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Fort Myers Film Festival: Nazi war crimes, a funny road trip and more movies from the fest

Charles Runnells Fort Myers News-Press

Published 10:14 a.m. ET May 6, 2021

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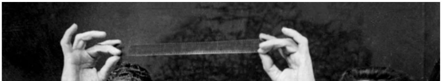
Four films from the Fort Myers Film Festival

A woman takes a comedic car ride with strangers. Abolitionists fight sex trafficking in Asia. Two men expose the horrors of the Holocaust in a landmark documentary.

Those are just some of the stories being shown on screen next week at the 11th annual Fort Myers Film Festival.



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Filmmakers Budd And Stuart Schulberg flank Hitler's personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, in a scene from "Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today." *Special To The News-Press*

The fest returns May 12-16 with more independent shorts, documentaries and feature films — both online and in-person. There will also be panel discussions, a red-carpet opening and more.

Here's a look at four films from this year's festival:

"Pooling to Paradise"

A scene from the comedy film "Pooling to Paradise" *Special To The News-Press*

Genre: Comedy

When it screens: 7 p.m. Wednesday, May 12. It's the opening-night film for the fest.

Running time: 80 minutes

Director: Roxy Shih

Cast: Taryn Manning, Jonathan Lipnicki, Dreama Walker

Synopsis: An angsty Los Angeles mom is heading to a blogger conference in Las Vegas. She accidentally chooses a carpool for her ride-share and finds herself on a road trip with strangers, including a struggling feminist, a heartbroken talent agent and their "hipster anarchist" driver.

Why the fest chose the film: "We wanted to start off the fest with something fun," says the fest's founder and director, Eric Raddatz. "It's kind of like 'Breakfast Club' meets 'Sideways' meets 'Wizard of Oz.'"

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About the film: Screenwriter Caytha Jentis has friends who are in their 30s and grappling with adulthood. She wanted to examine that in the movie.

“Were the life choices they've made thus far working out for them?” Jentis says. “In a very Jungian sense, it is about that scary time when one has to start to remove the mask of persona through vulnerability.”

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She describes “Pooling to Paradise” as a tribute to friends — and to friendships, in general.

“It's an ode to that special bond that we have with sometimes unexpected friends,” she says, “and how important friend love is, as well as how important it is to love ourselves for who we are and all its messiness, not who we want to be.”

Learn more:safierent.com/films/pooling-to-paradise

“i only miss you when i'm breathing”

Phil Vassar stars as Warren in a scene from the drama "i only miss you when i'm breathing." *Special To The News-Press*

Genre: Drama

When it screens: 11 a.m. Friday, May 14. It’s part of the fest’s “Thinkers Shorts Block 2.”

Running time: 17 minutes

Director and producer: Ashley Wren Collins

Cast: Lori Fischer, Phil Vassar and Chuck Long

Synopsis: A wife and husband are devastated after their son is killed in a school shooting. Their friends and neighbors are trying to get them to return to the human race. Inspired by the true story of Nashville country singer-songwriter Freddy Weller and his wife, Pippy (who also act in the film).

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Why the fest chose the film: “When I’m not sure what to watch at a festival, I usually pick a block of shorts,” Raddatz says. “Usually there is at least one that I like, and you really are getting more for your money.

“The four in the ‘Thinkers Shorts 2’ will get your brain matter flowing. Tackling subjects from gun violence, dementia, cults and bravery, you will be glad to have seen them.”

About the film: Director Ashley Wren Collins was inspired by the story of Pippy and Freddy Weller and the tragic death of their only son, Brandon. “The film was made to honor them and their journey,” she says. “I had also witnessed my sister-in-law endure the sudden death of her son (my nephew) and experienced firsthand how that has impacted her and the family.”

The real-life Brandon didn’t die in a shooting, Collins says, but the film’s creative team started thinking about how anesthetized our society has become to mass shootings and, specifically, school shootings.

“We found it hard to ignore the struggles of the survivors, the parents left to cope in the aftermath of school shootings … and thus, our film adaptation was born,” Collins says. “Furthermore, every culture handles death and grief differently; yet death and grief are not things we speak of openly in American culture. And that was something that interested me and I wanted to examine.”

Casting Phil Vassar: The country music star plays a lead role in the film. “Phil knows Pippy and Freddy Weller personally, and wanted to be a part of the movie,” Collins says. “He stars in it and helped produce it and compose the original music.”

