

Miami's indie film scene has exploded over the last decade. This year's festival proves it

BY RENE RODRIGUEZ

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There are 36 locally-made movies in this year's Miami Film Festival. Here are some of their stories.
By [Matias J. Ocner](#) | [Carl Juste](#) | [Rene Rodriguez](#)

In late January 2000, only a couple of weeks before the 17th edition of the Miami Film Festival was set to unspool, a local film production company fired off an angry four-page letter to more than 200 government officials (including Gov. Jeb Bush), civic leaders and journalists.

The filmmakers' complaint? They were furious that their their made-in-Hialeah feature had been turned down by the festival, and blasted the event's "consistent lack of support for Florida filmmakers."

The fact that their movie wasn't very good was beside the point: The filmmakers felt that simply because they existed — an independent feature shot in South Florida! — they deserved a platform.

A lot has changed since then. Miami's local film scene has exploded over the last two decades. It's now mature enough to encompass two generations of filmmakers — something that seemed inconceivable 20 years ago, when most of the movies shot here were big-budget Hollywood spectacles such as "True Lies" and "Bad Boys."

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Even the makers of the Hialeah film who felt snubbed by the festival in 2000 have gone on to successful careers in the documentary arena.

And the [Miami Film Festival](#), which is presented by Miami Dade College, has kept pace with the growth. This year's event, which runs March 1-10, boasts [171 feature-length films, documentaries and shorts](#), to be shown at various venues around the city, including O Cinema Miami Beach, the Coral Gables Art Cinema, the Tower Theater and, for the first time, the swanky new Silverspot Cinema at 300 SE Third Street.

Nearly a fourth of the movies were made in Miami, by Miami filmmakers.

"There are 36 movies from Miami in this year's line-up, and we had at least triple that number in submissions," said festival director Jaie Laplante. "I was amazed at how much there was to choose from. Movies that are made in Miami capture our lives and who we are better than other films can."



Local filmmakers gathered at the Miami Film Festival's annual luncheon for South Florida directors at the Brickell restaurant Piola on Monday, February 25, 2019.
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Florida's film and television industry is still reeling from [the loss of the state-funded tax incentive program](#), which ended in 2017. "Bad Boys For Life," the third installment in the Will Smith-Martin Lawrence buddy-cop series, is scheduled to shoot a mere 10 days in South Florida in April, even though the franchise is known for its Miami backdrop (the bulk of the film is being shot in Atlanta).

LOCAL SUPPORT

But many of the filmmakers with movies in this year's festival say an independent film community is still thriving in Miami, thanks to creative and technical support from collectives and programs such as [Borscht Corp.](#), [Filmgate Miami](#) and [Third Horizon](#).

"A marked change within the Miami scene is all the organizations that have stepped up and helped to cultivate the talent here," said Kevin Sharpley, chairman of the Miami-Dade County Film and Entertainment Advisory Board. "Having people here who can come out and help you tell your story is a big boom to our industry."

Sharpley will be moderating two master classes at this year's festival, one focusing on [film production](#) and another on [using sound in film](#).

For the 2019 festival, the Knight Foundation increased the amount of the cash prizes awarded in the Knight Made in MIA competitions, with \$30,000 going to the [Best Feature](#) and \$10,000 for [Best Short Film](#). But not every made-in-Miami movie in the festival is competing for a prize.



Rival gangs of graffiti writers wage war in the streets of Wynwood in the feature-length film 'Vandal.'
EXILIUM

The range of homegrown selections include several new feature-length works from veterans, including:

- Two new documentaries by the Miami filmmaking trio Billy Corben, Alfred Spellman and David Cypkin, whose debut film "Raw Deal: A Question of Consent" screened at the 2002 festival. This year, the Rakontur crew will present the world premiere of "[Magic City Hustle](#)," a study of former UM Hurricanes trying to master the most Miami of sports, and the local premiere of "[Screwball](#)," a recounting of the doping scandal that rocked the Major League Baseball performed by child actors.
- Dennis Scholl, whose latest film "[The Last Resort](#)" is currently playing in theaters, presents the world premiere of "[Singular](#)," a documentary portrait of the Haitian-American jazz singer Cécile McLorin Salvant. The movie, co-directed by Marlon Johnson, will be followed by a live concert performance by Salvant.



'Errol Flynn's Ghost: Hollywood in Havana' documents Cuba's love affair with American movies and the surreal events that took place after actor Errol Flynn visited the island in 1958.

- [“Errol Flynn’s Ghost: Hollywood in Havana,”](#) the latest film by producer-director Gaspar González (“[Muhammad Ali: Made in Miami](#)”) revisits Cuba’s longstanding love affair with the Hollywood dream factory and what happened when the fading screen icon visited the island in 1958 in an attempt to revive his career.

Other directors are presenting their first or second feature-length films at the festival, including:

- [“Huracán,”](#) a thriller about an MMA fighter suffering from multiple personality disorder, written, directed and starring Cassius Corrigan.



