

FY 2023-2024 Virginia Film Festival Annual Report

The 36th annual Virginia Film Festival (VAFF) presented over 140 films, panels, and events in 6 venues over 5 days from October 25-29, with 19,698 tracked attendances, and ticket sales revenue of \$195,358. 49% of films were directed by women and 56% by BIPOC individuals. Festival Guests and on-stage participants were 43% women and 44% BIPOC individuals.

Notable Programs and Guests

- The 36th annual Virginia Film Festival kicked off with a sold-out screening of ***Maestro*** at The Paramount Theater. Written, produced, and directed by Bradley Cooper, the film portrays legendary composer Leonard Bernstein's (Cooper) love story with Felicia Montealegre (Carey Mulligan). The film was introduced by Festival Director and UVA Vice-Provost for the Arts Jody Kielbasa and UVA President **Jim Ryan**. Following the screening, Kielbasa presented the **Craft Award** to renowned makeup effects artist **Kazu Hiro** for his outstanding behind-the-scenes film craft, including his transformation of Bradley Cooper into Leonard Bernstein. Best known for portraying Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill in *Darkest Hour*, Hiro has received two Academy Awards for his work on *Darkest Hour* and *Bombshell*. After the screening, he discussed his artistic process on ***Maestro*** with *The Hollywood Reporter's* Awards Editor Tyler Coates.
- The Festival welcomed director and Emmy Award-winning writer **Cord Jefferson** with his directorial debut feature, ***American Fiction***. Winner of the People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, the adaptation of Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* delivers a hilarious, challenging, and biting satire. VAFF advisory board member Jocelyn Diaz presented Jefferson with the **Breakthrough Director Award**, celebrating a director who has achieved excellence with their directorial debut. Following the screening, *NPR's* Bilal Qureshi led Jefferson in a discussion about his work on the film.
- The Festival spotlighted writer, director, and producer **Ava DuVernay** with her film ***Origin*** for its United States Premiere. *NPR's* Bilal Qureshi presented DuVernay with the **Visionary Award**, which honors an artist whose filmography has changed the course of modern cinema. Inspired by Isabel Wilkerson's bestselling novel *Caste: Origins of Our Discontents*, the film follows the life and work of the journalist as she investigates the genesis of injustice. *The Washington Post's* chief film critic Ann Hornaday led a conversation with DuVernay and producer Paul Giamatti after the screening.
- VAFF's Centerpiece screening of Alexander Payne's ***The Holdovers*** included a conversation with Academy Award-winning filmmaker **Mark Johnson** (*Rain Man*, *Breaking Bad*) who also serves as VAFF's Advisory Board Chair. Johnson produced the film, which stars Paul Giamatti as a curmudgeonly New England prep schoolteacher who forms a bond with students who remain at school over winter break.

