

Winners of Dufferin Film Festival Screenwriting Competition announced

Written By **Paula Brown**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Dufferin Film Festival has announced the winners of their inaugural Screenwriting Competition.

"We are thrilled to recognize the exceptional talent of Danielle Hawkins, James Gerus and Liam Gillespie, whose creativity and passion for storytelling impressed us," said Kelly McDowell, director of the festival. "Their winning screenplay exemplify the spirit of our festival, which aims to celebrate Canadian cinema and support emerging filmmakers."

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

Danielle Hawkins, a 17-year-old high school student and novice screenwriter from Orangeville, was the winner of the screenwriting competition's youth category, with her script "Lakeweed".

"Lakeweed" 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, "Lakeweed" touches on the themes of loneliness, friendship, and high school angst while tying in urban legend elements inspired by Hawkins' love for spooky stories.

"It's really cool and encouraging to have [Lakeweed] picked from a bunch of other scripts. I'm really excited to see it be turned into a short film," said Hawkins.

James Gerus and Liam Gillespie took home the win in the screenwriting competition's adult category, for their script "Handsy".

A horror-inspired script, "Handsy" 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.

Gerus is an award-winning actor and writer, who has performed in several shows at Theatre Orangeville including The Giant's Garden, Oliver Twist, and Alice in Wonderland. He recently wrote a screenplay for a short film that won Toronto's 48-Hour Film Project.

"I'm so happy. This win feels like a sign to keep going with my creative pursuits and that I'm doing the right thing creatively. It makes me want to explore this creative endeavor that is writing, even further," said Gerus.

Gillespie, a 17-year-old student at Westside Secondary School in Orangeville, explored a number of various creative pursuits including painting, sculpting, sketching, and photography. He aims to create narratives that resonate with audiences by blending his love for storytelling and photography.

"As a young person, to have this opportunity to be recognized for something created of your own is really an amazing feat," said Gillespie. "I hope people can see that there definitely is talent in Dufferin and opportunities to explore this art form within our town, especially for other young filmmakers and creatives."

The Dufferin Film Festival noted in the press release that the two adult winners, Gerus and Gillespie, attended one of the festival's screenwriting workshops hosted by Tristian Barrocks. The two were paired to work together, which is where they developed the

concept for what became their winning submission to the screenwriting competition.

?I am so excited to see the rising talent within our county. It gives me hope that my contributions in whatever small ways have helped to spark a wave of thriving, passionate storytellers. Let's celebrate these new voices,? said Barrocks.

As part of their prize, both winners will have the opportunity to see their scripts brought to life through final film production, which has been sponsored by Rose Digital Media Group.

The two selected scripts will be filed in the Dufferin County area in the coming months and will be premiered during the first annual Dufferin Film Festival in August of this year. The screenwriters will be invited to be involved in the production process and attend on-set at the filming.

For more information about the Dufferin Film Festival and upcoming events, visit www.dufferinfilmfest.com.