Cassius Corrigan wrote, directed and stars in 'Huracán,' a drama about an aspiring MMA fighter suffering from multiple personality disorder.

- [“Vandal,”](#) a drama about warring gangs of graffiti artists in Wynwood, directed by Jose Daniel Freixas.
- [“A Name Without a Place,”](#) the story of a Miami Beach man retracing the steps of his dead twin brother, written and directed by Kenny Riches (“The Strongest Man.”)
- [“Miami Basel: Art’s Winter Playground,”](#) a documentary about the origin and cultural impact of Art Basel Miami Beach, edited and directed by Aaron Glickman.

THE MIAMI VOICE

Another element fueling the boom in Miami film’s scene? The success of two filmmakers, born and raised in Miami, who are now racking up Oscars and success: Writer-director Barry Jenkins (“Moonlight,” “If Beale Street Could Talk”), who will appear at this year’s festival on [Sunday as part of the first-ever Knight Heroes](#) masterclass and symposium, and Phil Lord (“21 Jump Street,” “The Lego Movie”), who shared the Best Animated Feature Film Oscar last Sunday for writing and co-producing “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse.”



Oscar-winning filmmakers Barry Jenkins (“Moonlight”) and Phil Lord (“Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse”) were both born and raised in Miami.

Both Jenkins and Lord have similar advice to aspiring Miami filmmakers: Stay true to your voice.

“I used to think that because Miami is so remote from Hollywood or New York, that made it more difficult to be relevant,” Jenkins said. “What I realized as I grew into myself is that stories by and about Miamians have a flavor that simply can’t be found or created elsewhere. And I came to understand that that voice is an asset to be embraced and empowered. It’s no surprise that the greatest achievement of my creative life [[“Moonlight”](#)] is rooted in something that ultimately brought me home.”

“Being from somewhere as specific and unusual as Miami is such an asset,” Lord said. “Miami has so many dimensions and untold stories — it is so strange and new and unresolved. It feels primordial — like something new is always being born. It is multilingual and diverse and modern and wrestling with the problems of the future and the past. Being from a place that gives you an outlier perspective is priceless. Embracing what is unique to you — telling stories only you could tell in a way only you could tell it — is the fastest way to great work.”

Evidence of singular film-making voices can be found among several of the shorts in this year’s festival. For example, the [lovely, melancholy “Liberty”](#) tells the story of the friendship between two teenage girls living in Liberty Square — widely known to locals as the Pork & Beans — as the renovation of the housing complex is getting underway.



Two friends (Milagros Gilbert and Alexandra Jackson) perform a dance competition in a scene from 'Liberty.'

Faren Humes, the writer and director of “Liberty,” was born in Brownsville and raised in Carol City. She said she was inspired to make the film after getting to know the residents of Liberty Square while working as a location manager for “Moonlight.”

“When the city of Miami announced the redevelopment plan for Liberty Square, I remember thinking it was all odd,” she said. “There was this whole thing with a press conference and the mayor and the nomenclature of Liberty City Rising, but it all seemed coded. The focus was the community transitioning into something else. But where are all the current residents going to go? And will they be able to come back? It took a long time for the discourse to address those questions and they still haven’t been answered in a concrete way.”

Writer-director Jose Navas said the idea for his short film “[The Rafter](#),” a dramatic reenactment of the true story of the first Cuban rafter to reach South Florida in 1964, came after he finished his previous film “Miami Our City,” a documentary about the impact of Latinos in Miami.

“This guy started sending me emails saying he had seen my movie and that his father was a balsero who came here in 1964,” Navas said. “I did some research and then sat down with Reinaldo Cruz and I thought his story was a natural for a film, because of everything that happened to him.”



El Balsero' ('The Rafter') recreates the true story of the first Cuban rafter who fled the island in 1964

The real-life Cruz narrates the film, which depicts his dangerous ocean voyage (complete with a gigantic storm and shark attacks) while recounting the events that led him to flee Castro's Cuba.

But despite the polished special effects and production values of "The Rafter," Navas said he has no desire to move to Los Angeles to enter the next phase of his filmmaking career.

"There's a sense of pride here among filmmakers in Miami," Navas said. "There's something in the air. It's a feeling, and it's pushing everyone. A lot of us are choosing to stay here because we believe we can do it."

Laplante said that giving small films such as "Liberty" and "The Rafter" a platform in their hometown is one of the biggest privileges of his role as festival director.

"The Miami Film Festival does not produce movies," he said. "That's not our mandate. But we have our own way of encouraging local productions. I've always believed in connecting with your community. It's so exciting seeing Miami creatives catch wind of what the festival is doing. I think our local cinematic art is going to continue to get better and better."

The 36th Miami Film Festival runs March 1-10 at various venues around Miami-Dade. For a complete schedule of events, visit www.miamifilmfestival.com





Local filmmakers gathered at the Miami Film Festival's annual luncheon for South Florida directors at the Brickell restaurant Piola on Monday, February 25, 2019. CARL JUSTECJUSTE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

GALLERY



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