- The Festival presented the **Changemaker Award** to renowned poet and writer **Nikki Giovanni**. Giovanni is the recipient of numerous awards, including Virginia's Governor's Award for the Arts in 2000. *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project* received the U.S. Grand Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival and stars a Virginian and American icon. A.D. Carson, Professor of Hip-Hop and the Global South at the University of Virginia, presented Giovanni with the Changemaker Award to recognize her force for positive change, both within the entertainment industry and beyond. Randall Stith, Former Director of Visual & Broadcast Communications at Virginia Tech, led a conversation with Nikki Giovanni following the screening.
- Local filmmaker Ricardo Preve received the **Governor Gerald L. Baliles Founder's Award** at a screening of his film *Sometime, Somewhere*, which explored unique journeys and shared struggles of Latino immigrants in Charlottesville. Named for the Founder of the Virginia Film Festival, and 65th Governor of Virginia, the award recognizes excellence in Virginia filmmaking and honors an exceptional filmmaker who has roots in Virginia or prominently spotlights Commonwealth locales, history, and culture in their work.
- The 2023 Festival also featured additional Gala screenings of major upcoming films: the Ari Aster-produced *Dream Scenario*, starring Nicolas Cage, and Todd Haynes' *May December*, starring Julianne Moore and Natalie Portman.
- The Festival closed with *American Symphony*, directed by Emmy Award-winning documentarian **Matthew Heineman** and starring Grammy and Academy Award-winning composer and recording artist **Jon Batiste**. Festival Director Jody Kielbasa introduced the film and presented Heineman with the **Directorial Achievement Award**, honoring the achievement of an exceptionally talented, creative, and compelling director. Heineman has documented the U.S. health care industry, the Mexican drug trade, and activists in Syria responding to ISIS. For his 2015 *Cartel Land*, he won 3 Emmy Awards and was nominated for an Academy Award, and he has received numerous other accolades. Following the screening, Tyler Coates, *The Hollywood Reporter's* Awards Editor, moderated a discussion with Heineman and Batiste, and Batiste extended an electrifying performance.
- VAFF **Audience Award Winners** included *Origin* (Narrative Feature) and *American Symphony* (Documentary Feature), as well as the short films *Dreams of Home* (Narrative) and *Black Godfather of Scuba* (Documentary). The 2023 **Programmers' Award Winners** were *American Fiction* (Narrative Feature) and *No Ordinary Campaign* (Documentary Feature), and the short films *For the Moon* (Narrative) and *1-15-41* (Documentary).

Additional Industry Guests

- The VAFF welcomed writer-directors **Riley Keough** and **Gina Gammell** with their film *War Pony*, winner of the Caméra D'or at Cannes Film Festival. The film follows two young Oglala Lakota men as they come of age on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

Keough and Gammell met with leaders of the Monacan Nation as well as engaged in a conversation with filmmaker and UVA Professor Kevin Everson and his UVA Cinematography students.

- Academy Award-winning producer **Bruce Cohen** discussed *Rustin* with Kevin C. Gaines, the Julian Bond Professor of Civil Rights and Social Justice at the University of Virginia. The film follows architect of the 1963 March on Washington, Bayard Rustin, one of America's great activists, organizers, and towering personas.
- Known for her work on *Crip Camp*, Emmy Award-winning director **Nicole Newnham** received the **Chronicler Award** for her excellence, creative vision, and significant achievement in non-fiction filmmaking. Following a screening of *The Disappearance of Shere Hite*, she spoke with *The New York Times* contributor Beatrice Loayza about her work on the film.
- EVP of Production at HBO and MAX, **Janet Graham Borba** led the panel, *The Last of Us* – Production Masterclass. Also a VAFF Board Member, Borba touched on preparing, shooting, and finishing the hit show, with clips and behind-the-scenes context.
- Engineer, educator, and former NASA astronaut **Leland Melvin** executive produced *The Space Race*, a compelling exploration of the untold experiences of pioneering Black pilots, scientists, and engineers who joined NASA to serve their nation in the realm of space despite enduring ongoing inequality on Earth.

Community Partnerships

The **Virginia Film Office** supported 5 Virginia-based filmmaker presentations (*Breakwater, For the Taking, I Could Have Been a Tree, Sometime, Somewhere*, and *Tapawingo*), and the 2023 Virginia Screenwriting Competition, the winners of which were honored during VAFF's centerpiece Gala event, *The Holdovers*.

The **Southern Environmental Law Center** supported VAFF's Nature & Environment film series which featured 5 films that explored our collective relationship to the natural world: *Evil Does Not Exist, Impossible Town, King Coal, Sometime, Somewhere*, and *We Start with the Things We Find*.

The VAFF partnered with **United Way of Greater Charlottesville** on the Black Excellence Series, which included 11 films: *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt, American Fiction, American Symphony, Black Barbie: A Documentary, Breaking the News, OnBoard, Origin, Rustin, The Space Race, Stamped from the Beginning*, and *This World is Not My Own*.

Out and About Virginia supported *Rustin*, **Charlottesville Chapter of The Links, Incorporated** supported *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*, **Minority Business Alliance of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce** supported *OnBoard*, **International Rescue Committee** and **Welcoming Charlottesville** supported *Sometime, Somewhere*, and **Hummingbird**

Fund + Haney Conference for Compassionate Care at the End of Life supported *No Ordinary Campaign*.

