

# FY 2021-2022 Virginia Film Festival Annual Report

## 2021 Film Festival by the Numbers

The 34th annual Virginia Film Festival presented **over 80 films and events** at 3 in-person theatres and a drive-in format over 5 days from October 27-31, 2021, with **more than 8,000 tracked attendances, and over 270 vehicles attending five drive-in screenings** held at Morven Farm in Albemarle County, and ticket sales revenue of **\$104,091**. 51% of films were directed by women and/or BIPOC individuals, and 56% of Festival Guests and on-stage participants were also BIPOC individuals and/or women.

## Notable Films

- The 2021 Festival kicked off with two sold-out Opening Night screenings of ***The French Dispatch*** at The Paramount Theater and the Drive-In at Morven Farm. The latest film from Wes Anderson stars Frances McDormand, Owen Wilson, Bill Murray, and Jeffrey Wright as journalists in the fictional French outpost of an American magazine. The film was introduced by Festival Director Jody Kielbasa and UVA President **Jim Ryan**.
- The Centerpiece Film was ***The Power of the Dog***, based on the novel of the same name, directed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Jane Campion, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, and introduced by **Jody Kielbasa**. Set in 1925 Montana, the film is an exploration of the confines of masculinity against the backdrop of the American West.
- The Festival closed with ***C'mon, C'mon***, starring Joaquin Phoenix who plays a burnt out radio journalist. He is left to take care of his precocious young nephew Jesse, and they embark on a cross-country road trip as Johnny interviews children from around the country, asking them what they think the future will hold. The film was introduced by Festival Director Jody Kielbasa and UVA Provost **Liz Magill**. *C'mon C'mon* was preceded by the Apple+ short film ***Blush***.
- The Festival's gala screening of ***The Harder They Fall*** featuring Jonathan Majors, Idris Elba, Regina King, and Jonathan Majors portraying real historical cowboys in this action-packed revisionist Western was preceded by a pre-recorded discussion with director **Jeymes Samuel**.
- The Festival presented Spotlight Screenings of highly anticipated films: Maggie Gyllenhaal's directorial debut, ***The Lost Daughter***, based on the novel by Elena Ferrante, this film is an exploration of the difficulties of motherhood and the dangers of leaving one's past unsettled; from acclaimed filmmaker Edgar Wright; ***Last Night in Soho***, a psychological thriller following a young fashion designer who is mysteriously able to transport between the 1960s and the modern day; Norway's submission to the Academy Awards, ***The Worst Person in the World***, which yielded a Best Actress Award to Renate Reinsve at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, is a modern and unique look at relationships and how they shape us; and 2021 winner of the Toronto International Film Festival Audience Award, ***Spencer***, stars Kristen Stewart as Princess Diana as she reexamines her marriage with Prince Charles and wrestles with the decision to leave the royal family for good over one royal holiday weekend and ***Belfast***, from acclaimed filmmaker Kenneth Branagh, this semi-autobiographical black and white film set in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s is an ode to the bonds of family.

- VAFF **Audience Award Winners** included *The Machinery of Dreams*, *Stay Prayed Up*, *Calf Rope*, and *When We Were Bullies*. The 2021 **Programmers Award Winners** included *The Speech*, *Socks on Fire*, *The Acolyte*, and *In The Shadow of the Pines*. The **Reel South SHORT Award** winner was *There Was Nobody Here We Knew*.

## Featured Guests

- Award-winning actress **Martha Plimpton** visited the Festival for a tribute event highlighting her remarkable career and for a screening of her latest film *Mass*, which follows a private talk between two sets of parents as they attempt to move forward, years after an unspeakable tragedy tore their lives apart. A discussion with Plimpton was moderated by **Brian Truitt** (USA Today).
- The Festival was proud to present award-winning writer and actor **Jeremy O. Harris** with the **2021 American Perspectives Award for Outstanding Achievement in Cinema**. Perhaps best known for his record-breaking and Tony-nominated work *Slave Play*, Harris co-wrote A24's 2021 film *Zola*, based on the greatest true story ever tweeted. A conversation with Harris was moderated by VAFF Program Manager **Chandler Ferrebee**. Following the conversation, Harris visited with Kevin Everson's Cinematography class to discuss the film more with students and to answer their questions about the film industry in general.
- Prolific writer, director, actor, and showrunner **Danny Strong** joined the Festival for a screening of the new Hulu limited series *Dopesick*, for which he was a writer and executive producer. Based on the real account by Virginia journalist **Beth Macy**, *Dopesick* examines how one company triggered the worst drug epidemic in American History. The limited series takes viewers to the epicenter of America's struggle with opioid addiction in an intense ride to take down the corporate forces behind this national crisis. A conversation with Strong and Macy was moderated by **Ted Johnson (Deadline)**.
- Director of 2020 VAFF screening *Boys State* **Jesse Moss** returned to the Festival to promote his newest documentary *Mayor Pete*, which follows South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg and his husband, Chasten, just days before becoming the first openly gay presidential candidate. This documentary is a fascinating look inside one of the most intense campaign cycles of our time, and a powerful story of perseverance and politics. A discussion with Moss was moderated by Ted Johnson (*Deadline*).
- Overall, the Festival produced numerous discussions that engaged with over 75 artists, community experts, and UVA faculty to participate together in introducing and discussing our films.

