

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL OPENS ELIGIBILITY FOR PROGRAMS AND COMPETITION

BY HANS MORGENSTERN

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Jaie Laplante revealing MIFF's programming changes

Photo by Rachel Lauren Bleemer

Miami Dade College's Miami International Film Festival is changing the rules for its competition and programming, and that could be good news for festival goers looking for quality cinema. The new rules are designed to attract bigger named filmmakers, but are also more inclusive for producers of short films, and should ultimately make the MIFF a little more exciting.

Festival executive producer Jaie Laplante made the announcement over lunch by chef Allen Susser, outdoors at the Café at Books & Books at the Adrienne Arsht Center, on a typically hot and sunny Miami Monday afternoon. He gathered select journalists, filmmakers, and film industry insiders to share news that he hopes will ultimately take the festival to another level.

The bottom-line: the eligibility requirements have been expanded for three awards competitions. "There will be more exciting films in competition, and hopefully that excitement will translate to the audience," said Laplante.



From left: Mitch Kaplan, Jaie Laplante, Chef Allen Susser

Photo by Rachel Lauren Bleemer

Laplante said he saw what expanding the field of competitors could do during the awards ceremony of this year's 32nd annual festival. "When we were presenting the 24 films that were in the Knight Documentary Achievement Award category so many people had actually seen one of the nominees. They were like, 'Oh, I saw that,' so they were cheering for the film, so it's exciting for the audience. When there's more films competing that means more of the audience will know a film or two in the competition."

The breakdown is as follows, and it features three major changes:

1. The Knight Competition will no longer be for just Ibero-American feature films. Any filmmaker that has ever had a work in MIFF's official selection – be it short or feature, fiction, or documentary – is now eligible.
2. What used to be the Lexus Ibero-American Opera Prima Competition, for first time filmmakers, is now the Lexus Ibero-American Feature Film Competition, which will be open to any Latin American film in the program.
3. Finally, for short films, programmers have been given a wider pool to consider. The festival used to only want Florida premieres with no online presence, but now they can program shorts regardless of premiere. Note: this is for shorts out of competition, only. The Park Grove Shorts Competition is still only for Florida premieres.

Last year, the festival bent the rules to allow for the screening of some stellar shorts from the Borscht group in the festival, even though the films had their Miami premiere already. This makes the change in that rule official. "We have struggled over the years with so many great short films we cannot program because of so many regulations in terms of a Florida premiere or no online status," said Laplante, "but we feel great work is great work."



From left: Ana Morgenstern, Diliانا Alexander, Monica Peña, Carla Forte

Photo by Rachel Lauren Bleemer

This inclusiveness is not meant to deter the festival's world famous emphasis on Ibero-American cinema, Laplante said "We'll continue to program from our hearts, and we'll continue to program for the audience, so by nature, we're going to be pursuing films from Latin America. The thing is when you think about the films that have been here before it's Latin American directors, so we'll continue to have a strong Latin American focus."

Laplante said he and the festival's programming committee spent several months after the festival discussing the changes that he calls a "natural evolution," and they hope it will add more exciting voices to the mix, from legends who had premieres during the 32 years of the festival to newcomers. It also allows for some overlap in eligibility for more than one competition. "Essentially, there's more chances to win for Latin American filmmakers," Laplante said, "so Latin American filmmakers that have been to the festival in the past will be eligible to compete in our Knight competition. They'll also be competing in the Lexus feature film award."

Laplante calls the changes exciting for all parties, from filmmakers to festival attendees to the programmers who screen thousands of submissions a year. He also notes that this doesn't necessarily mean more screenings for the audience to have to try to keep up with. "It expands our international content," he explained. "It also expands our relationship with our Miami and Florida filmmakers that we spent a lot of time nurturing and supporting, especially in the last five years." He adds, "We're excited as programmers because we really get to choose from the best work, not just the best work that meets our criteria."



From left: Jessica Berman, Francisco Tardio, Jaie Laplante, Andres Castillo

Photo by Rachel Lauren Bleemer

Finally, the prize money hasn't changed. It still breaks down as follows:

- \$40,000 for Knight Competition, which consists of a feature film prize, directing prize and a performance prize courtesy of the James L. & John S. Knight Foundation.
- \$10,000 for Lexus Ibero-American Competition
- \$10,000 Knight Documentary Achievement Award
- \$5,000 for Jordan Alexander Ressler screenwriting (still for first-time feature screenwriters)

Filmmakers have until September 30 to submit their films for competition and/or inclusion for next year's festival. But the earlier you submit the better on your budget. The submission for the early deadline is \$45 and goes up to \$100 from there. Due dates and fees are as follows:

- Early Deadline: June 29 – \$45
- Regular Deadline: July 27 – \$55
- Late Deadline: August 31 – \$65
- Extended Deadline: September 30 – \$100

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