

Green days for the Film Festival

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Every year, film lovers in Trinidad and Tobago look forward to the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival. The annual smorgasbord which features some of the best films from Trinidad, the Caribbean and beyond runs from September 19 to 26. It's also a time when filmmakers get a chance to meet the public and talk about the issues facing the industry. The last two years



A scene from Moko Jumbie.

have been tough for everyone in the creative sector, but the overall excellence of T&T Film Festival shows that the filmmakers are not going to be deterred by the wider economic challenges. Festival founder and director Dr Bruce Paddington spoke with the T&T Guardian and voiced optimism about the local film industry and said the industry in the Caribbean is “ready to take off.”

1 What's new or different for the ttf in 2017?

Paddington: This year we are particularly pleased to have added MovieTowne San Fernando to our screening venues, to be working in close partnership with a number of agencies to help strengthen the capacity and skills of filmmakers, and to put the spotlight on issues of gender and social justice. Through this support we have a strong industry programme with a focus on screenwriting and script development, co-productions—particularly with our Latin American neighbours, and an examination of the representation of women and girls in film and thus the wider society.

We are excited once again to be opening the Festival with a local feature—Green Days by the River—which was one of the 15 films in development that participated in our Caribbean Film Mart in 2015. It is such a joy to see the film come to fruition. It will no doubt play to sold-out audiences across the country. It is, of course, just one of the 120+ films we will be screening at five venues across T&T.

Our line-up of Caribbean films is especially strong and includes Feature T&T—a day of films from T&T—in recognition of National Patriotism Month. As always the films are both thought-provoking and entertaining—and many are supported by Q&As with the film directors.

We also hope film lovers and our friends from the South will come out and join us for our pre-festival lime at 519 Trinidad in the C3 Centre, on September 15 from 6pm. It will be an opportunity to meet filmmakers, get a copy of the Festival guide (brochure), and generally be part of the buzz and excitement that surrounds the Festival.

2 Has the enthusiasm from filmmakers been the same? Are you seeing the same number of submissions or more?

Despite funding challenges, filmmakers still seem to be passionate about their craft and we've seen more local submissions this year—five features and 34 short films with varied subject matter. There are some great contributions, including among the short films: Maya Cozier's Short Drop, Oliver Milne's Salty Dog, Kevin Bhall's lovely animation Temple by the Sea, Sean Hodgkinson's comedy The Weekend and Shivanee Loach's Finding Dowry. Short films are a testing ground for filmmakers. It's where they hone their craft and show their filmmaking potential and ability, and are therefore a marker for improving standards and quality. And this year, some of the best of these shorts, leave us feeling confident for the future.

3 How has it been running the ttff in such a depressed economy? Do you have the same level of support from sponsors and demand from the public?

It has definitely been challenging securing the same level of sponsorship in this economic environment, as everyone is facing the same reality and tightening their belt. It's just meant that we've had to be more creative and inventive in seeking to run the Festival at the same level and standard. Flow and BPTT- two of our long standing sponsors have continued to do so at the same levels as before and have been very supportive.

Agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank, UN Women, the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, Amnesty International and the British Council are also on board supporting our work to open dialogue around issues of gender inequality and human rights; and on regional cooperation and support for filmmakers. While some other partners and supporters may not have been able to provide funding at the same level, they've sought to make up the short fall through in-kind support. The demand from the public continues to be great and encouraging. A recent screening of Selwyn Jacob's Ninth Floor at UWI, which was sponsored by Flow, saw standing room only and people having to be turned away due to safety concerns. The demand for local films and local content is definitely growing.

4 We've seen films that were featured in recent editions of the ttff going on to get acclaim in other markets - Sally's Way, The Cutlass, Bazodee, Play the Devil and God Love the Fighter come to mind - what are the big local features this year and which ones are you most excited about?

Michael Mooleedhar's Green Days by the River and Vashti Anderson's Moko Jumbie - are well crafted and beautifully shot and are stories about T&T told through a local voice. Moko Jumbie is already doing well internationally and we hope Green Days can get similar international exposure. They are releasing in cinemas nationwide immediately after the Festival and we are expecting great things for them.

5 As you look forward to 2018 and the future, what are your biggest concerns for the tfff and for the local film industry?

Our biggest concern for everyone involved in the film sector - indeed the arts as a whole - is that the value of the creative sector - both to the economy and the social fabric of the country is not compromised further during these difficult economic times, due to a lack of understanding of their transformative power. The Arts as a vehicle for helping tackle poverty, crime, gender-based violence, rehabilitation of prisoners and reduction in recidivism - to name just a few social issues - should not be overlooked or underestimated. Then there is the whole issue of the strength of the orange economy - the employment and income generated by the creative sector, that is not officially collated and recognised.

That said, we are encouraged by the fact that more films are being made, and by the conversations around local content, and the growing interest from audiences, TV stations and cinemas. The tfff is looking forward to continuing our work to support the industry through building an audience for Caribbean cinema at home and abroad, and partnering with other agencies to support filmmaker training and development. Caribbean cinema is poised and ready to take off. We have to work together as a nation to ensure that it happens.
