

## As Miami Film Festival celebrates 40 years, South Florida cinemas hope for better days

BY AMANDA ROSA UPDATED MARCH 01, 2023 12:18 PM



Comedian Ray Romano, left, makes his directorial debut with 'Somewhere in Queens.' MARY CYBULSKI  
Courtesy of Miami Film Festival

At the Miami Film Festival's debut, founder Nat Chediak stood on stage at The Olympia Theater downtown and spoke to a packed house. He was musing on a question people kept asking him.

What is this festival going to be like?

"I have a feeling it's going to be like Miami," Chediak said on stage. The audience immediately burst into applause, much to his surprise.

Miami's diverse immigrant communities were starving for international films that spoke to them. He still remembers one night in the early years when the festival was playing a Chinese film called "Raise the Red Lantern" on a Tuesday at 10 p.m. He was standing outside the theater on a deserted Flagler Street when the film ended and hundreds of people poured out of the building. He didn't realize how big (and underserved) Miami's Chinese community was, he said.

“The demographic would change from film to film,” he said. “In the lobby, the Argentinians would mix with the Chinese who would mix with the Cubans who would mix with the French and the Italians. It was South Florida in a lobby.”



That was decades ago, before the film festival was assumed by Florida International University and switched hands to Miami Dade College. Before Chediak left the festival after running it for 18 years. Before a global pandemic rocked the film industry and South Florida's small movie theaters. Before the Regal South Beach, one of the festival's venues, announced its closure. And before MDC was shut out of Tower Theater, a historic art house cinema in Little Havana that the festival called home for half of its lifetime.

It's been 40 years since the Miami Film Festival, the city's premier international film event, launched. Since then, it has grown in size and scale, much like Miami. It has maintained its success and has attracted thousands of filmmakers, actors and movie lovers to Miami's theaters to discover films from around the world. And this year's festival, which kicks off Friday and ends March 12, marks a pivotal moment, not just for the festival itself but also for the local cinema venues that host its screenings.

#### **STAYING POSITIVE**

"Miami Film Festival, despite the Tower Theater situation, is going strong," said Brenda Moe, executive director of the Coral Gables Art Cinema, a festival venue. "Its 40th year looks phenomenal."

This year's lineup is "bigger than ever," said Lauren Cohen, the festival's director of programming.

The schedule includes a dozen world premieres, three North American premieres, seven United States premieres, dozens of events, several awards, and screenings of more than 140 feature narratives, documentaries and short films from over 30 countries.

"This year is about honoring the last 40 years by giving our audience more of what they want," Cohen said.



On Friday evening, the festival kicks off with "Somewhere in Queens," the directorial debut of comedian Ray Romano, who will attend opening night. In the film, Romano plays a well-meaning dad from Queens who tries his hardest to get his shy son a basketball scholarship despite his wife's wishes. The festival closes with "The Lost King," a film starring Sally Hawkins and Steve Coogan that tells the true story of an amateur historian who found King Richard III's missing remains in a parking lot.

In between, the lineup features several buzzworthy American and international films. Notably, Cohen name-dropped "Chevalier," a film based on the real life of Joseph Bologne, the son of an enslaved African woman and a French plantation owner who became a renowned composer in French society. The documentaries include "Judy Blume Forever," a film about the iconic children's book author herself, and "Stephen Curry: Underrated," an intimate look into the star Golden State Warrior's life.





“This year I wanted to start and end on a note of positivity,” Cohen said of the opening and closing night picks. “We happened to find two films that I think we’re just so perfect and so universally lovable, that it made my job very, very easy to do that.”

The festival also acts as a springboard for local talent, said Chris Molina, the short films programmer and a Miami-based filmmaker. Most up-and-coming filmmakers get their start creating short films, he said. When curating the short films lineup, Molina wanted to include as many Miami-based films as possible.

“You’re really supporting this talent on the ground,” Molina said. “What I find most exciting is that you’re really getting to know an artist before they blow up.”

