

FILM REVIEWS

Review: 'It Runs in the Family'

By [Patrick Mullen](#) • Published August 14th, 2016 [0 Comments](#)

Jay Cabalu with cousin Jazz

It Runs in the Family

(Canada, 46 min.)

Dir. Joella Cabalu

Joella Cabalu makes filmmaking a family affair in *It Runs in the Family*. Cabalu puts her own blood under the microscope after her brother, Jay, comes out. Having a gay brother isn't a big deal for some families, especially these days, so what strikes Cabalu isn't the orientation of her artistic brother, but the number of members within the clan who are queer. There are enough that Cabalu recalls someone telling her that the family is cursed and Cabalu tackles the chance to prove that the family is actually blessed.

The film is a follow-up to Joella's earlier look at Jay's coming out in the short *StandStill*. That doc portrayed the gap between their parents' strict Roman Catholic beliefs and Jay's sexuality. Joella, who is Filipina-Canadian, explains her motivation in voiceover as she and Jay embark on a trip to meet some of the half-dozen queer Cabalus and explore the global phenomenon of coming out and embracing one's sexuality.

The doc takes Cabalu and her brother from Vancouver to Manila with a pit stop in Oakland as they connect with some of their queer relatives. These visits let the family explore its lineage and legacy as the relatives share candid stories about the tenuous divide between queerness and Catholicism.

One cousin, Monica, and her wife in Oakland, California enjoy a family life of openness and acceptance. She lets her cousins into her home at a time when the family is celebrating the spirit of her late mother. Monica recalls intimate moments in which her parent

questioned her about her sexuality—not out of concern, but out of interest. This story emphasises that love between same-sex couples is the same as Monica draws inspiration from her parents’ relationship to strengthen her own marriage. *It Runs in the Family* looks at the bonds between parents and their children as different generations of the family support their kin and love them for who they are.

Talks with Cabalu’s cousin Jazz in Manila are especially revealing, as she uniquely embodies gender fluidity with contemporary candour. Jazz, born male, expresses gender as female and dresses as a woman, but doesn’t want to have the full gender reassignment surgery for religious reasons. However, Jazz also speaks openly about gender with younger cousins, nieces and nephews. When they ask if their uncle is a boy or a girl, Jazz tells them ‘A boy,’ but notes that clothing is part of one’s self-expression.

Unlike the Cabalus in Canada and California, however, Jazz doesn’t put much emphasis on coming out. Jazz says that unlike Westerners, Filipinos don’t treat this revelation as an “event.” It’s just an aspect of who one is.

Navigating doc portraits of one’s family can often be risky business that leads to awkward viewing, but Joella Cabalu capably uses her proximity to her subjects to mine a personal topic. Her film creates an open and inclusive dialogue between the director and her subjects. She is a subject herself, which draws out the connections families share around the world. Cabalu can’t confront the nature/nurture debate in a film of this scale, but she doesn’t have to. Instead, she uses three conversations to capture one particular family’s unique perspective on sexuality. As a result, the film is open and personable. It invites one to join the conversation.

It Runs in the Family screens at the [Vancouver Queer Film Festival](#) on August 16.



It Runs in the Family - Trailer - Courtesy of OUTtv Network

from [Joella Cabalu](#)

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[It Runs in the Family – Trailer – Courtesy of OUTtv Network](#) from [Joella Cabalu](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Pat Mullen is POV’s Associate Online Editor. He covers film at [Cinemablographer.com](#), contributes to [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#) and is a member of the Online Film Critics Society. You can reach him at [@cinemablogrpher](#)

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