

Miami Film Festival has a new executive director and a new theater in Little Havana

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UPDATED OCTOBER 02, 2023 11:30 AM



James Woolley, a longtime film festival organizer, was named the Miami Film Festival's new executive director. *Courtesy of Miami Film Festival*

The Miami Film Festival, the city's premier international film event, has found its new executive director.

James Woolley, who has organized and run major film festivals from Sydney to San Francisco for decades, will oversee the Miami Film Festival as it prepares for its 41st edition and the 10th anniversary of its GEMS festival this fall.

Woolley succeeds Jaie Laplante, who served as the festival's director for 12 years before stepping down last summer. The festival, which is operated by Miami Dade College, returns in

April. Woolley said he was drawn to the festival’s “great reputation around the country and around the world.” When he saw that the executive director role was open, he noted what an amazing opportunity it would be.

“For me in particular, I thought I could do amazing things with this organization,” he said. “I’m so glad that in meeting with the team and meeting with all of the wonderful people at the college -- it’s run by a group of amazing people who have such high ambition. I wanted to be at a place that was already doing well, but really also wanted to continue to thrive.”

Most recently, Woolley was the executive director of San Francisco-based Frameline, the world’s longest running LGBTQ+ film festival and one of the largest film festivals on the West Coast, for four years. His career spans nearly two decades working at more than 20 large-scale film festivals, including international film festivals in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. In 2017, he was named the Sydney Film Festival’s head of marketing and customer relations. He earned a bachelor’s degree in creative arts from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

MDC was interested in finding a seasoned film festival leader who could help elevate the festival’s prestige as a major international film festival, said María Carla Chicuén, MDC’s Executive Director for Cultural Affairs.

“His skill set and his experience, specifically in the management of international film festivals, really helped him stand out among a very qualified pool of candidates that we were very impressed by,” Chicuén said. “He also has a deep excitement to be part of the Miami film, arts and cultural community. He is very excited to take the festival to even greater heights.”



María Carla Chicuén is Miami Dade College’s Executive Director for Cultural Affairs. MDC operates the Miami Film Festival. *Courtesy of Miami Film Festival*

Woolley takes the helm as the GEMS festival, Miami Film Festival's offshoot event that features buzzworthy international films, celebrates its 10th anniversary Nov. 2-5. The GEMS festival also marks the unveiling of the newly renovated "state of the art" movie theater at the Miami Dade College Koubek Memorial Center in Little Havana, Chicuén said. This announcement comes months after the city of Miami evicted MDC from the Tower Theater, a historic theater on Calle Ocho that the college operated and used as home base for the Miami Film Festival for 20 years.

The Koubek Center Theater will offer screenings year round and during the Miami Film Festival and GEMS, Chicuén said. The festival will continue to partner with local venues and theaters in the future, as well.



Miami Dade College renovated the theater at the Koubek Center, which will be unveiled during the upcoming GEMS festival. *Courtesy of Miami Dade College*

"We continue our commitment to serve the Little Havana community and to bring other communities into Little Havana," she said. "We recognize the opportunities that come with being able to operate our own theater venue. At the same time, we are continuing to expand the reach in programming of the Koubek Center as a uniquely positioned multicultural center that showcases programs in all art forms."

This moment is a transformative time for several arts organizations, including the film festival, as Miami's arts community has seen several notable retirements and job announcements over the last couple of years.

As executive director, Woolley said he is "extremely excited" to work in a city with a thriving arts community and an enthusiastic audience.

“That to me is one of the best things to emerge from the pandemic, people’s continued enthusiasm for arts and culture,” he said. “I’m just so glad that we are here in a city that is ready to embrace us and ready to embrace the creative work that we’re going to be putting out there.”

Woolley’s adventure in the world of film festivals began in his home country of Australia. In fact, his love of film runs in his family. His grandparents subscribed to the Sydney Film Festival, where his parents used to go on dates. He’s passionate about sharing film with others, he said.

“They have the power to move people,” he said. “I think all art form does of course, but there’s something about film that makes you really see the world, really see people’s emotions. I think it can lead to change in people’s attitudes, but I also think it can lead to joy.”

After graduating from college, he set out to work in arts, but film festivals were always the goal. He started out, as he put it, “from the absolute bottom of companies.” He spent the next 15 years working his way up from shortlived, seasonal contracts to trying his hand at every possible job that exists at a film festival organization to eventually overseeing big name institutions.

And he has plenty of “war stories” from over the years. There have been films that wouldn’t play digitally. Films that started playing upside down and backwards. And the time he had to run a festival during a global pandemic.

“Everything you can think of has happened, but that’s all part of the joy of... a one off special event,” he said. “It’s live, it’s real. I really enjoy that immediacy of it.”

Above all, Woolley said, “There’s nothing more I love than filling a cinema.”

And his goals are aligned with MDC’s: to build on the Miami Film Festival’s reputation to get the international recognition it deserves.

“The festival’s already respected, but there is a continuation of ensuring that the prestige of the festival is known around the world and around the nation,” he said. “We’re really passionate about making sure that everybody knows that this is a world class festival that people should be coming to.”

This story was produced with financial support from The Pérez Family Foundation, in partnership with Journalism Funding Partners, as part of an independent journalism fellowship program. The Miami Herald maintains full editorial control of this work.