



THE 2020 Florida Film Festival

The Oscar®-accredited festival promises film fanatics a “mind-blowing” experience, with something for everyone.

BY G.K. SHARMAN



Academy Award-winner Richard Dreyfuss was a celebrity guest of the 2019 Florida Film Festival and hosted “An Evening with Richard Dreyfuss, featuring *The Goodbye Girl*.”

The Florida Film Festival is always a party. Now in its 29th year, the event is a steadfast source of the best in independent and Florida-centric cinematic art.

And on the surface, nothing will appear different when the festival kicks off on April 17.

Film lovers — an estimated 23,000 of them — can still revel in more than 180 films showing at two locations, the Enzian and two screens at Regal Cinema



COURTESY FFF (3)

The crew of *The Blair Witch Project* participated in the 2019 FFF's "An Evening with *The Blair Witch: A 20th Anniversary Celebration*." Shown, from left to right are: Eduardo Sanchez, Robin Cowie, Ben Rock, Dan Myrick, Joshua Leonard, Mike Monello and Michael C. Williams.



in Winter Park. The lineup includes an estimated 40 Florida premieres, 20 world premieres and — fingers crossed — some eventual Oscar winners. The festival is one of only a few qualifying festivals in the country for all three Oscar shorts categories: animated, live-action and documentary.

But a behind-the-scenes decision in late 2019 brought changes for the Florida Film Festival and festivals across the country.

The deal? Switching online film submission platforms from Without a Box, which closed last year, to FilmFreeway.

"They had been after us to join them," Programming Director Matthew Curtis says. "It's a feather in their cap to have another Oscar-accredited festival."

The result? More submissions. Lots more submissions — which necessitated a beefed-up selection committee and plenty of long nights.

"A lot changed this year because of the

unbelievable increase in submissions, especially in domestic and international shorts," Curtis says. "It's an incredibly challenging task. It's an endurance race to get through this, an extraordinary amount of work to do."

The festival usually sees about 2,000 entries. This year, he says, the festival received more than 2,700 as of early January and expected to top 2,800 before the review period wrapped up in February.

How tight is the competition? Reviewers considered more than 1,000 domestic shorts entries for about 32 spots, according to Programming Coordinator Tim Anderson.

Some of them make it into Sunshine & Swampland, a program created in 2019 to replace Best of Brouhaha and give more Florida films a chance to be seen.

Also back for another year is Sunspots, a showcase for experimental films. A wild success since its inception, Anderson says, this year's lineup "is already shaping up to be mind-blowing."

The best thing for attendees to do though is pick out some films — any films — they want to see.

"If you love cinema, and you like to push your boundaries and you haven't navigated the Florida Film Festival before, because it all just seems like 'too much' ... this is the time," Anderson advises.

"Let your guard down, come out, have fun, see a flick. Don't know what to see? Ask. We will help you find a film that is right up your alley, or so far away from your current comfort zone as to perhaps open your eyes to a whole new world. Plus, you really don't know what once or future Oscar winner is going to be sitting at the bar talking about the movies with you."

G.K. Sharman is a freelance writer living in Sanford, Florida.

Be part of the scene:

The 29TH annual Florida Film Festival is set for April 17-26. For additional information, tickets, passes and VIP packages, visit floridafilmmfestival.com.



COURTESY FFF (3)

Director Tyler Falbo and his cast and crew take audience questions after the screening of *Postal* during the 2019 Florida Film Festival. *Postal* won the Audience Award for Best Narrative Feature.



Orlando Live interviews the cast and crew of *The Rabbit Hunt* after they received the Grand Jury Award for Best Documentary Short in 2017.

Celebrity Dreams



Woman in Motion Director Todd Thompson having fun in front of the Movebooth Photo Station at the Opening Night Party. His film premiered as the 2019 Opening Night Film.

Ever wonder what happens to a film after screening at the Florida Film Festival? Some offerings go on to fame and glory. *Blair Witch Project*, which was the Opening Night Film 21 years ago, is probably the most notable example. More recent filmmakers, however, are wasting no time racking up accolades.

Postal, a comedy by Tyler Falbo, was named Best Narrative Feature at the 2019 festival.

"Florida Film Festival was the perfect festival for us to premiere *Postal*," says Falbo. "Most of the crew and myself are graduates of University of Central Florida, so it was awesome to debut the film in Orlando. It's always nice to win at your first festival."

Postal has since screened in about a dozen other festivals and picked up some "Best of" awards, as well as kudos for acting and screenwriting.

The Rabbit Hunt, a documentary set in the Florida Everglades co-produced by Patrick Bresnan and Ivete Lucas, garnered the 2017 Grand Jury Award for Best Documentary Short.

The film has played at an array of festivals and was nominated for the International Documentary Association Award for best short documentary and won the Cinema Eye Honor for best short documentary.

"The proximity of the festival to our protagonists in the town of Pahokee allowed us to bring them to the screenings and awards ceremony," Bresnan says. "They were able to go on stage with us and make a speech. It was incredibly meaningful to us as a film team."

Woman in Motion, a documentary by Todd Thompson, was featured as the Opening Night Film on three screens in 2019.

The film about *Star Trek*'s Nichelle Nichols and her contributions to bringing women and minorities to NASA has since played at the Cannes and Heartland festivals and received the Human Spirit Award for Best Documentary Film at the Chagrin Doc Festival in Thompson's hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. It also was the opening night film at the 2020 San Francisco IndieFest.

"Having the opportunity to preview *Woman In Motion* for audiences on the big screen and in a sold-out theater was a great way for us as filmmakers to see what was working with the film and what parts of the story still needed our attention," Thompson says. "It gave us the opportunity to fine-tune and make it the powerful and inspirational film it is today."

Other FFF films that went beyond:

- ***Technology Lake: Meditations on Death and Sex.*** The 2019 Special Jury Award for Innovative Storytelling, narrative short by Brandon Daley has screened in festivals from Chicago to Maryland and Brussels to South Korea.
- ***Kifaru***, produced by filmmaker David Hambridge, received the 2019 Audience Award, Best Documentary Feature, and has played in a number of festivals and won awards such as Best Conservation Film at the International Wildlife Film Festival.
- ***Departing Gesture*** by Brian Bolster and Jonathan Napolitano received the 2019 Grand Jury Award, Best Documentary Short. The film became the first feature in *The New Yorker* magazine new documentary series. **OAM**

