

Inaugural Dufferin Film Festival showcases local talent with 16 original films

Written By **Paula Brown**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Lights. Camera. Action!

Filmmakers, writers, and movie buffs flocked to the Opera House in Orangeville on Aug. 9 and Aug. 10 to celebrate the inaugural Dufferin Film Festival (DFF).

Created by Kelly McDowell and Nick Rose, the Dufferin Film Festival looks to create a platform where Canadian filmmakers and audiences can connect, inspire, and engage in meaningful conversations.

The idea for the local film festival was brainstormed nearly two years ago, while McDowell and Rose were leaving a film festival they'd attended.

"Being in the film industry for a few years now, I've met so many talented filmmakers that I think are under celebrated and my goal with this festival and bringing it to Dufferin was to honour them and make them feel like they are the stars of the show," explained McDowell, who serves as director of the festival. "Also, I think Dufferin County really embraces the arts. We do have a lot of filmmakers that come here to film, there's been Hollywood-level films and indie-level films."

The two-day film festival featured 16 original films that ranged in genres including comedy, dramas and documentaries.

The 16 films included: Heap, Beyond the Reins, For Roy, Handsy, Lakeweed, Cancelled, Red String of Fate, On the Windowsill, Kofi, Prism, Good Girl, Cinching Saddles, Charlie, Triage, The Two of Us, and Waterman's Ballad.

"They are edgy, powerful, moving, funny, quirky, breathtaking and they make you think and wonder; the power of cinema is displayed on every angle," said Tristain Barrocks, a film critic for the Dufferin Film Festival.

Barrocks, who is also a renowned Afro-Canadian film and commercial director from Toronto, noted the importance of recognizing the film industry in Dufferin County.

"What people don't know is that outside of the GTA, there's so many budding communities of artists that want to tell stories that are unique to the communities they come from. Having something like this in Dufferin County really gives us an opportunity to share some of the stories that are unique to us and gives us a chance to see the potential of how we can grow the art," said Barrocks. "I hope that everybody that participates gets a little sneak peak of the potential of what we can create and how we can develop things even more in Dufferin County."

Two of the films showcased at the festival screenings - Lakeweed and Handsy - were selected from a screenwriting competition hosted by the Dufferin Film Festival.

Writers of all ages and backgrounds in the Headwaters area were invited to showcase their storytelling abilities by crafting and submitting their original scripts to the Dufferin Film Festival Screenwriting Competition, which was created to foster local talent and creativity. Submissions were collected from October to December 2023 and judged by a panel for originality, creativity, character development, and dialogue.

As part of their prize, the winners of the screenwriting competition had the opportunity to see their scripts brought to life through final film production, which was sponsored by Rose Digital Media Group.

Danielle Hawkins, a high school student and novice screenwriter from Orangeville, was the winner of the screenwriting competition's youth category, with her script 'Lakewood'.

'Lakewood' follows a teenager named Charlie, who grows up near a lake, but the twist is that those who live near the lake can never swim in it unless it's 'happy'. Adapted from a short story into a script, 'Lakewood' touches on the themes of loneliness, friendship, and high school angst while tying in urban legend elements inspired by Hawkins' love for spooky stories.

'I'm really excited to see it on the big screen for other people to see it and to see how they react to it. I think [Lakewood] can be interpreted a lot of different ways and that's what I was hoping for. It might mean one thing to some people and another thing to other people,' said Hawkins.

James Gerus, an award-winning actor and writer, and Liam Gillespie, a high school student at Westside Secondary School and multi-media artist, took home the win in the screenwriting competition's adult category, for their co-created script 'Handy.'

A horror-inspired script, 'Handy' tells the story of a young boy who becomes trapped in a haunted house while looking for his dog. The boy begins making shadow puppets when suddenly other hands appear in the light that aren't his own.

'It's heartwarming and gratifying to see our small but mighty town rising up to do such cool and big things like this,' said Gerus.

'It's surreal in the best possible way because it's one of those things where you never imagined it could possibly happen to you. I feel astounded to get to celebrate the arts and our film with the community,' said Gillespie.

A significant aspect of the Dufferin Film Festival is its focus on celebrating films created by Canadian writers and filmmakers. The films featured in the festival were submitted from all across Ontario as well as British Columbia and Montreal.

'I think that we really need to celebrate our homegrown talent and really invest in them to have the future of our Canadian arts and culture fed,' said McDowell.

To learn more about the Dufferin Film Festival and to keep up with future events, visit www.dufferinfilmfest.com.