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ourfeatures

Deaf Culture Thrives at TIDFAF

By: Tanya Miller, One80 Intern

No phones. No alarm clocks. No eavesdropping.

For those accustomed to tuning into news reports, harmonizing musical imperfections, or even appreciating the echoes of nature, enduring a life without sound would be devastating. Yet hundreds of individuals – either born with damage to nerves within the inner ear or having suffered a disease decaying cells essential for hearing – continue to adapt to their unique communication needs everyday.

The Ontario Cultural Society for the Deaf bridged the gap between deaf and hearing communities and exposed their timeless creations by recently hosting the first annual Toronto International Deaf Film and Arts Festival (TIDFAF), appropriate with the Hearing Awareness Month of May. Brilliant film productions were exhibited at the Isabel Bader Theatre, and inspiring works of visual art showcased at the Deaf Culture Centre in the Distillery District celebrated the heritage and culture of the deaf.

While many similar festivals have been staged throughout Europe, Asia, and the United States in the past, Canada welcomed its first opportunity to expose the voice behind the deaf arts scene.

“The goals of TIDFAF are to promote the works of the deaf, hard of hearing, and deafened filmmakers’ achievements and showcase their films to mainstream audiences,” explained festival director Catherine MacKinnon. “It’s been too long since we have been in ‘hiding’, but now we are here and loud!”

As the popularity of Deaf Film and Arts Festivals surged across the globe, participating directors, producers, filmmakers, actors, and artists realized the incoming support was merely the beginning. Agencies and advocates demonstrated their enthusiasm to assist deaf artists by endorsing the selected exhibits, documentaries, panel discussions, and due awards. Their collaboration allowed TIDFAF to screen the inspiring feature film *It’s All Gone Pete Tong* and encouraged Dr. Jane Norman, professor at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC and the keynote speaker at TIDFAF’s opening night gala, to climb aboard.

MacKinnon, a Ryerson University graduate and the first Deaf film graduate in Canada from a film studies program, expressed her gratitude for ‘Deaf

Cinema’, which “seems to be a ‘new’ territory, with the usage of sign language in films, voiceovers, and subtitles.” The technology, geared toward assisting deaf films, enhanced the quality of the real-life story behind It’s All Gone Pete Tong (slang for ‘it’s all gone wrong’). It helped portray the obstacles protagonist DJ Frankie Wilde encountered and the lifestyle he adopted after losing his hearing and immense fortune.

Dr. Norman is familiar with the struggles Wilde experienced. She has dedicated herself to overcoming barriers for the deaf, and is acclaimed for developing many programs worthy of Emmy Awards. The ‘Deaf Film Groupie’ illustrated the evolution of deaf films over the decades, beginning with its origination in 1910 and ending with the importance of visual mediums. “As long as we have film, it is perfect,” she said. “Films preserve our language.”

Over 60 films were submitted to TIDFAF’s programming jury. As part of the final selections, TIDFAF was proud to showcase a student film, The Seeing Hand by Sheila Nykwist, a graduate from the School of Journalism at Ryerson. The film documents the challenges of Elio Riggillo as he confronts the Ontario Government for more funding for people with acquired deaf/blindness.

“The film is meant to show how despite being deaf and legally blind, Elio does not complain,” said Nykwist. “He maintains a positive outlook on life, chases a dream, is open to love, and believes that he can make a difference. How often do you meet such people – who not only make you thankful for your own life, but who spark a little fire within yourself or your community?”

A fellow activist, TIDFAF board member Vanessa Vaughan, has dedicated 30 years to the film industry. She displayed paintings at the Deaf Culture Centre. “Hopefully the success of TIDFAF will create more funding and access to programs for deaf film and art, as well as generate more interest for many more of our stories waiting to be told,” said Vaughan, also an actress, artist, and filmmaker.

The interaction provisions available for the temporarily and permanently deaf have grown, with more focus on education, the practice of sign language, and special features in film. Practical tools and methods of communication are constantly improving with its awareness, and there are unlimited opportunities for students to practice their interpreting skills.

TIDFAF proved that if a force as threatening as a hearing impediment is incapable of denying the deaf community the satisfaction of striving for excellence, not much can hinder them from aspiring to fulfill their dreams.

- Tanya Miller is completing her internship with One80 and will be attending Journalism School at Carleton University next year. We wish her all the best!

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