands of them."

Stock's family wants his legacy to serve educational purposes, Sawka added, so she is pleased the film will be distributed to American schools, colleges and universities by Filmmaker's Library, an imprint of the Alexander Street Press.

Sawka was particular in selecting festivals to present the documentary, she said.

"I went a little crazy," Sawka said, "because some of the festivals overlapped, but I didn't think the film would be accepted into all four, plus a conference. They were!"

The film premiered at the 2011 Hot Springs Film Festival in Arkansas, the oldest documentary festival in the U.S.

"I was home for one day, then back on a plane, because it was then accepted into the 2011 Sao Paulo (Brazil) Film Festival, where it was a finalist in the new directors category," Sawka said.

"That was an audience choice and that means so much to me."

The film was then selected for the DOC NYC festival at the IFC Center in New York, and the Starz Denver Film Festival. It was also featured at the Society of Photography Educators Northwest Region Annual Conference in November 2011.

"I was a speaker at the conference, so I needed to attend," she said.

"Beyond Iconic" will also premiere this year on the Dutch Public Television program, "Close Up," its



first broadcast sale. "Close-Up" is a cultural program featuring films on artists.

Even with the thrill of these successes, Sawka holds two projects -- one new, the other ongoing -- dear to her heart. She is continuing work on her father's 90-minute multi-media project, "The Voyage," with music by the Mickey Hart Band. Jan Sawka, a painter and graphic artist, created hundreds of digital images for the project.

Hart was the drummer for the Grateful Dead, for whom Jan Sawka created a 10-story, revolving multi-media set, with thousands of lights, for the Dead's 25th anniversary tour.

"I'm editing the project now, as well as producing it," she said. "The Voyage" is nearing completion, but she's not ready to announce when it will launch.

"I love doing narrative and my next film is a quirky, romantic comedy that I wrote specifically for this area several years ago," she said. "I wrote it for here and I'm filming it here."

The working title, "Ronday-voo" (deliberately misspelled) concerns a love affair between two unlikely people: A local person whose family has lived here for ages and a "newbie" from New York City.

"Beyond Iconic" will be presented on Sunday at 1:30 p.m. at Upstate Films Woodstock, 132 Tinker St.

It will be followed by a question-and-answer session afterward. Admission is \$10.

A reception will follow across the street at the Center for Photography at Woodstock with film composer John Menegon and his wife, singer Teri Roiger, performing.

For more information on Sunday's presentation call (845) 679-6608 or visit upstatefilms.org. For more information on the documentary, visit beyondiconic.com. for more information on Sawka, visit hmsawka.com. Information about The Voyage is also on this site.

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