Learn more: ionlymissyouwhenimbreathing.com

“The New Abolitionists”

The documentary “The New Abolitionists” follows people fighting sex trafficking in Southeast Asia. *Special To The News-Press*

Genre: Documentary

When it screens: 10 a.m. Sunday, May 16

Running time: 98 minutes

Director and producer: Christina Zorich

Synopsis: The director follows abolitionists as they fight human sex trafficking in Southeast Asia and rescue, rehabilitate or prosecute the people involved.

Why the fest chose the film: “Human trafficking is something we hear about and wish more could be done,” Raddatz says. “This crew set out to do something about it. ... This one is an eye-opener and one that hopefully keeps the discussion going and saves a life or two.”

About the film: At a 2012 Christmas party, director Christina Zorich met an anti-trafficker who was building homes for trafficked woman and children — a safe place where they could live and heal.

“The meeting ended up changing my life,” Zorich says. “I knew I had to be of service in some way to her. ... I kinda believe in divine assignments. This felt like one of mine.

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“Making the doc changed me for the better. I hope it has a positive impact on everyone who sees it.”

The issue: “Human sex trafficking is the number-two criminal industry — second only to drugs,” Zorich says. “Everyone needs to be educated and activated so we can all work to end it.

“Young lives are being destroyed. I believe it’s one of the most important social justice issues of our time.”

Learn more: thenewabolitionistsdoc.com

“The Lost Film of Nuremberg”

A scene from the Nuremberg trials featured in the documentary “The Lost Film of Nuremberg” *Special To The News-Press*

Genre: Documentary

When it screens: 4 p.m. Sunday, May 16. It’s the closing-night film for the fest.

Running time: 51 minutes

Director: Jean-Christophe Klotz

Synopsis: A film about the making of “Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today,” a 1948 documentary that collected filmed and recorded evidence of Nazi war crimes for the Nuremberg trials. Seventy-five years later, director Jean-Christophe Klotz looks at the filmmakers, Budd and Stuart Schulberg, as they hunted for evidence to present at the trial. The film also examines why the subsequent documentary was never shown in the United States.

Why the fest chose the film: “The Lost Film of Nuremberg” will be shown along with the restored “Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today.” The 1948 documentary will be shown at 2:30 p.m. on the same day.

“The Schulbergs were like superhero filmmakers back in the day, although many don't realize it,” Raddatz says. “They were tasked with finding, compiling and editing footage to be used in the Nuremberg trials.

"It is truly thanks to their bravery and filmmaking expertise that those guilty of war crimes from Nazi Germany were brought to justice.”

The film convinced many people that the Holocaust existed, Raddatz says. And it still has relevance today.

“There are still Holocaust deniers, for example,” he says. “And there are others who believe whatever they are told in 2021.”

About the film: After restoring and releasing the original documentary, co-producer Sandra Schulberg — Stuart Schulberg’s daughter — wanted to show audiences the story behind the film.

“I quickly learned that audiences were just as fascinated by the story of the making of ‘Nuremberg’ and its suppression as they were in the trial itself,” Schulberg says. “They were eager to know more about the hunt for the film evidence shown in the courtroom, the fact that much had been destroyed but some saved from destruction. And they loved hearing about the men behind the scenes — (famed movie director) John Ford and the Schulberg brothers and their colleagues.

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“The fact that I, as Stuart’s daughter, had unearthed the film and brought it out of the darkness gave them a feeling of personal connection to the chain of events — from the crimes of the Nazis, to the trial, to our ongoing quest to remember and to understand how the Holocaust could have happened.”

What makes the movie special: The film offers more than just the story itself — two men searching for footage in a war-scarred Europe to help convict Nazi leaders, says director Jean-Christophe Klotz. “The film offers a reflection about how history is made, how it’s constructed. Visual footage found by the Schulbergs has had a primary role in the way Nazi crimes are represented to this day.”

Learn more: tinyurl.com/ff5pa9vz

Connect with this reporter: Email crunnells@gannett.com or connect on social media at Charles Runnells (Facebook), @charlesrunnells (Twitter) and @crunnells1 (Instagram).

If you go

What: Fort Myers Film Festival

When: May 12-16

Where: Most films will be shown at the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, 2301

First St., downtown Fort Myers. Some screenings will happen at the Alliance for the Arts, Lab Theater, IMAG and Edison & Ford Winter Estates

Tickets: Tickets are $10 per film or block of films, or $20 for a day pass. Virtual access to some short films and Q&A's will be free.

The red-carpet opening-night starts at 7 p.m. Wednesday, May 12, and features the indie comedy "Pool-ing to Paradise." Tickets for that are $15 for movie-only, $100 for VIP.

Info: fortmyersfilmfestival.com

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