

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



ON THE TOWN: In Love With Lutah



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The Santa Barbara International Film Festival was a standout this year: great crowds, great movies and many opportunities to highlight accomplished artists.

The festival also showcased local talent — and one movie in particular was a standout this year.

"Lutah" told the story of Lutah Maria Riggs, the noted California architect from Santa Barbara. She was the city's first licensed female architect and worked for eight years with her mentor, renowned architect George Washington Smith, before continuing on her own with a career that spanned nearly 60 years.

The documentary drew sold-out crowds to the Lobero Theatre twice, so a third show was held the last day of the festival. A fourth viewing took place yesterday.

The film highlights Ms. Riggs' iconic structures seen throughout the community. She worked on the Lobero with Mr. Smith (her handiwork is especially noted in the fantastic ceiling therein), the Vedanta Temple, the Von Romburg home, and the Alice Erving "glass tent" in Montecito.

The documentary was brought about through the enthusiasm and energy of Gretchen Lieff, who bought one of the last homes on which Mr. Smith and Ms. Riggs had collaborated before his death in 1930.

In the process of restoring the home, Mrs. Lieff and her husband, Robert Lieff, learned about Mr. Washington's draftsman/lead designer, Lutah Maria Riggs. Intrigued by Ms. Riggs' volume and calibre of work but lack of recognition, Mrs. Lieff teamed up with

Leslie Bhutani and formed the Lutah Maria Riggs Society with other enthusiasts interested in learning and sharing more about Ms. Riggs' accomplishments.

Serving as co-producers, Mrs. Lieff and Ms. Bhutani tapped award-winning local filmmaker Kum-Kum Bhavnani to direct the documentary they envisioned. For the premiere, the Lobero was filled with fans and friends from the Lutah Maria Riggs Society: Kimberly Phillips, Kellam de Forest, Laura Bridley, Trish Davis, Hattie Beresford, Jeff and Michelle Bruner, Isaac Hernandez, Howard and Tracy Rochestie, and Christine and Scott Smigel.

Ms. Riggs was the first California woman to be named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and her name remains among America's most distinguished professionals. Architects were out for the premiere screening (many are interviewed in the film): Marc Appleton, Peter Edwards, Deming Isaacson, Bob Easton, Joseph Knowles (who worked with Ms. Riggs early in his career), Mark Shields (recent recipient of the George Washington Smith Award) with wife Jo, and Roger Phillips Roger with wife Diana.

Others in attendance included Daisy Weber (head researcher for the documentary), electrician Stan Larsen (featured in the film), Jennifer Jaqua, Fred Usher, Mary Ellen Tiffany, Jocelyn Gibbs, Mo Masson, Ted Cronin, Ozzie Da Ros, JC Gordon, Alicia St. John, Christopher Gandara and Serena Rochestie. Praise abounded for the stunning work of Ryan Pettey, director of photographer for "Lutah."

Gretchen Lieff commented, "This was truly a community effort to honor Lutah. I thank the LMR Society, who had the vision and confidence to move this project forward."

From left, Hilary Burkemper, John Woodward and Jane Burkemper are members of the Lutah Maria Riggs Society who have been meeting over the year to discuss the life and impact of Lutah Maria Riggs, and to support the creation of the documentary, "Lutah," which premiered at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

ERIN GRAFFY/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

From left, Lutah Maria Riggs Society members: talented architect Martha Gray (who was praised for her stunningly crafted models of Lutah Maria Riggs' celebrated homes), artist Corinna Gordon and Tracy Rochestie.

Director Kum-Kum Bhavnani, left, was tapped by Leslie Bhutani, co-producer of the film, to create a documentary on Lutah Maria Riggs, Santa Barbara's first licensed female architect and the first California woman to be named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

Archivist Melinda Gándara, left, the UCSB curator who first organized and compiled the extensive Lutah Maria Riggs collection, with Gretchen Lieff, founder of the Lutah Maria Riggs Society and co-producer of the documentary.