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Miami International Film Festival gets ready for 30th anniversary event

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Judi Davis and River Phoenix in a scene from 'Dark Blood', the actor's final film, which is making its U.S. premiere at the Miami International Film Festival.

In its infancy, the Miami International Film Festival was a scrappy upstart, screening a carefully cultivated selection of 20 to 25 films at one venue, the historic Gusman Center for the Performing Arts.

But the festival turns 30 years old this year, and it's a full-size grownup now. When organizers from Miami Dade College fire up the projector Friday night at Gusman's Olympia Theater, they'll be rolling out one of the largest lineups in festival history. By the time the final credits conclude on the night of March 10, 117 feature-length films and 12 shorts from 41 countries will have been shown at various venues around

Miami-Dade.

The growth has come at a cost. The festival's original co-founder and director, Nat Chediak, patterned his event after the New York Film Festival, which screened a similarly small number of films, opting for quality over quantity. The size of the program made the festival manageable — one could conceivably see every movie — making it a shared experience at which viewers could debating the single picutre they'd seen in the lobby afterward.

But in the late 1990s, the trend for regional festivals was to expand and get bigger, figuring the more options you gave the public, the bigger turnout you would receive. Just as other cultural jewels like the Miami Book Fair International, Art Basel and its satellite events, the Winter Music Conference/Ultra Music Festival and the South Beach Wine and Food Festival started focused and compact but swelled to enormous proportions, the film festival has followed suit and spilled out of Gusman and all over town.

It took awhile for festival organizers to make it all work. Florida International University, which held the festival reins when it first expanded, ran the event with a budget deficit for several years before handing it over to Miami Dade College. There, too, the event proved hard to tame: The college burned through three festival directors before hiring executive director Jaie Laplante, who in three years on the job has restored freshness and

excitement to the fest. Although the festival doesn't have the international reputation of world-class events such as Cannes or Toronto, its profile continues to grow among regional festivals, drawing the attention of aspiring filmmakers as well as established ones.

The work that goes into assembling the sprawling event is formidable, especially considering the festival only has four full-time employees (the remaining staff is seasonal).

Andres Castillo, a festival programmer and assistant director of content and creative development, says the festival received a record 500-plus submissions this year. They were filtered by committee into a manageable array for Castillo and Laplante to sift through.

To round out the lineup, Castillo, Laplante and other programmers traveled to the major festivals in Cannes, Toronto and Sundance.

"I watched 600 movies in preparation for this year's festival," Castillo said. "I know the exact number because I wrote them all down so I could count afterwards."

The festival's original identity as a showcase for Ibero-American cinema holds strong, Castillo says, but the staff works hard to make sure that emphasis does not exclude films from all parts of the world.

"We have movies like *Ping Pong*, the story of eight players from five different countries who are competing in the ages-80-and-up category in the Table Tennis Championship in China, or *Reality*, a satire on reality TV and modern-day celebrity directed by Matteo Garrone, who previously made *Gomorrah*," Castillo said.

The cultural diversity extends to the two Career Achievement Tributes the festival is holding this year: One is for Spain's Fernando Trueba, a festival fixture who will bring along his latest film (*The Artist and the Model*) and another for Swedish filmmaker Lasse Hallström, who will present *The Hynotist*, his first Swedish-language film in 25 years.

Despite organizers' efforts, Castillo admits they can't always land every movie they want. *Blanca Nieves*, which recently swept the Goya awards (Spain's equivalent to the Oscars), was high on his wish list, but the film's U.S. distributor declined the invitation. Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* was another film he chased, but the filmmakers chose to go with Austin's SXSW (South by Southwest) festival — which overlaps with Miami's.

"There are lots of different reasons why you don't see movies in the festival you would expect to be there," Castillo says. "But the program is so deep, there's always something else to go see. This year we have 10 world premieres in the lineup, which is the most we've ever had."

The depth of this year's lineup ranges from the mainstream (including the U.S. premiere of *Dark Blood*, River Phoenix's final film, or *At Any Price*, a father-son drama starring Zac Efron) to smaller but still-worthy films awaiting discovery — such as the British drama *Broken*, about the growing tensions in a London cul-de-sac, or *Blackfish*, about the mistreatment and abuse of killer whales at theme parks. And for the real diehards, there are challenging art films that may never screen in Miami again.

"I think the festival has evolved into something really special for Miami, as well as fostered an international profile as an essential industry event," says Marcus Hu, co-president of Strand Releasing, which specialized in art fare and has three movies in this year's lineup (*White Elephant*, *Paradise: Love* and *Post Tenebras Lux*). "We've had the pleasure of presenting the works of Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Traperero, Francois Ozon and so many others there. It has also become a destination for Latin American and U.S. Hispanic filmmakers to develop their projects. I don't think any of the other festivals in Florida can compare to the scope and accomplishments of this one."

Along with its profile as a home for Spanish-language cinema, the festival is gaining a reputation as a friendly place for documentaries. Last year, Steve James brought the highly acclaimed *The Interrupters*, a study of inner-city violence. This year, the festival is screening *Which Way is the Front Line From Here? The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington*, directed by Sebastian Junger (*The Perfect Storm*).

"Regional festivals are a great way of getting films to audiences who are motivated to have a festival experience," says Nancy Abraham, senior vice president of HBO Documentary Films, which is screening five movies here. "That's especially true with documentaries, which are about real people and not movie stars, so audiences feel more comfortable meeting and speaking with them. Miami is a big market and a unique city. The festival has been going on there for a long time, but it has gone up a notch in the last three years. It's definitely one of the top regional festivals in the country."

Thom Powers, the documentary programmer for the Miami and Toronto film festivals, says one of the first things Laplante did when he began overseeing the festival was to hire him.

"Jaie sensed documentaries were a growing force in the overall landscape of cinema," Powers says. "I spend time in South Florida each year and for a long time I tried to get the staff to get more involved with docs. After Jaie asked me to come on board, the number of documentaries in the festival grew."

To wit, this year's is the first festival to open and close with documentaries (*Twenty Feet from Stardom*, a look at backup singers who rarely get their due, and *Venus and Serena*, about the world-famous tennis-playing sisters). In addition to the festival's existing documentary competition, Laplante added a new category, Doc-You-Up, to make room for more nonfiction films from around the world.

Another category added this year is Lee Brian Schragger's Culinary Cinema, featuring three films selected by the founder and director of the Food Network South Beach Wine & Food Festival.

"From June to November, Jaie would send me films to screen and I picked the ones I liked best," says Schragger, who will also host a Franco-Brazilian brunch at noon Sunday at the Miami Beach restaurant Juvia before the screening of one of his documentary *Why Did You Leave?*, about a group of French chefs who move to Brazil.

Another new program, Miami Future Film Critics , will allow seven writers ages 21 to 30 to cover the festival like professional critics and present their own awards on closing night.

That program is a perfect example of how the college continues to use the festival as an educational tool as well as a cultural event — and hopes to continue doing it for another 30 years.

“This is a milestone year for the festival, which is the only major film festival housed, produced and presented by an institution of higher education,” said Alina Interían, executive director of cultural affairs at Miami Dade College. “The festival is a year-round effort, and it is made possible by all the members of the college family who contribute so passionately and intensely to its organization. I am proud that we are able to offer 10 days of thought-provoking opportunities to our students and to the community. As long as Miami supports and appreciates the event, we are committed to continue to bring them this great gift.”

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