

# Reel Talk: This summer in film

The film festival: a veritable treasure-trove of aspiring talent looking to gain exposure in one of the hardest industries to crack.

Traditionally, festivals are designed to celebrate the voices of independent filmmakers, acting as the proverbial catapult to stardom. In reality, the major fests have often leaned towards celebrating the celebrity and, in many cases, left the door closed for truly independent creators. So, that leaves the local festivals to carry the burden of finding that next darling of the cinema firmament. And there are a few happening this summer right here in RI.

Even before the pandemic, the film fest was becoming a bit of a tough sell. With the pervasiveness of the medium, access to content is easier now more than ever. So, what's the draw of a live event? What can pry droves of starry-eyed souls off their couches to the local parks and auditoriums to view independent films with hardly any explosions? For a few local groups, the answer lies in creating meaningful programming that relates to their community.

The folks at **FLM FWD**, pronounced Film Forward, set out to create festivals that tackle themes that are, according to festival President **Lisa Lowenstein**, "pressing subjects of our day as well as transversal subjects of interest to many people in our community." These issues: empathy and environment, are, according to Lowenstein, "urgent." Hence the choice to brand the festivals in shorthand and, since their mission is focused heavily on community building, they've also removed the "I" from film, "because it is about a community-wide festival. Not an individual initiative."

The organizers have re-envisioned the area where Barrington's Town Hall and Library sit to form a temporary "village" that offers food, drink, live music and children's activities as well as an area of information booths for local organizations to go with the film screenings. This will mark the inaugural year for their **Environment Festival**, happening **June 24 - 26**, and the second for their **Empathy Festival**, **Aug 26 - 28**. The Empathy Festival will also feature a section devoted to the military, veterans and their families.

What's more? "This year we are adding an alcohol-free after-party dance event just after the film screenings, with a DJ behind town hall," said Lowenstein. "It will be held in the area we call 'The Boulevard' that is set up to resemble a European café-lined street with its mood lighting. It should be a blast!"

This is a free event. Follow FLM FWD on social media @flmfwdfestival.

The **Block Island Film Festival**, founded in 2018, is a non-profit event designed around the Block Island community. Like FLM FWD, BIFF's organizers are focused on important cultural and environmental issues, as well as opportunities for young filmmakers through their student filmmaker competition. Founder/ Executive Director **Cassius 'Cash' Shuman** is truly excited about this. "The students get to network and learn from other filmmakers at the film festival," said Shuman. "Education is a central and important part of our mission."

The fourth BIFF, **Sep 7 - 10**, features film screenings, spotlight programs, tribute and award ceremonies, question and answer forums and nightly social mixers; most take place in their new venue,

the Block Island Maritime Institute. Shuman said, "It is located right at the edge of the Great Salt Pond, so it should be a spectacular setting for the film festival. We have some terrific documentaries that we are screening, and spotlighting in partnership with BIMI and its mission."

Shuman is no stranger to Hollywood as, according to the BIFF website, he is an award-winning screenwriter, journalist and filmmaker, but BIFF organizers choose discovery over celebrity, focusing on the quality of the films rather than using energy to attract Hollywood A-listers. Even still, BIFF does attract some attention this year with the Terence Howard, Jeremy Pivens film *The Walk*.

The organizers are truly about making their community better and it shows. Any proceeds from the festival are donated to an Island nonprofit. Past beneficiaries include Friends of the Island Free Library and NAMI-Block Island, an advocate for those with mental health issues.

Finally, perhaps the biggest and certainly the longest-running film fest comes from Flickers. Their **Rhode Island International Film Festival™** (RIIFF) will take place at venues throughout RI, **Aug 8 - 14**, and features a hybrid event with a drive-in, outdoor and online screenings, filmmaking workshops, meet-and-greet industry events and seminars.

Says Festival Director **Shawn Quirk**, "We make it our goal to highlight films of all shapes and sizes with the goal of appealing to the largest range of audience members possible. Some will come to discover a collection of international shorts, others will come to support a local filmmaker or see an industry celebrity speak... RIIFF serves as an ideal meeting ground for both the film industry and audience members."

Quirk is excited to have visiting filmmakers share space again - "RIIFF brings the world to Rhode Island every year, and we're looking forward to celebrating Flickers' 40th anniversary with everyone in August."

RIIFF also prides itself on connecting future auteurs with established makers. In recent years they've showcased films directed by William Fichtner, Karen Allen, Brad Hall, Denis Villeneuve, Bob Balaban and others. Says Quirk, by "placing newly discovered filmmakers in the same context as some of Hollywood's leading talents, we can empower the next generation of filmmakers. Last year we had the pleasure of featuring the US premiere of *You're Dead Helen*. The film was later short-listed for the Oscars and purchased by TriStar Pictures." A feature version of that film is in the works with Sam Raimi as producer and the original director, Michiel Blanchart, at the helm.

Learn about this year's lineup - and the local film night on Wednesday, Aug 10 at Dusk (cosponsored by *Motif*, Dusk and R1 Entertainment Center) - at [film-festival.org](http://film-festival.org)