

Walter Mercado and made-in-Miami movies highlight the 2020 Miami Film Festival

BY RENE RODRIGUEZ

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“Mucho Mucho Amor,” the affectionate documentary portrait of the famed astrologer Walter Mercado, will play closing night at the 37th Miami Film Festival. GIOVAN CORDERO COLON

More than 125 narratives, documentaries and short films — many of them made by local filmmakers or with a Miami-centric subject — will unspool at the 37th Miami Film Festival, which runs March 6-15 at various venues around Miami-Dade County.

The festival, which is presented by Miami Dade College, kicks off with a screening of “The Burnt Orange Heresy,” an adaptation of the Charles Willeford 1971 crime novel about an art dealer plotting to steal a legendary painting, starring Elizabeth Debicki, Claes Band, Donald Sutherland and Mick Jagger.

Closing night brings “Mucho Mucho Amor,” an affectionate documentary about the life and legacy of the beloved astrologer Walter Mercado, directed by Cristina Costantini and Kareem Tabsch. The film was acquired for distribution by Netflix following its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

“There will be no better way to wrap up our 37th year of sharing our love for cinema and Miami than with Cristina and Kareem’s sharing of the incredible positivity and love that the life of Walter Mercado represents,” said festival executive director Jaie Laplante in a press release.

Other highlights of the festival include:

- “Reefa,” director Jessica Kavana Dornbush’s recounting of the 2013 death of 18-year-old graffiti artist Israel “Reefa” Hernandez after he was tasered by Miami Beach police officers.
- “Us Kids,” a documentary about the formation of the March For Our Lives movement spawned by the 2018 mass shooting that took the lives of 17 students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, directed by Kim A. Snyder.
- “When Liberty Burns,” director Dudley Alexis’ exploration of the 1980 Arthur McDuffie race riots and their lasting impact on Miami 40 years later.
- “The Last Rafter,” a drama about a young Cuban refugee searching for his father in Miami while avoiding deportation, directed by Carlos Betancourt and Oscar Ernesto Ortega.

- "Chateau Vato," a made-in-Miami comedy about a working-class family (led by Paul Rodriguez) that moves into a vacant mansion after the death of its owner, written and directed by Tom Musca.
- "Paper Children," a documentary about four siblings from gang-ravaged Honduras who fled to the U.S. and embarked on the torturous U.S. asylum process, directed by Ali Codina.
- "Michael Tilson Thomas: Where Now Is," a study of the remarkable career of the founder and artistic director of Miami's New World Symphony, directed by Susan Froemke and Kirk Simon.



"Reefa," a drama about the death of Miami graffiti artist Israel "Reefa" Hernandez, will screen at this year's Miami Film Festival. Gato Suaya

Special festival events include a 35th anniversary screening of the classic "Miami Blues," an adaptation of Charles Willeford's novel starring Alec Baldwin and Jennifer Jason Leigh, along with a month-long exhibition of memorabilia and work by the late author, who died in 1988 and taught at Miami Dade College for 16 years.

Actress Amy Ryan ("Gone Baby Gone," TV's "The Office") will receive one of two Precious Gems Awards presented at this year's festival and participate in a conversation about her career, accompanied by a screening of her latest film "Lost Girls," directed by Liz Garbus.

Three-time Goya-winning Spanish actress Emma Suárez will also receive the award, accompanied by the U.S. premiere of "Window to the Sea," directed by Miguel Ángel Jiménez.

Director Lulu Wang ("The Farewell"), contemporary horror master Ari Aster ("Hereditary," "Midsommar") and director Stella Meghie ("The Photograph") will participate in the second edition of Knight Heroes, an in-person conversation about the filmmakers' works and career at the Olympia Theater on March 8.

There were 36 locally made movies in the 2019 Miami Film Festival. Here are some of their stories.
BY MATIAS J. OCNER | CARL JUSTE | RENE RODRIGUEZ

Three freshly minted Sundance Festival award-winners will screen at the festival:

- "Boys State," about a program in Texas that allows 500 high schoolers to form their own government, won the U.S. Documentary Grand Jury Prize and was scooped up by Apple TV for \$12 million.
- "Crip Camp," a look back at the Catskills ramshackle camp for teenagers in the 1970s that helped bring attention and legal protection to disabled Americans, won the U.S. Documentary Audience Award.
- "Charm City Kings," a drama based on a story written by Barry Jenkins ("Moonlight") about a Baltimore teenager who longs to join an infamous group of dirt-bike riders, won the U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Prize for Best Ensemble Cast.



Claes Bang and Elizabeth Debicki co-star in "The Burnt Orange Heresy," an adaptation of the Charles Willeford novel that will open this year's Miami Film Festival. Jose Haro

A new partnership with Oolite Arts will feature two workshops during the festival exploring the intersection of art and marketing: “The Art of Trailer Editing” and “The Art of the Film Poster.” Variety’s 10 Latinxs To Watch celebrates up-and-coming talent, including Camila Mendes (“Riverdale”) and Julissa Calderon (“Gentefied”).

Competitions returning to the festival include the \$40,000 Knight MARIMBAS Award, given to a new film that best exemplifies richness and resonance for cinema’s future, the \$30,000 Knight Made in MIA Award for locally produced feature-length films and the \$10,000 Knight Made in MIA Short Film Award, all presented by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Other competitions include the \$10,000 HBO Ibero-American Feature Award, the \$10,000 HBO Ibero-American Short Film Award, the \$10,000 Jordan Ressler First Feature Award and the \$5,000 Zeno Mountain Award, presented by Fringe Partners to the film that best breaks down barriers to our understanding of people living with disabilities.

The \$42,500 Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Family Foundation CinemaSlam Competition is open to completed and work-in-progress films made by college students that incorporate Wolfson archival materials. The \$5,000 Alacran Music in Film Award is given for best original film score.

Venues for this year’s festival are the Olympia Theatre, Silverspot Cinemas, Tower Theatre and the Coral Gables Art Cinema. Tickets for the general public go on sale February 13th. For more information, including the complete festival lineup, visit www.miamifilmfestival.com.



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