

Trans rights film FREE Cece! a timely and topical centrepiece for Vancouver Queer Film Festival



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CeCe McDonald, left, and Laverne Cox star in the Jac Gares documentary Free CeCe. Cox also co-produces the film that confronts the issue of violence against trans women of colour. *SUBMITTED PHOTO / PNG*

Vancouver Queer Film Festival

Aug. 10-20 | various venues

Tickets: \$12-\$165, at queerfilmfestival.ca (<http://queerfilmfestival.ca/tickets>)

A key for an excellent film festival is not just a roster of good films; you need movies that create great discussions.

One of those is this year's Vancouver Queer Film Festival's centrepiece gala offering [FREE CeCe](https://www.freececedocumentary.net/) (<https://www.freececedocumentary.net/>)!

One of 50-plus films at this year's festival, this documentary by American filmmaker Jac Gares tells the story of a trans woman of colour who stood up for herself. In 2011 in Minneapolis, CeCe McDonald and some friends were walking past a bar when McDonald became the victim of a racist, transphobic attack. She fought off the attacker, who later died. McDonald went to jail. And in case you are wondering that is a particularly tough place for a trans woman, as this film so deftly reminds viewers.

Promotional Trailer for FREE CeCe!



The film, which is co-produced by LGBTQ activist and actor Laverne Cox — who plays an incarcerated trans woman in the Netflix hit *Orange is the New Black* — is a heart-stopping look at discrimination and downright wrong headedness. Cox also appears on camera interviewing McDonald.



Vancouver Queer Film Festival co-artistic directors Amber Dawn, left, and Anoushka Ratnarajah. *SUBMITTED PHOTO / PNG*

“The centrepiece gala tends to be the gala that creates the most discussion,” says Amber Dawn, who has co-curated this year’s festival with Anoushka Ratnarajah.

“The opening is all about arriving. The closing is all about saying goodbye, but the centrepiece — we know our audience is primed to really sink into

themes and topics that are vital to us in our queer community. FREE CeCe!, we knew as soon as we saw the film we wanted to make it the centrepiece gala, and we wanted to invite Jac Gares.”

Gares will be on hand for the post film question and answer session.

“I’ve been moved to tears by seeing people’s reactions to this film and how powerfully it resonates with them,” said Gares from New York City recently.

Gares reports she is in final negotiations with an educational film distributor, but in the meantime it is festivals like VQFF that keep the movie — which debuted at the 2016 Los Angeles Film Festival — out there and reminding people of the struggle others face for the most basic of human rights.

The film began its life back in 2012 when Cox came to meet with Gares, who was then a producer on PBS series *In the Life*, about the gay and lesbian community. Cox wanted to discuss McDonald’s dire situation: a second-degree murder charge and being forced into a men’s prison and put in solitary for her “own protection.”

“She (Cox) had a very personal take on it, because she had been a victim of street harassment. It was very personal and very real to her,” said Gares. “CeCe’s story not only resonated, but she always felt that could have been me.”

In the Life was subsequently cancelled after 20 years, and Gares had time to do a full documentary. She and Cox joined forces and three years later *FREE CeCe!* was completed, right at the time LGBTQ rights became a top-lining issue.

“It was a huge cultural shift that my collaborator was a part of,” said Gares, adding that during filming Cox got called away to shoot the famous *Time* magazine cover with the headline “The transgender tipping point: America’s next civil rights frontier.”

Now here we are in 2017, and the U.S. President wants to kick trans people out of the military.

“I was feeling really hopeful for having this film out in the world. I felt it was important. At least we were starting the work,” said Gares. “And then the election happened. I feel the film is more important now than when we premiered it in June (2016) because of the shift we are having politically.”

When Gares travels with the film she is often accompanied by McDonald, but coming to Vancouver was a no-go because of McDonald's felony, and a gender marker issue with the state of Illinois means she can't get passport.

When McDonald speaks to crowds, Gares says she has one very clear message.

"CeCe has been basically telling people not to call the police when something arises," said Gares. "That particular point is really resonating with the country now."

With the rights of marginalized people still very much under attack, the art world plays an important role in educating, supporting and activating communities.

"That's something our festival often does really well: look at where we've been as a communities, and where we are, and puts out calls to action — things we should continue to think about, things we can be active in and support," said Dawn.

"Our festival is particularly good at programming post-film Q&A and panel discussions that will continue some these discussions and crystallize these calls to action."



A scene from *I Dream in Another Language*. *SUBMITTED PHOTO / PNG*

Opening the festival is the Sundance award winner *I Dream in Another Language* (*Sueno en Otro Idioma*), from filmmaking brothers Ernesto and

Carlos Contreras.

This film tells the story of a young linguist looking to preserve a language that survives in two men who have refused to speak to each other for 50 years. In a bid to bring them together the linguist discovers a secret past.

Sueño en Otro Idioma (I Dream in Another Language) - Clip Exclus...



The 11-day celebration offers a wide range of film choices from filmmakers around the world and close to home, with the latter highlighted in The Coast is Queer, an Aug. 18 event at the York Theatre showcasing short films from nine B.C. directors.

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When programming the festival, Dawn and Ratnarajah focused on the behind the camera aspect of the films they were looking at.

“Amber Dawn and I both came into this festival this year with the idea of looking at the ethics of filmmaking, and really seeing who was behind the camera as well as who was in front of it,” said Ratnarajah. “We often see stories made about us, but not by us. We really wanted to push the work of experiential filmmakers, particularly from our most marginalized queer communities.”

Experiences that need to be shared and discussed.

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