

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2016 MAKES MIAMI SHINE

BY CAROLINA DEL BUSTO

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2016 | 7 HOURS AGO



AholSniffsGlue in "I've Never Not Been From Miami."

Courtesy of the Miami International Film Festival

The main offices for the 33rd-annual Miami International Film Festival (MIFF) are hidden within the 91-year-old Freedom Tower on Biscayne Boulevard. On a recent windy Monday morning, Jaie Laplante, the festival's director of programming, laces his fingers around a paper coffee cup in the building's shadow and shows off the picture that graces the cover of this year's ticket guide. It depicts a tan woman with a bird's-nest-like hairstyle staring longingly ahead while holding a bright orb. Star doodles surround her, and in the center, the phrase "Projecting Light in the Magic City" describes this year's theme.

"Cinema is really all about light and how we use light," Laplante explains. "It's always been, but even more than ever now because it's all digital."

Operated by Miami Dade College, the festival features 129 films from 40 countries – the largest selection to date. That number includes 100 features and documentaries and 29 short films. A record 46 films are directed or codirected by women. Screening venues include the historic Olympia Theater, MDC's Tower Theater, Regal Cinemas South Beach, O Cinema Miami Beach, Coral Gables Art Cinema, Cinépolis in Coconut Grove, and Miami Beach Cinematheque.

When Laplante took over as director in 2011, he made it a point for the festival to include more films by local filmmakers. "My whole career, I've been fascinated by indigenous direction – production that happens right in your city."

One comment he often heard from attendees in those early years is that the festival wasn't attuned to local filmmakers. He saw some work being done, but it needed more attention. "I try to see all the work that is produced locally every year. We've also changed – the festival used to have strict premiere rules [for Florida filmmakers] – and recognized that the flow and ebb of how filmmakers get out their work is changing," he says, his blue eyes gleaming below a silver pate. "It's important for us to be supportive of that."



Still from *The Rebound*

Courtesy of the Miami International Film Festival

Included in the lineup this year is the showcase Florida Focus, which features the world premiere of *The Rebound*, by Shaina Allen, and *Hearts of Palm*, by Monica Peña, as well as the collective work of ten local directors presented in *I've Never Not Been From Miami*. That program premiered as individual documentaries on WPBT2, South Florida's PBS station, last fall. But for the first time, all ten will screen together at MIFF. Each short follows the same idea: local filmmakers making films about local artists.

"A lot of the filmmakers involved in the project are people who we've screened before, like Kenny Riches, Jonathan David Kane, Monica Peña, Kareem Tabsch – and then there are new filmmakers who we're excited to share with the audience as well."

Peña will also premiere a full-length feature at the festival. *Hearts of Palm* is part of the revamped Knight Competition. The film tells the familiar tale of love. "He loved her and she loved him," the festival program states. "An experimental narrative set in Little Haiti that tells the myth about rotting love, invoking Miami's mystical undercurrents." (*Hearts of Palm* screens Wednesday, March 9, and Sunday, March 13.)

Opening the festival this year is Friday's screening of director Alex de la Iglesia's *My Big Night*. The star of the film, famed Spanish singer Raphael, will be in attendance. Closing out the ten-day festivities is the U.S. premiere of the dark comedy *The Steps*, starring Jason Ritter, James Brolin, and Emmanuelle Chriqui.

"When you go to a festival, you can see a lot of big films with big stars that you know will have wider releases, but there are films that don't get distribution and may not show up on Netflix in a year or two," says Laplante, adding that he would love to see that change.

"But more than anything, the impact I want this festival to have is that I want people to love experiencing cinema in the cinemas. There are so many different delivery options now for film, and I'm glad that the net result is that people are seeing films more. But seeing a film in the context of a shared experience with light on the screen is something that's important for us to value.

"I love all the art cinemas that we work with because they show our films," he says with a laugh. "But what's important for me is that people go to the theaters... You go to a theater, you sit down, shut yourself out from the rest of the world, and experience the work. It's a magical thing."

Miami International Film Festival

Friday, March 4, through Sunday, March 13, at various venues throughout Miami. For a complete schedule and tickets, visit miamifilmfestival.com.

Contact: **Carolina del Busto** Follow: **@carolinarebeca** **Miami New Times Arts & Culture** **Miami New Times Arts & Culture**

Sponsor Content

