

RHODE ISLAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Lineup features movies from 48 countries

Festival will honor Winifred Brownell, a retired URI professor and dean

By Andy Smith
Journal Arts Writer

The biggest week of the year for Ocean State film buffs has arrived. The Flickers' Rhode Island International Film Festival starts Tuesday and runs through Sunday.

The festival will screen 293 films, 84 of them either world or North American premieres, from 48 countries. The films will be shown at venues in Providence, Warwick, Newport, Bristol and Woonsocket.

The RIIFF is one of only 10 festivals in the world that qualifies short films — live action, documentary, animation — for an Oscar, a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) and a Canadian Screen Award. Last year, Chris Overton's short film "The Silent Child" had its world premiere at the Rhode Island festival, won the Grand Prize and went on to win an Oscar.

About 30 films at the festival are full-length productions; the rest are shorts.

The films were selected from 6,591 submissions, up about 20 percent over last year. George Marshall, executive director and founder of the festival, said many of the entries reflect global events: the opioid epidemic, climate change, law enforcement, refugees, immigration.

Shawn Quirk, program director for the festival, said the films are screened by a series of juries made up of board members, film professors, students. Films are rated on a scale of one to five, and the ones that rate fours and fives move up the ladder for additional consideration.

"It can be tough to make choices," Quirk said. "We try to appeal to as many demographics as possible, and there's only so much space. It becomes like a big puzzle, a mosaic. Things start to fit together, complement each other. Eventually, the films start to talk to each other."

There will be films from Iran, Iceland, Hungary, India, Israel, Spain, Australia and more. There's also plenty of work from Rhode Island, including Pat Heywood and Jamil McGinnis's "Fall River," Clayton Vila's "Back to Life; The Torin Yater-Wallace Story,"



George Marshall, executive director and founder of the Rhode Island International Film Festival, says many of the selections reflect global events. (THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, FILE / STEVE SZYDLOWSKI)



"Salam" is a short film that follows a female Lyft driver as she navigates the night shift in New York City while waiting to hear news from her family in Syria. It will be screened at 8 p.m. Friday at AS220's Black Box Theatre.

Reshad Kulenovic's "Blood & Moonlight," Selene Means' "The Time is Already," Ali Migliore's "After Her," Gene Pina's "Warrior," Denali Tiller's "Tre Maison Dasan," Tim Gray's "Survivors of Malmédy: December 1944," and lots more.

Marshall said he expects more than 200 filmmakers from around the world to attend the festival. Sometimes the subject of a film shows up, too. This year, child prodigy Maximilian Janisch, subject of the documentary "Maximilian," is expected to attend.

The 2018 festival is dedicated to Winifred "Winnie" Brownell, retired communications professor and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of

Rhode Island. The festival is establishing a scholarship in her honor.

"I was so moved... it really touched my heart," she said. "I get to be recognized for something I loved doing anyway. It was delightful."

Brownell is a longtime board member and supporter of the Rhode Island International Film Festival, and happened to be Marshall's speech professor when he was at URI in 1972.

"Early on, George asked me if I would be on the [festival] board, and I agreed right away," Brownell said in a phone interview. "I was excited about having this wonderful resource in Rhode Island."

Marshall said Brownell, 73, was instrumental in

allowing URI to host the KidsEye Summer Filmmaking Camp every July, which now attracts 65 young filmmakers from around the world. "George asked me if there was a possibility [to hold KidsEye at URI], and I said 'Absolutely,'" said Brownell.

Although not a filmmaker herself ("I recognized early on I was not the world's greatest cinematographer") she often used film in her classes, and was instrumental in creating a film media major at URI in about 2005. Brownell said URI had film courses for more than 30 years, but there wasn't enough qualified faculty to create a major. So Brownell began looking for faculty with film expertise, and eventually the major was established.

The festival is awarding its Gilbert Stuart Visionary Artist Lifetime Achievement Award to Joe Alves, a production designer known for his work on "Jaws," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and "Escape from New York." Alves will speak at the festival's annual Rhode Island Film Forum, which will be held on Thursday, Aug. 9, at 9 a.m. at the Biltmore Hotel ballroom in downtown Providence.

Another popular event is the Scriptbiz Screenplay Pitch Seminar, on Friday, Aug. 10, a session designed to help aspiring screenwriters create and sell their scripts. It's at the Rhode Island Foundation, 1 Union St., Providence, at 9 a.m.

Quirk sees continued growth for the RIIFF, with more diverse submissions, from more places, each year. He says the expansion of video and online streaming platforms is making audiences more literate about different kinds of film. "But I think there's still a need for a communal cinematic experience, and festivals help fill that void," he said. The Rhode Island International Film Festival kicks off on Tuesday, Aug. 7, with an opening-night gala and screening of 10 short films, ranging from 4 minutes to 23 minutes long, at the Providence Performing Arts Center. The event starts at 7 p.m.

