

Miami Film Fest Fosters Familial Ties and Latinx Line-Up

By [CATA BALZANO](#)



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Alexandra Codina got involved with filmmaking right after college. Following her job as a production assistant in New York, she began working with the [Miami Film Festival](#) in 2002, where she learned to further pursue a career in the filmmaking industry. Codina ran the community programming and outreach areas of the festival until 2005, when she confidently decided to fully pursue documentary production. In 2010, her first feature film, “Monica and David,” was picked up by HBO.

“Because I worked [at the [Miami Film Festival](#)], I made a lot of friendships with people in the industry so when I was ready for ‘Monica and David’ it wasn’t as frightening to go out there and to try to sell the film and to try to talk to people as peers,” she says.

This year, Codina returns to the Miami Dade College’s Miami Film Festival with her feature “Paper Children,” a drama centered on the immigration crisis at the United States-Mexico border. The film was one of nine documentaries nominated for the fest’s Knight Made in MIA Feature Film Award, a cash prize honoring the filmmaking industry in South Florida. It follows the story of four immigrant children who flee alone from Honduras and then undergo the U.S. asylum process.

“This is my first time screening my own work [at the Miami Film Festival], which will be very meaningful,” says Codina.

For the past 37 years, the Miami fest, which runs from March 6-15, has been committed to bolstering films and documentaries created by independent filmmakers who have produced projects in South Florida. Filmmaking is a booming industry in the South Florida area, which includes a vast population of Latino artists, filmmakers, screenwriters and directors.

Variety’s [10 Latinxs to Watch](#) brunch and panel discussion held on March 14 is among the events at the fest honoring breakthrough talent. This year’s honorees are Melissa Barrera (actor, “Vida,” “In the Heights”); Angel Bismark Curiel (actor, “Pose,” “Critical Thinking”); Julissa Calderon (actor, “Gentefied”); Carolina Costa (cinematographer, “Hala,” “Workforce”); Mariana di Girolamo (actor, “EMA”); Gonzalo Maza (director, “This Is Cristina”); Cesar Mazariegos (writer, “High & Mighty,” “The Simpsons”); Camila Mendes (actor, “Riverdale”); Tainy (music producer, Bad Bunny’s “X 100pre”); and artist-singer-dancer Chesca.

Variety features editor Malina Saval will moderate the panel discussion.

“We are incredibly excited to host it because of our traditional ties to the Latino community, cinematically speaking, here at the Miami Film Festival,” says Jaie Laplante, executive director of the Miami Film Festival. “It’s important, especially with high levels of Hollywood creative roles, because there has not been a lot of Latino representation, and it continues to be an issue in the industry. For *Variety* to step up and say these are people worth working with is incredibly exciting for them.

“In the latter half of the previous decade there was almost like a slow burn that became an explosion in the creativity that became the Miami film scene. It’s something that had been brewing and it really came to a head when ‘Moonlight’ won the best picture Oscar,” Laplante continues. “What that did was give creatives who are making cinematic stories a tremendous boost of confidence that South Florida’s stories can have a universal resonance.”

Puerto Rican filmmaker Angel Manuel Soto has felt the support of the festival’s members since 2011 when his short film “En la privacidad de mi hogar” screened.

“Ever since I started with them, I felt a sense of family and unity,” says Soto. “Once you’re in, it’s like you’re in there forever. They really treat you as one of their own and they make you feel at home,”

Soto has since moved to Los Angeles, but has continued to stay involved with the festival by submitting his first feature film “La Granja” in 2016. In 2018 he was a fest juror.

This year, Soto is back with his second feature film, “Charm City Kings.” The Baltimore-set story follows 14-year-old protagonist Mouse, a kid who desperately wants to join the Midnight Clique, a group of dirt-bike riders who rule the summertime streets of the city.

“It’s always good to be back at the Miami Film Festival and to see some of those familiar faces that I know are rooting for me every year,” says Soto. “I know that their electoral process is extensive and there are big titles that go in, with big names from all over Spain and South America; people that I respect, people that I admire and people that I hope I can emulate in my career one day.”