The **Korean Cultural Center of Washington DC** supported the full Korean Cinema Series (see above).

Accessibility & Outreach

VAFF's commitment to accessibility included two screenings presented with open captions and ASL interpretation of introductions and discussion for the deaf and hard of hearing community. These films included *All of Us Strangers* and *20 Days in Mariupol*.

The Festival continued displaying a Land Acknowledgement slide before all screenings. This slide, which was made last year, publicly acknowledges 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. Additionally, the Festival presented a short film about the Monacan nation prior to several key screenings, including the Opening Night Film.

The VAFF also hosted a series of **free panels at the CODE building**, aimed at encouraging local artists, providing industry advice, and generally bringing guests into direct conversation with industry guests. These insightful panels included: ***The Last of Us—Production Masterclass***, which used the award-winning show as a case study in physical production and featured EVP of Production at HBO and MAX Janet Graham Borba; ***Beyond the Headlines: The WGA*** panel, featuring WGA and VAFF Board members and writer-directors Jai Jamison and Steven J. Kung and moderated by Ted Johnson (*Deadline*); and the ***Making It—Film Industry Career panel***, wherein VAFF Board member Scot Safon led a conversation on paths to success in the film industry with writer Nayna Agrawal, producer Julia Pontecorvo, and production development specialist Rebe Malaret.

UVA Professor and internationally renowned filmmaker Kevin Everson's filmmaking class was also given the opportunity to speak personally with industry guests Cord Jefferson, Riley Keough and Gina Gammell. In these two private conversations, students were able to ask guests questions about their careers, gain insight into their creative processes, and learn more about the film industry as a whole.

The VAFF offered UVA full-time enrolled students access to the Festival's 2023 Festival through UVA Arts\$. The Festival issued 2,480 free Arts\$ tickets to UVA Students.

University Partnerships

The 2023 Festival engaged with **38 UVA faculty and staff** and **14 UVA alumni** to participate in introductions and discussions around our film program. In addition, we worked directly with **35 UVA students** as arts administration interns, VAFF volunteer ambassadors, and Festival events volunteers. And finally, we collaborated with **14 Departments and Programs** to create, host, and

promote our programming to the UVA Community.

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 the **Virginia Commission for the Arts**, the **Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian** film sidebar presented five films: *About Dry Grasses*, *Animalia*, *Four Daughters*, *The Persian Version*, and *Terrestrial Verses*.

The Festival partnered with the **UVA Korea Society** and **Korean Cultural Institute – Washington, DC** to present three films from South Korea, curated by Lecturer at the School of Continuing and Professional Studies **Hyeyon Moon**: *Sleep*, *Cobweb*, and *From You*.

The Fralin Art Museum's Curator of Indigenous Art of the Americas **Dr. Adriana Greci Green** curated six films for the **Indigenous Cinema of the Americas** series, showcasing the work of Indigenous American filmmakers and providing a platform for discussion about (and by) this community: *Breaking the News*, *Café Daughter*, *Fancy Dance*, *Frybread Face and Me*, and *War Pony*.

The Festival partnered with the **UVA Department of Art** to present A Suite of Short Films by Kevin Jerome Everson.

Additional UVA Partnerships included:

In partnership with **UVA Global Affairs**, the Festival presented *20 Days in Mariupol*.

In partnership with **UVA Gamma Knife**, the Festival presented *May December*.

In partnership with **UVA McIntire School of Commerce**, the Festival presented *OnBoard*.

In partnership with **UVA Alumni Association**, the festival presented *Going Varsity in Mariachi*.

In partnership with the **Division for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**, the Festival presented 2 screenings: *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project* and *Rustin*.

In partnership with **UVA Health**, the Festival presented *No Ordinary Campaign* and *Impossible Town*.

In partnership with the **UVA Korea Society**, the Festival presented 3 screenings: *Cobweb*, *From You*, and *Sleep*.