## Programming Team

This year, the VAFF full-time programming staff, including Festival Director **Jody Kielbasa** and Program Manager **Chandler Ferrebee**, were supported by a team of guest programmers including Fralin Museum Curator of Indigenous Art of the Americas, **Dr. Adriana Greci Green**; UVA assistant professor of New Media and Indigenous artist and filmmaker **Federico Cuatlacuatl**; filmmaker and programmer **Joe Fab**; UVA Lecturer at the School of Continuing and Professional Studies **Hyeyon Moon**; UVA assistant professor of Cinema and international film scholar and curator **Samhita Sunya**; and JxJ Washington Jewish Film Festival director **Ilya Tovbis**.

## **University Partnerships**

The 2021 Festival engaged with **32 UVA faculty and staff** and **31 UVA alumni** to participate in introductions and discussions in our film program, and as volunteers. In addition, we worked directly with **83 UVA students** as arts administration interns, VAFF volunteer ambassadors, and Festival events volunteers. And finally, we collaborated with **16 Departments and Programs** to create, host, and promote our programming to the UVA Community.

The **Indigeneity in Mexico** series, curated by UVA Assistant Professor of Studio Art **Federico Cuatlaacatl** and supported by **UVA Arts Council**, included one feature film preceded by a short, examining the rich culture, struggles, and lives of the people of Mexico. The intimate short documentary *La Utopia de la Mariposa (The Butterfly's Utopia)* intertwines art and injustice, followed by the feature film *Nudo Mixteco*, which compounds upon those themes in the connecting stories of three women dealing with love, abuse, and a struggle for empowerment in a village that continues to push them down.

Curated by UVA Assistant Professor of Cinema **Samhita Sunya** and supported by the **UVA Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures**, the **UVA Department of Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures**, and **UVA Arts Council**, the **Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian** film sidebar presented two films that take place across the Middle East and South Asia, as well as a showcase of short films, each screening covering a broad range of themes and genres. Produced during the 1970s and 80s, the *Sudanese Film Group Shorts* highlights the work of a group of filmmakers who banded together to make a series of compelling short films shedding light on the civil war in Sudan. The features included a suspenseful and sinister investigation in Tunisia's first horror film, *Dachra*, and the heartwarming feature *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*, following a young teacher in the Himalayas teaching at one of the most remote schools in the world.

The Festival partnered with the **UVA Korea Society** and **UVA Arts Council** to present four films from South Korea, curated by Lecturer at the School of Continuing and Professional Studies **Hyeyon Moon**: *Aloners*, a compelling exploration of a woman's loneliness after her neighbor dies, speaking to our own isolation and struggle for human connection during the pandemic; the raw and real *Fighter*, exploring the physical and mental battles of a North Korean refugee who discovers she has some boxing talent while working as a cleaner in a boxing gym; a tale of inequity in the workplace highlighted by *I Don't Fire Myself*, the story of a young woman refusing to give in to her company's blatant attempts to have her quit her job; and *In Front of Your Face*, an introspective film from Hong Sang-soo, one of cinema's most fascinating auteurs, about an actress re-adjusting to life in Korea after moving back in with her sister and her encounter with a director offering her a new role. The series was also supported by the Korean Cultural Center, Washington, D.C.

In partnership with **UVA Arts Council**, the **Jewish and Israeli film series** showcased three films centered on finding human connection in the midst of cultural and personal conflict and separation. *The Raft* explores the way personal relationships are formed and tested as four teens construct a raft to sail from Israel to Cyprus for the world cup. *Neighbours* and *Persian Lessons* both deal with deconstructing prejudice, as the former deals with a six-year-old boy weighing the values of his anti-Semitic Arab school against the loving Jewish family who lives next door, and the latter follows a young Belgian Jew pretending to be Persian and his unconventional connection with the German chef of a concentration camp kitchen.

Also presented with **UVA Arts Council**, the Fralin Art Museum's Curator of Indigenous Art of the Americas **Dr. Adriana Greci Green** curated five films for the **Indigenous Americans in Film** series, showcasing the work of Indigenous American filmmakers and providing a platform for discussion around the complex issues facing this population today. Director Tracy Deer's debut, *Beans*, recounts the 1990 Oka Crisis through a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story of a young Mohawk girl named Beans. *Monkey Beach* takes a fantastical, supernatural view of the Pacific Northwest as a woman searches for her lost brother at sea. Two documentaries answer questions of identity and activism, as *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock* showcases the leadership of four women during the 2015 Standing Rock protests, and *Love and Fury* dives into Native American artists and their fight for recognition in a post-colonial world. A live virtual screening of *Tekahionwake, Pauline*, presented by the **Fralin Museum of Art**, looking at the life of the powerful British/Mohawk wordsmith E. Pauline Johnson's work to condemn colonization and its effects, followed by a virtual discussion with the filmmaker. The series was supported by the Virginia Commission for the Arts.

