

| arts feature



"Mom, all I'm asking you to do is see me, that's it," says Krystal LaBeija, a young trans woman of colour who has been kicked out her home for embracing her identity.

The emotional scene is just one of many raw moments captured in Elegance Bratton's *Pier Kids*—an uncut guerilla-style documentary that unearths Black queer resourcefulness and resilience at its core.

The film opens this year's Vancouver Queer Film Festival (VQFF), which kicks off Aug. 13 and runs until Aug. 23. Due to COVID-19, the 11-day festival is being held virtually in 2020, offering audiences the best in independent queer cinema from the comfort of their homes. In addition to *Pier Kids* (United States), the 32-annual event will feature more than 60 films from 10 countries and include artists from India, Philippines, the U.S., and

🕒 *Pier Kids* is an uncut guerilla-style documentary that unearths Black queer resourcefulness and resilience that opens this year's Vancouver Queer Film Festival.

🕒 *HIV: Healing Inner Voices* provides an intimate look and insight into Indigenous Peoples living with HIV/AIDS. Images submitted.

# OUT ON SCREEN AT HOME

View the best in independent  
LGBT2Q+ cinema online during the  
2020 Vancouver Queer Film Festival

by Emi Sasagawa

Canada. There will also be virtual visits from filmmakers, directors, and numerous local performing artists, in addition to online parties and post-screening Q&As.

"When this year began, before the pandemic changed our landscape in unimagined ways, I had already decided on our theme of Still Here," says Anoushka Ratnarajah, the festival's artistic director. "I could feel how deeply queer filmmakers were determined to depict our lives as worth living, worth fighting for, worth celebrating, worth mourning ... that we are worthy of seeing and being seen because we are necessary, beautiful, and complex. And that is what you will see at this year's VQFF."

*Pier Kids*, for example, follows the life of Krystal LaBeija—who took her name after iconic Black trans woman and drag queen Crystal LaBeija—and other queer and trans youth of colour at the Christopher Street Pier in New York City. *Pier Kids* mourns the reality of being displaced, while embracing a sense of home and belonging.

Bratton knows a thing or two about being uprooted; the director spent a decade living with homelessness after his mother made him leave the family home at age 16 for being gay. Bratton will be joining the festival at a virtual Q&A, along with *Pier Kids* producer Chester Algernal Gordon.

continued on page 26





📌 Festival program *Spirit, Heart, Land: two-spirit and Indigiqueer shorts* will feature films that celebrate queer Indigeneity and two spirit lives. Among them is *HIV: Healing Inner Voices*, a loving and uplifting testament to Indigenous resilience and healing that explores the effects of HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination within Indigenous communities through eight intimate interviews.

📌 The festival's *Centrepiece Gala film* is *Lingua Franca*, which follows an undocumented Filipina trans woman living in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach and working as a domestic caregiver for an elderly Russian-Jewish woman. Photos submitted.

from page 25

The festival's Centrepiece Gala film is *Lingua Franca*. It is directed by Isabel Sandoval, who also stars as the protagonist Olivia, an undocumented Filipina trans woman living in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach and working as a domestic caregiver for an elderly Russian-Jewish woman named Olga. When the American man Olivia is secretly paying for a green card marriage backs out, she becomes involved with Olga's grandson, a slaughterhouse worker who is unaware that she's transgender.

Beyond issues such as immigration and the experiences of transgender women of colour, communication and understanding are key themes in this subtle and understated work. And according to Sandoval, these important topics bleed out beyond the film.

"I don't spoon-feed a lot of information or messaging to my audiences," she says. "I want the viewers to meet the film halfway in terms of really engaging with the characters and their motivations—and their conflicts—and I hope [this approach] allows them to be more intellectually and emotionally engaged than they otherwise would have been."

The 2020 VQFF will also feature two special presentations of seminal queer women's history: *Ahead of the Curve*, a documentary about the history of *Curve Magazine*, the longest-running lesbian publication in history, and a retrospective of *Long time Comin'*, Dionne Brand's 1993 documentary that charts the work of two Black queer Canadian artists—folk/jazz singer-songwriter Faith Nolan and multimedia visual artist Grace Channer. This special presentation is curated by festival programming coordinator Nya Lewis and will be followed by a panel of local Black queer femme activists, scholars, and activists.

Festival favourite *The Coast is Queer* program will return with an evening dedicated to local talent showcasing short films that range in genre and style—from documentary to narrative,



fantasy to experimental, and romance.

And another program, *Spirit, Heart, Land: two-spirit and Indigiqueer shorts*, will feature films that illuminate and celebrate queer Indigeneity and two spirit lives while calling into account the ways in which colonial heteronormativity continue to impact queer Indigenous and two spirit representations and lived realities.

Among them is *HIV: Healing Inner Voices*, a loving and uplifting testament to Indigenous resilience and healing that explores the effects of HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination within Indigenous communities through eight intimate interviews.

"It was really important for us to have representation within Indigenous communities, because prior to colonization there was a place for everyone in Indigenous culture," says filmmaker Martin Morberg, who is resistant to the colonial title of director and who prefers to think of the project as a collective effort between the many characters in the film.

"This work is an intimate look and insight into our lives living with HIV. It's about the visibility of these communities.

It's about people who are in oppression or have been oppressed and marginalized.

"We're these resilient Indigenous Peoples who have grown in the face of adversity, who have overcome many barriers in our lives, and who have broken through. We've transformed the darkest parts of our lives. Now we're using those as a teaching tool to educate our community, and in doing so, awakening compassion, understanding and education," he adds.

COVID-19 or not, this year's VQFF shows that when it comes to personal empowerment, LGBT2Q+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two Spirit, Queer) communities persevere.

"Our survival is an inevitable miracle," says Ratnarajah. "Nothing can stop us from taking root. We will always reach for the light and sky." ❖

*The 32nd-annual Vancouver Queer Film Festival, presented by Out On Screen, runs Aug. 13-23. To view these films, you can purchase festival passes and tickets online at [www.queerfilmfestival.ca](http://www.queerfilmfestival.ca). Tickets range in price from \$10 to \$14 with a special COVID19 access pricing ranging from \$2-\$5.*