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VQFF: Pushing Queer Cinema in New Directions

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By Frederick Blichert



The Vancouver Queer Film Festival has long had the goal of telling the stories of the international queer community.

"In many ways there has been an utter lack of recorded history in queer lives, and film has really filled that gap," says Amber Dawn. Dawn, alongside Anoushka Ratnarajah, is in her first year as Artistic Director for the festival, and the two intend to make true on its promise to tell the unheard story.

Now in its 28th year, the festival has seen plenty of change—much of it in this decade—and queer representation has spiked in mainstream film and TV, but oftentimes with straight, cis filmmakers or performers. Recently, this has affected the role of the festival, whose job is no longer just to raise awareness of queer film, but to push the boundaries of what's considered acceptable in the mainstream.

"Festival audiences get to see something unique," says Ratnarajah. "Oftentimes they get to see something a little bit edgier." The festival understands this role as well. "I think many of our viewers love the daring and the innovation and the buttons that queer films and queer filmmakers push."

The duo pegs this on the gate-kept programming of the mainstream channels. Many films don't have the chance to make it to those audiences, and the VQFF offers them a home. But it's not just for the filmmakers—audiences also desperately want to see these lineups. Dawn is all too familiar with the scant and one-sided programming of the past: "When I started watching queer cinema, which was only about 15 years ago, going to a [queer] documentary film usually meant you were going to walk out of the theatre devastated. You can go see a queer documentary now and leave the theatre feeling uplifted, feeling empowered."

Ratnarajah agrees. "I think it's really important for queer folks to be able to go and see a romantic comedy, to go and see a murder-mystery, to go and see a musical." She regrets that there will be no musical hitting the screen this year, but it's not just about checking boxes—it's all about broadening the collective perspective. "There's lots of queer folks—most of us, hopefully—who are having fulfilling, joyful lives. And it's as important to see that as it is to see our struggles."

The lineup really is formidable, and while all the films look great, there are some must-see standouts. "The IndigiFemme program," says Dawn, "especially for those audience members who are really looking for an interdisciplinary—not just sit back and watch a film—experience. Fathers from Thailand is a love story, so sweet, and this is your one time to see it. This is not going to go on Netflix, it's not going to go on iTunes."

Ratnarajah chimes in with her own favourite: "B&B, which is having its Canadian premiere with us and will go on to a theatrical release. For those of us who enjoy Miss Marple or Poirot, it's going to be fun to see some queer people in that kind of film genre."

The breadth of the festival reflects its desire to showcase interdisciplinary work that brings depth through the conversations they ignite—one of the most important goals of an undertaking like this. "Film can be thought of as a finished project," says Ratnarajah, "but actually it's still very alive, whether it's the conversations that audiences have with each other afterwards, whether it's Q&As, whether it's in conversation with the folks who made the films, or whether it's other artists responding to it as a piece of art. There's still generative energy left in a film even if it's 'finished.'"

Depending on how you measure it is easy to see the VQFF's mission as "finished", but a closer look shows there is a long way to go. But with each showing of queer cinema, from underground documentaries to foreign features to mainstream Netflix series, we get closer to a united viewership. And that, really, isn't so far away.

The Vancouver Queer Film Festival kicks off on August 11. Check out the full festival lineup at <http://queerfilmfestival.ca/> (<http://queerfilmfestival.ca/>).

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