In partnership with **The Miller Center**, the festival presented *9/11: Inside the President's War Room*, exploring the hours immediately after the attacks on 9/11 from the angle of President George W. Bush and those around him, featuring never-before-seen footage and interviews with the former President and members of the Bush Administration. Director and CEO of the Miller Center **William Antholis** moderated a discussion with Former White House Chief of Staff **Andy Card** and Former Deputy Chief of Staff **Karl Rove** (via live video conference) as well as former White House Correspondent for ABC News **Ann Compton**.

Numerous films were supported by the **UVA Division for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**, including *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock*, *How the Monuments Came Down*, *Mayor Pete*, *Mending Walls*, *Stay Prayed Up*, *Truth Tellers*, and *Try Harder!*

In a partnership with UVA's stunning **Morven Farm** in southeastern Albemarle county, the VAFF brought audiences together for safe and socially-distanced drive-in movies each night of the five day Festival. The films included Opening Night Film, *The French Dispatch*, and Halloween classics *Dracula*, *Scream*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and *The Addams Family*. The Drive-In Movie Series was presented by **Morven Farm** and **UVA Arts: Office of the Provost and Vice Provost for the Arts**.

## **Community Partnerships**

For the second time, the VAFF partnered with **Reel South**, to present the Reel South SHORT Award. Reel South is a cooperative documentary series between the South's PBS member stations, including Virginia's VPM. The award honors outstanding achievement in Southern documentary short-form at film festivals across the South. This year's Reel South SHORT Award winner at the Virginia Film Festival was *There Was Nobody Here We Knew*, directed by Khaula Malik, which follows a middle-aged Pakistani couple contemplating alien life and searching for answers during lockdown after they spot what they believe to be a UFO outside their window.

The Festival partnered with **VPM - Virginia's Home for Public Media** to present two documentaries, *How the Monuments Came Down*, a documentary a deep dive into the history of Richmond, Virginia through the lens of the confederate monuments that served as a constant reminder of the white supremacy and Black resistance that shaped the city. The screening at Culbreth Theater included an introduction by President and CEO of VPM Jayme Swain, and a

conversation with filmmakers Hannah Ayers and Lance Warren and story advisor and descendant Joseph Rogers, moderated by Dr. Andrea Douglas, Executive Director of the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center.

The second screening was of *Mending Walls*, a documentary following the wake of the social unrest following George Floyd's death. Artist Hamilton Glass brings together 30 artists from different walks of life to collaborate, connect, and heal through art and storytelling. Based in Richmond, Virginia, the Mending Walls project pairs up artists of different backgrounds to complete a public art project that is meant to incite discussion not only amongst viewers but also between the artists themselves. The screening at Culbreth Theater included an introduction by President and CEO of VPM Jayme Swain, and a conversation with producer Pam Hervey, co-producer Hamilton Glass, and subject Matt Lively, moderated by Marc Cheatham, founder of The Cheats Movement.

### **Accessibility & Outreach**

VAFF's commitment to accessibility included seven screenings and discussions presented with open captions and ASL interpretation for the deaf and hard of hearing community. These films included *The Lost Daughter*; *How the Monuments Came Down* including discussion with filmmakers Hannah Ayers and Lance Warren and story advisor and descendant Joseph Rogers, moderated by Dr. Andrea Douglas (Jefferson School African American Heritage Center); *The Harder They Fall*; *Passing* with introduction by Sandhya Shukla (UVA); *The Power of the Dog* with introduction by Jody Kielbasa (VAFF); *Truth Tellers* with discussion with filmmaker Richard Kane and subjects Robert Shetterly moderated by Andrea Douglas; and *Zola* including discussion with and presentation of the American Perspectives Award for Outstanding Achievement in Cinema to writer Jeremy O. Harris moderated by Chandler Ferrebee (VAFF).

The Festival created a land acknowledgement to run prior to all Festival screenings. The slide publicly acknowledged the Monacan Nation, the traditional owners of the land and waters upon where the Festival takes place, as well as their elders, past, present, and emerging. We worked with guidance from guest curator Adriana Greci Green as well as staff at the UVA Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection to draft and vet the language. The slide featured a photograph taken by Monacan photographer Carrie Pruitt, behind the text.

The Festival also partnered with **Fralin Museum of Art** for a free virtual screening of *Tekahionwake, Pauline*, looking at the life of the powerful British/Mohawk wordsmith E. Pauline Johnson's work to condemn colonization and its effects, including a virtual discussion with the filmmaker.

The VAFF presented a **Critical Eye Panel** of nationally recognized journalists and film critics for a discussion on the current state of film criticism. Panelists included leading critics Carlos Aguilar (LA Film Critics Association), Robert Daniels (812filmreviews.com), Roxana Hadadi (pajiba.com), and Brain Truitt (USA Today), moderated by Jack Hamilton (UVA).

Playwright and screenwriter Jeremy O. Harris visited UVA Professor and internationally renowned filmmaker Kevin Everson's filmmaking class to talk about his process and career.

The VAFF offered UVA full-time enrolled students access to the Festival's 2021 Festival through UVA Art\$. The Festival issued 2,880 free Art\$ tickets to UVA Students.