One of those artists is Hansel Porras Garcia, a Cuban filmmaker living in Miami who has two films in the festival, a short called “23 Semanas” and a feature-length film called “Febrero.” In “23 Semanas,” which is competing for the \$10,000 Knight Made in MIA Short Film Award, a pregnant actress and her husband struggle to find the perfect name for their daughter.

Showing his films at the Miami Film Festival is an opportunity he doesn’t take for granted, Garcia said.



"There is no other way of showing my films to the Miami community," he said. "I always work with local actors and local crew, and it's amazing that people here in Miami can see our work through the festival."

Luis Gispert, a Miami-based visual artist turned filmmaker, is also premiering his film at the festival for the first time. "Amigo," a feature-length movie, was inspired by the true story of a family friend who successfully fled Cuba by shipping himself to the United States in a box. In the movie, which takes place in Little Havana and features an Afro-Latino cast, the main character loses the money he's been saving to buy a home for his family and goes on a quest to find it.

Premiering "Amigo" at the Miami Film Festival is "the best-case scenario," Gispert said.

"It's a classic Miami story," he said. "It's a very big deal. They show filmmakers from all over the world, but I think for Miami filmmakers and movies coming out of Miami in particular, it has a very good history and track record."



Screenings will take place at Silverspot Cinema in downtown Miami, the University of Miami's Cosford Cinema and the Coral Gables Art Cinema. Losing access to the Regal South Beach and Tower Theater was not ideal, Cohen said, but the situation presented an opportunity to expose the festival's audience to different venues and drive-up traffic to more local cinemas.

"People should be going there year-round and supporting them because art house cinemas need your support now more than ever," she said.

### **THE FIGHT FOR ART HOUSE**

This year's festival also reignited discussion — and outrage — over the city of Miami's decision to wrest control of Tower Theater from MDC.

The Tower Theater, located on Calle Ocho, first opened in 1926 as "the finest state-of-the-art theater in the South," according to the theater's website. In the early '60s, the theater embraced Miami's growing Cuban refugee community by showing English-language films with Spanish subtitles and Spanish-language films. The theater closed in 1984, but reopened in 2002 when the City of Miami authorized MDC to manage the property. The theater became home base for the Miami Film Festival and supported independent, art house and Latin American films.



That came to an abrupt end when the city decided to terminate its contract with the college. On Sept. 19, the city's Department of Real Estate and Asset Management sent a notice to MDC saying that the city would take over the theater starting in January.

During an October press conference, City Commissioner Joe Carollo said that the city would turn the theater into a visitor welcome center and a venue for film and live theater. Local filmmakers and residents protested the decision, arguing that the movie theater was not designed for live performances and that the Little Havana neighborhood already has a visitor center.



“Miami Dade College has done a fine job with what they do, but they’re a college to educate people,” Carollo said at the time. “They’re not a movie theater or arts provider.”

The theater has been closed since the city took over. MDC removed its projectors and sound equipment, as reported by WLRN. When asked if the college is committed to keeping the festival in Miami, MDC President Madeline Pumariaga said that the college will “continue to prioritize cultural events and programming like the Film Festival, as it has for over 60 years.”

“Miami Dade College serves as a workforce and cultural engine of this community,” Pumariaga said in an email. “We play a critical role in providing educational and cultural opportunities for all.”

Prominent members of South Florida’s film community say the city’s move was the latest in a series of blows to South Florida cinemas.

Regal Shadowood near Boca Raton and Regal South Beach, a large multiplex on Lincoln Road, will soon close, leaving just O Cinema and Rooftop Cinema Club as the only movie theaters in Miami Beach. This month, Florida Atlantic University’s Living Room Theaters closed. The historic Coconut Grove Playhouse, which has been abandoned since 2006, is up for partial demolition.



“Those are huge losses to South Florida, huge losses,” said Rene Rodriguez, the Cosford Cinema manager and the former Miami Herald film critic. “It’s the kind of thing where you won’t miss them until they’re gone. But you will miss them.”

When Rodriguez was the Herald’s film critic, Miami’s art film scene was thriving, he said. But running art house cinemas was never easy, and many struggled to survive during the pandemic when theaters had to close and viewers embraced streaming.