For schedule and information, go to rifilmfest.org. Tickets for RIIFF screenings are \$10, \$15 for the opening night gala at PPAAC. To order call (401) 861-4445. Tickets will also be available at the door or online at rifilmfest.org.

Must-see movies

A half-dozen of the films on the festival's must-see list.

"The Etruscan Smile"

Directed by Mihal Brezis. British actor Brian Cox stars in the story of a man who leaves his isolated home in the Hebrides, an island chain off Scotland, to seek medical treatment in San Francisco.

8:30 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 9, Veterans Memorial Auditorium

"You Can Choose Your Family"

Directed by Miranda Bailey. A 17-year-old boy blackmails his father after discovering he has a secret family. Stars Jim Gaffigan and Anna Gunn, who played Skyler White on "Breaking Bad."

8:30 p.m. Friday, Aug. 10, Veterans Memorial Auditorium

"Maximilian"

Directed by Nicholas Greinacher. Documentary follows 13-year-old Swiss math prodigy Maximilian Janisch and his parents through their high-energy daily life, and reflects on what it means to be a child prodigy.

1 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 11, Woodman Center, Moses Brown School

"American Relapse"

Directed by Pat McGee and Adam Linkenhelt. Documentary about the heroin epidemic and underground rehabilitation industry that has sprung up in and around South Florida.

3 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 9, AS220 Black Box Theatre

"On Killer Robots"

Directed by Lorraine Nicholson. On July 7, 2016, the police in Dallas used robotic technology to confront and kill a suspect. The short film explores the morality behind this step toward automation.

9 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 9, Veterans Memorial Auditorium

"Hero"

Directed by Freddie Fox. An isolated young boy and a decaying film star are brought together by their shared love of the silver screen in a short film starring Charles Dance, James Norton and Jessica Brown Findlay, who played Lady Sybil Crawley on "Downton Abbey."

7 p.m. Friday, Aug. 10, RISD Museum's Metcalf Auditorium

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and forth between the three boys. It manages to capture some deeply emotional moments, such as the outwardly tough Tre, 13 when filming started, weeping in his father's arms during a visit at the Adult Correctional Institutions, in Cranston.

Or Maison's father admitting guilt to his son: "I don't want you to think I'm an innocent person in here."

Dasan's mom is released from prison during the course of the film, and the cameras are there when she gets a visit from her parole officer, and again when she tells Dasan she had been in prison: "It's like a grownup time-out," she said.

Tiller said getting those key moments was the result of spending hours and hours with the three boys and their families, much of it just hanging out.

"It all came down to my relationships with the kids and the families," Tiller said. "The movie became a collaboration between the filmmakers and the kids." (Originally, Tiller said, one of her subjects was a girl, but issues developed over



He visits his father at the Adult Correctional Institutions in Cranston in Denali Tiller's documentary "Tre Maison Dasan."

cooperation, and she was ultimately dropped from the film.)

Over the course of the documentary, the viewer gets to know the three boys, who have very different personalities. Tre seems the toughest, and on the most difficult path, particularly after his mother dies of a drug overdose.

Maison, 11 when filming began, is hyper-articulate,

hyper-aware, and says he's been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. Maison lives with his grandmother, since his mother moved to California and appears only as a fleeting presence in his life. He's a media-savvy kid — Tiller said Maison approached her when she was doing research at the ACTI to offer himself as a subject for the film.

Dasan, 6 when filming began, is sweet, sensitive and curious.

Tiller said the Department of Corrections was very willing to allow her into the visiting areas at first, although officials became a little concerned when she and her cameras kept returning for subsequent visits. Ultimately, though, the department allowed Tiller the access she needed, and it

is acknowledged in the film credits.

She said the movie was not intended to promote a specific prison reform, although Tiller hopes it inspires more humane visitation policies in general. She also would like to ease some of the stigma felt by children with incarcerated parents.

"At the end of the day, it's about the importance of parent-child relationships," she said.

Tiller said she's working very hard on the aftermath of "Tre Maison Dasan," and that means more than just promoting it on the film festival circuit. She's organizing a prison screening tour in California. (The film was already shown to a small audience at San Quentin in April. The San Quentin News, the prison newspaper, reported that some fathers in the audience wept.)

Ultimately, Tiller said she would like the film to be widely available to community groups, social workers, prisoners, and prison staff around the country.

"This is a long-term commitment to me, that the film doesn't go off to festivals and distribution and just disappear," Tiller said.