

Jacksonville Film Festival returns to San Marco, Feb 4-5-6



Oliver and Cody Pearce

BY MARY WANSEER
Resident Community News

Friday, February 4 through Sunday, February 6 red carpets will be rolled out in San Marco for the annual Jacksonville Film Festival.

Dozens of the hundreds of films submitted from a variety of genres will be screened for an audience of local, national, and international festivalgoers. Most are scheduled at the San Marco Theatre. Some will be presented across the square at Aspire Church, formerly known as Southside Baptist, in their Maguire Fellowship Center auditorium.

Following the shows, discussions are planned with the filmmakers themselves. Some of the actors will also be present. Two

Sundance Film Festival alums, Tara Ansley and Marty Lang, will be in town all weekend and will do a producer's panel to talk about making independent films, including crowd-funding of projects.

Opening night will begin the festival with a film block entitled "All of the Colors" sponsored by the LGBTQ Community Fund. Closing the festival on Sunday the 6th will be a feature documentary about the future of Florida's natural springs. In between, audiences will be treated to a plethora of talent from as far away as the UK and Iran as well as local-grown artists. Their films

span topics from women's issues to family dynamics, from faith to folly and are styled as animations, narratives, and more.

For the full schedule and tickets, see JacksonvilleFilmFestival.com.

NONPROFIT

The event is managed by its own non-profit organization, Jacksonville Film Festival (JFF), under the umbrella of Jacksonville Film Events, Inc.

The mission of JFF is to celebrate motion pictures by discovering and showcasing new talent, and it aims to rejuvenate the film industry in Jacksonville. The event's atmosphere allows filmmakers to be recognized for their cinematic achievements.

A small group of judges made up of people in the industry rate the submissions on a 1-10 scale. Scores 6 and lower are not discussed, scores 7-10 are considered, scores 9-10 are selected for screening at the festival. Eight films out of the dozens screened will be chosen as "Best" in their corresponding categories.

Niki Logoreci, President of JFF, is an Avondale native and the executive director of the event. He began as a JFF volunteer in 2005; now he runs the company, since 2016. He hopes that, someday, the JFF will grow to a point where they can present monetary awards. He leads a core group of organizers who are on a mission. "We want to bring people back to Jacksonville," he said. There's so much talent here that leaves for bigger opportunities in Atlanta or Los Angeles (LA) where the jobs are, and that distresses

Logoreci. He wants to bring film talent back to its roots.

According to Logoreci, San Marco is the right spot for this year's festival not only for its iconic theatre but also for the nearby Five Points district of bars and restaurants for socializing in a vibe supportive of cultural arts that the event promotes.

Tim Driscoll, Program Director, assists Logoreci with organizing the annual festival. Driscoll grew up in the Riverside-Avondale area near Willowbranch Park for his first ten years before moving to the Southside area of Baymeadows for another ten. While attending Providence High School of Jacksonville, he and his buddy, Joel Russo, convinced their English teacher, Mrs. Tusek, to allow them to submit all their reports as movies, until the school eventually banned video projects. That's what led Driscoll to his lifelong career in film.

Years later, Driscoll and Russo worked together on a feature film called *The Lengths*, which is now available for viewing on Amazon Prime.

As an adult, Driscoll has moved about some, including out of state, but he maintains a strong connection to Jacksonville. In 2016, he started JAX Film Bar Mondays, where he met Logoreci the following year. Their first festival in September 2018 took place at the downtown library. In 2019, the festival was attended by 1,500 people. Though this is their fifth year working together, it is only their fourth event; 2020 had no official event due to the pandemic. "February from now on will be our date," Driscoll said of festival plans going forward.

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Driscoll added, "I hope our audience will show out. We want everyone to have a good time and talk about cool art. The impact will be huge," he said.

Todd Roobin, Manager at Jacksonville Film & Television Office facilitates permits for various productions filming on city property. He said, "I am 110% supportive of the Jacksonville Film Festival and what it stands for. Niki and Tim have put a lot of hard work and passion into putting together a wonderful experience for the independent film community here. I applaud them." About the venue, Roobin added, "The San Marco Theatre has a lot of rich history and is a treasure for our community."

FILMS

It was Driscoll's idea to introduce professional-level Christian films into the festival's mix. In pushing that initiative, a faith-based category was opened. The local Baptist church loved the idea and agreed to open the doors of its little theatre. One of the films to be screened there on Saturday the 5th is a feature documentary entitled GodChaserz by a world-known, heavily followed Christian rapper called Brinson, originally from Jacksonville.

Another film that will run at Aspire is A Cappella Nativity, a TV short produced by Frank Ralls, Music Director at Aspire, who moved to Jacksonville a year ago. An earlier iteration of his film premiered in 2018 in San Diego and was nominated for Best New Television Show. Much of the music was signed to Sony for distribution, and many arrangements have landed in numerous film and TV scenes.

In December 2021, Ralls adapted that film for live stage, working with a team of University of North Florida faculty members and Choreographer DeWitt Cooper, an instructor at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts. The performance was held at the San Marco Theatre as one of the Holiday Magic attractions and was well received. The story inspires universal themes of hope and love. It's an edited film version of that live performance that will be screened at Aspire during the festival.

Speaking on behalf of the church's leadership, Ralls said, "Aspire Church desires to be a part of the community. We don't see ourselves as a separate, exclusive club. Rather, we really do like to engage the community and participate. We are very honored to be able to help host the film festival this year."

Several more of the festival's selected films have been written, produced, and/or directed by folks from Jacksonville. Another is The Grey Area co-directed by Keagan Anfuso and Drew L. Brown.

Anfuso, a San Marco resident now, went to high school in Mandarin when photojournalism was her hobby. After leaving the corporate workforce, she attended the Art Institute of Jacksonville from 2009-2011, the same school Brown graduated from in 2016. In fact, Brown's student thesis film went to the student Oscars and won gold.

For ten years, Anfuso and Brown each lived in Riverside while working on The Grey Area. Except for a few scenes from downtown, almost every location in the film was shot in Riverside. Anfuso is the main subject of the docudrama, which is told from the first-person perspective of a masculine female. The film contains reenactment-style footage that draws on her own experiences through childhood into adulthood, including the animosities, anxieties, obstacles, and lingering effects of being bullied and feeling othered.

"We could not have had as much success had we not been in Jacksonville. We had the support of an entire city; I truly believe that we did. We are infinitely grateful," Anfuso said. The screening is scheduled for Friday the 4th as one of five in the opening block.

In the Utterly Macabre category, a film by two local brothers will be screened on Saturday the 5th. Born and raised in San Marco, graduates of Bishop Kenny High School, Oliver and Cody Pearce worked for over a year co-producing their short film about a drone that Oliver had designed and constructed from spare junk parts, foam, and PVC. Broken Wing has been accepted into seven film festivals so far and has already won two awards: Best Dark Comedy and Best Horror Comedy.

Oliver's production career began in the eighth grade when Cody was born. Their mother, Mimi Sherman Pearce, a visual artist, had purchased a movie camera to capture family memories and asked Oliver for assistance. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Though Oliver has created many shorts that have been accepted to various film festivals across the nation, Broken Wing is the brothers' first collaboration—Oliver as director and Cody as writer. The film was shot in two days, the first being in December 2018. That night, the director of photography's camera was stolen. So, the second day of filming could not be completed until June 2019.

Today, the brothers reside in LA and work in production roles. "It makes my heart very happy to see them working together and following their creative dreams," said Mimi.

Showing in the same block of films on Saturday night will be Beans by Justen Mann who lives in Murray Hill.



Drew L. Brown and Keagan Anfuso

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