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Top directors covet slot at Miami International Film Festival

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"Cannibal"

When Shirley MacLaine and Christopher Plummer walk the red carpet at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts on Friday night for the North American premiere of their film *Elsa & Fred*, the 31st Miami International Film Festival, which runs through March 16, will kick off in high style.

But look past the expected celebrities (including John Turturro, Mike Myers and Andy Garcia) and cameras and glitz and you'll find something far more substantial than a superficial celebration of glamour.

This is a festival with eye-catching, splashy titles, to be sure. But it also features lots of sophisticated and challenging fare.

Buoyed by a grant given by the James L. and John S. Knight Foundation since 2006, Miami Dade College, which puts on the \$1.4 million event, has been able to lure talent to Miami and nurture it with cash-prize competitions. One rich feature is a flood of Ibero-American movies of a wide range of tones and genres.

"The Knight Competition is a huge cachet and a huge draw," says Jaie Laplante, who is in his fourth year as executive director of the festival. "There are two competitions, one for feature films and one for documentaries, each carrying a cash prize [\$40,000 and \$10,000]."

"The Foundation's participation gives the festival an intangible backbone that attracts global attention," Laplante says. "Some of these films are very small productions, but they are represented by very powerful agencies in Europe who profit by selling the movies around the world, and those sales agents believe in the Miami Film Festival and they talk about us. That creates a certain buzz that snowballs among filmmakers."

Argentine director Matías Lucchesi's debut film *Natural Sciences* (*Ciencias naturales*), about a teenage girl looking for the father who abandoned her, is making its North American premiere in the Knight competition. He says Miami was the natural choice as a place to unveil his film to the U.S. audience.

“There are festivals all over the world where you can get your movie shown,” he says. “Miami’s festival is very important and prestigious. My movie has only been screened three times until now, all at the Berlin Film Festival. Miami will be the fourth and fifth. I’m very anxious to see what kind of reception we get.”

The festival, which drew an estimated audience of 67,000 in 2013, is a critical component of Miami’s cultural scene, says Dennis Scholl, vice president/arts of the Knight Foundation.

“There are two things we think about when we fund organizations: community engagement at a high level and artistic excellence,” Scholl says. “We want Miami audiences to get to see the best films possible, and prizes help lure filmmakers. I think the film festival has reached the level of Art Basel or the Book Fair in the sense that it creates the same kind of great energy in the city. It has become a broader, more accessible event.”

In the festival’s early years, it was a boutique festival in which 25 to 30 carefully curated films were shown at Miami’s Gusman Center.

Now, it has exploded to more than 100 feature-length and short films in six venues. Its burgeoning popularity means programmers can make room for tiny films such as *Locations: Looking for Rusty James*, Chilean writer-director Alberto Fuguet’s cinematic *Valentine* to the 1983 cult classic *Rumble Fish*, alongside big-deal titles such as *Dom Hemingway*, a dark comedy starring Jude Law and *Game of Thrones’* Emilia Clarke, or *Only Lovers Left Alive*, director Jim Jarmusch’s tale of a centuries-old romance between vampires played by Tilda Swinton and Tom Hiddleston.

Festival veteran David Trueba, who returns this year with *Living Is Easy With Eyes Closed*, a warm-hearted road comedy that swept the Goyas (Spain’s equivalent to the Oscars), isn’t in competition this year. But he still believes the festival remains a critical stop for Spanish-language cinema, an identity the event has cultivated since its inception.

“Miami is a marvelous gateway because the audience knows and appreciates Spanish cinema, but also because it’s not an event that is closed to popular cinema, which sometimes has the hardest time getting into festivals,” Trueba says. “Miami always offers a possibility of connecting with the audience, with a natural audience for our films. In particular with *Living Is Easy*, we’ve been able to ascertain that the picture establishes a special connection with people devoid of filters or prejudices. It provokes thought and enjoyment at the same time. And it seems to us that Miami is the perfect place for spectators to appreciate a film like this.”

Manuel Martín Cuenca, another festival veteran from Spain (*The Weakness of the Bolshevik*, *The Cuban Game*), is back this year with *Cannibal*, a psychological thriller about a tailor with an unusual appetite.

“Film festivals are a magnificent way to get your film shown,” Cuenca says. “But I have a particular affection for Miami. I’ve been there several times over the last 15 years and I’ve seen the city’s cultural scene grow in an astonishing way. And the festival has always supported my work, so I’m happy to continue the relationship.”

For some directors, such as Costa Rica’s Neto Villalobos, Miami will be a sort of homecoming. His deadpan comedy, *All About the Feathers* (*Por las plumas*), about a night

watchman and his pet rooster, was made with the assistance of the festival's Encuentros program, which helps filmmakers finish their works in progress or launch their conceptual ideas.

"I have a lot of affection for the Miami International Film Festival, since that was the first place where I screened a cut of my movie last year," he says. "It's a great pleasure to return to a city that treated you like home."

Mexico City's Fernando Eimbcke, whose droll coming-of-age tale *Club Sandwich* is part of the Knight competition, says he only makes personal movies that he truly loves and isn't necessarily interested in a big Hollywood career. But he harbors respect and admiration for the Miami Film Festival, because "31 years is a long, long time, and the quality of films selected along the way tells you a lot about the love and appreciation the city has for cinema."

And then there are those who are just curious to see how their movie plays here. That includes Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren, co-directors of *The Dog*, a documentary about the real-life bank robber played by Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon*. Their film is part of the Knight Documentary competition.

"We were lucky enough to premiere our film in one of the major festivals and markets [Toronto] and quickly follow it up with two others — New York Film Festival for our U.S premiere and the Berlin Film Festival for our European premiere," the filmmakers say via email. "That's almost a dream for independent filmmakers, because it opens the door to other festivals, to receiving press coverage and to have distributors see your film."

"Festivals are a very rewarding experience in terms of showing your film to real audiences. And each audience is different from the other. We can't wait to see what Miami will be like. We think it'll be great, because let's face it, there are a lot of New Yorkers in Miami for the winter, so they'll get to see some of 1970s NYC and find out there was much more to the story of *The Dog* and the bank robbery."