The death of small theaters hurts the art of filmmaking as a whole, he said. Many films — though still entertaining on a television screen — are designed by filmmakers to be shown in a theater in front of a large group of people. And the less art house cinemas there are, the less non-Marvel Cinematic Universe movies will get a chance to be screened, he added.



Igor Shteyrenberg, the Miami Jewish Film Festival executive director, didn't mince words. "It's an extinction level crisis that not enough people in the community are mindful about," he said.

The loss of movie theaters is especially concerning to Shteyrenberg who grew up in Miami Beach after immigrating from Ukraine at 5 years old. Going to the movies introduced him to American culture and helped his family make sense of their new life. "We need to be fighting for our cinema screens," he said.

"We need to do all we can to not be complacent and see them go the way of the dinosaurs."





Despite the widely accepted narrative that Americans no longer want to go to movie theaters, Miami film curators said they've seen the opposite. Coral Gables Art Cinema saw a 19 percent increase in membership during the pandemic, Moe said. The Cosford, which offers unique and educational programming, has seen its audience numbers grow over the last year, Rodriguez said.

"Our audiences here are hungry, but it's a matter of supporting these art house cinemas and not doing what the city of Miami did with the Tower Theater," Rodriguez said. "I think that decision was unconscionable and completely politically motivated."

The Miami Jewish Film Festival recently made its return to in-person programming and attracted 35,000 attendees, Shteyrenberg said.

The demand for cinema is abundant in Miami, but the screens are limited, Shteyrenberg said. That poses a threat to local film festivals who may struggle to find and afford to pay for venue space. Still, he said, the Miami Jewish Film Festival's comeback story is proof that if curators give people a good reason to come out, they will.

"How could that not give you hope?" he said. "How could that not give you the belief that film still matters, that it's still worth fighting for?"

## **SURVIVING POST-COVID**

The pandemic nearly claimed another movie theater victim in Broward. But The Gateway's narrow survival may signal brighter days for small theaters.

The Gateway, a classic movie theater in Fort Lauderdale, was dangerously close to shutting down after the pandemic threw the film industry out of whack, said owner Armand Daiguillon. Movie production of all genres stopped, causing a chain reaction that left all movie theaters — big and small — starved for product, he said.

Not only did The Gateway lose its senior audience to streaming, but it also lost access to the niche films it relied on. Since film distribution was scarce, theater chains took whatever they could get, he said. So when a nearby AMC got access to "The Fabelmans," an Oscar-nominated film, The Gateway didn't.



But the tide is finally turning, he said. Production and release schedules are returning to normal.

“The future is looking brighter starting in March,” Daiguillon said.

But small cinemas need to do more than just wait for Hollywood to catch up, he said. Art house theaters need to diversify their product and lean into what makes them unique — the experience.

“People do have to adapt to survive, but it’s only going to get better going forward,” he said.

Vivian Marthell, the O Cinema co-founder and director, agreed. Cinemas need to get creative.

O Cinema was originally located in Wynwood, but was forced to relocate when its landlord decided to sell the property. Marthell’s plans to purchase a building for the theater were stalled by the pandemic but still remain as a goal to avoid displacement.

“We’re all kind of suffering from the same situation,” she said. “We need to have the opportunity to leave a legacy in the community so that we don’t get pushed out, so that people have access to the arts.”



For Chediak, it’s all about the long game. South Florida’s art film exhibition will only survive if someone is committed to its survival, he said. Miami is full of skeptics, and it’s up to the film community to stick around long enough to convince them.

“I’m confident other people will come around and carry the torch,” he said. “In fact, they’re doing it right now.”

Here’s his advice: Look to people like Rodriguez and Shteyrenberg. Study the art of curating. Don’t blame the audience. Pray for the best.

And do it for the right reasons. “For the love of film,” he said.

**MIAMI FILM FESTIVAL 2023**

When: March 3-12

Where: Screenings at Silverspot Cinema, Cosford Cinema and the Coral Gables Art Cinema

Info: Tickets, schedule and full lineup available online at [miamifilmfestival.com](http://miamifilmfestival.com)

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