

A Reel Reputation

The Cleveland International Film Festival caters to film lovers

by [Jeff Niesel](#)

Last year, the Cleveland International Film Festival received more than 1,200 submissions before settling on the 143 features and 170 shorts that screened at the festival. This year, more than 1,700 films were submitted, and festival organizers had to whittle things down to the 153 features and 152 shorts that will be shown during a 10-day period at Tower City Cinemas.

"Most of the features I choose from other film festivals," explains artistic director Bill Guentzler. "Most of our increase was with the shorts this year, since we were named one of the nominating festivals for the Oscars. The winners of our live-action and animated short awards can be eligible for the Oscars, so that's why we got far more entries. I didn't watch many of the shorts because we have a committee that picks them. But everyone was saying it was a lot harder to choose the best shorts."

The festival begins on March 18 with a gala event that will include a screening of writer-director Jac Schaeffer's debut, the romantic comedy *Timer*. Both Schaeffer and producer Jennifer Glynn will attend the 7 p.m. screening and reception at Tower City Cinemas.

"It's a great film," says Guentzler. "It's a romantic comedy with a little sci-fi thrown in. I loved it, and I'm glad it's by a woman director, especially since [*The Hurt Locker's*] Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win Best Director at the Oscars this year. It's a sweet movie that lends itself to a party and gets people ready to watch movies for 10 days straight."

This year, the festival will feature films from more than 84 countries, a festival record. Guentzler recommends *Bomber* (March 19, 20 and 21), a film from the U.K. that he describes as "a nice road movie." He says the Romanian film *The Happiest Girl in the World* (March 23, 25 and 28), a story about a woman who wins a car but then struggles to deal with the strings attached to it, is one of his favorites from Eastern Europe. "It's just a simple story," he says. "And it's interesting to see 20 years after communism what capitalism really means to Eastern Europe." And he describes the Canadian film *Father and Guns* (March 23, 26 and 27) as a "fun comedy that's a crime drama at the same time."

This year's festival also includes returning programs like the student FilmSlam, the Audience Choice Award for Best Film and the "Someone to Watch" series on rising filmmakers. This year's "Someone to Watch" series spotlights Sweden's Jesper Ganslandt and Brooklyn-based filmmaker Emily Abt, both of whom head up their own production companies. The Director's Spotlight Series returns this year with a tribute to Czech director Jan Hřebejk, a film-festival favorite who will be in attendance. The festival will screen several of his films, including *Cosy Dens* (March 19 and 20), *Divided We Fall* (March 21), *Up and Down* (March 19), *Beauty in Trouble* (March 20 and 21) and *Shameless* (March 20 and 21).

One new addition: "Lights! Camera! Action Steps!" is a program that encourages activism. "We're giving the audience information about what they can do with the information that they learned about in the film," says Guentzler. "We're giving them ideas about what they can do in the Cleveland community to make things better."

Other highlights include art-house films that will likely receive theatrical release later this year, including *Harvest*, a film about a college student who returns home to reconnect with his dying grandfather (March 19 and 20) and the Richard E. Grant (*Withnail and I*, *Gosford Park*) romantic comedy *Love Hurts* (March 19, 20 and 21).

The "Local Heroes" section features more than a dozen films with Ohio connections and includes films like the surfing documentary *Out of Place* (March 19, 21 and 22) and the Oscar-nominated *The Last Truck: The Closing of a GM Plant* (March 26 and 28), Julie Reichert's film about a Southern Ohio auto factory.

"This is one of the best local heroes sections since I've been here, and this is my 12th festival," says Guentzler. "We've reached out a little bit, and we're considering all of Ohio in our local heroes section."

Guentzler says he's happy the Cleveland International Film Festival has gotten a reputation for catering more to film fans than industry types.

"We're finally getting to the point that people love coming to our festival because it's not like every other one," he says. "We have a huge audience of film lovers. And once people find out about us, they tend to come back."

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