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Report from the 2019 Slamdance Film Festival

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Report from the 2019 Slamdance Film Festival

Abstract

This is the Introduction to the 2019 Slamdance Film Festival.

Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).



REPORT FROM THE 2019 SLAMDANCE FILM FESTIVAL



The Treasure Mountain Inn is the iconic home of the Slamdance Film Festival. It is located at the high end of Main Street's commercial district in Park City, Utah.

This is the 25th Anniversary of the Slamdance Film Festival. It began in the mid-nineties and was first called "Slamdance: Anarchy in Utah" because it was an alternative to the well-established Sundance Film Festival. But Slamdance has now established itself as a film festival in its own right, one that gives new and unknown filmmakers an opportunity to show their films to a public audience. Slamdance is held in late January each year in the ski resort of Park City, Utah.

Slamdance faithfully follows its motto, "By Filmmakers, For Filmmakers" as films are selected for inclusion in the Festival program by a committee of filmmakers: no single programmer can reject a film for inclusion. For all of its original focus on anarchy, the Festival now includes many excellent mainstream movies in a variety of categories. The Festival also has gained an

international reputation. This year's Festival included approximately 100 submissions from foreign countries. Films from Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Germany, India, Italy, Kenya, Poland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom are included in this year's Festival.

Since Slamdance is approaching its 25th Anniversary, I thought it would be interesting to see what insiders thought about the Festival. So, I asked Peter Baxter, President and co-founder, to give our readers some insight into the Festival.



Bill Blizek and Peter Baxter. Photo by Monica Blizek.

Blizek: What was the Festival like in the very early years?

Baxter: In the first years we were mostly just determined to give new, unknown filmmakers an opportunity to show their films to a public audience. We could never have imagined in the early years that Slamdance would grow to its present size and still be going strong 25 years later.

Blizek: I've read that there were just 48 submissions to the first Slamdance. How has that number grown over the years?

Baxter: I know that in 2018 we had a total of roughly 10,000 submissions. This includes feature length narrative films, feature length documentary films, both narrative and documentary short films, films from the US and from other countries, and screen plays for our screen play competition. This year we had 199 programmers and 50 people reading screenplays for the screenplay competition.

Blizek: What are the two most interesting changes that have taken place over the years?

Baxter: Obviously one big change is the size of the Festival. Not only has the number of submissions grown and the number of people working on the Festival increased, but we have added the screenwriting competition, Slamdance Studios, Slamdance educational programming, and Slamdance on the Road.

A second big change is that we are no longer limited to simply showing movies. We try to help filmmakers establish careers through our mentoring and networking programs.

Blizek: What features of the original Festival have you kept because they seem to work?

Baxter: We have tried very hard to stay true to our original motto, "By Filmmakers, For Filmmakers." Our programmers are filmmakers who often have already shown their films at Slamdance. Many of our filmmakers return to Slamdance to participate in the selection of movies for the next Festival. They are giving back to the Festival that gave them a start as filmmakers.

Blizek: What are the Slamdance Studios?

Baxter: The Slamdance Studios are groups of filmmakers who work with new filmmakers in order to find them commercial outlets for their films and to encourage new filmmakers to make a career of filmmaking.

Blizek: Slamdance on the Road takes selected movies from the Festival to places around the country, indeed, around the world, to countries that would not otherwise be able to see those movies. Where has Slamdance gone "On the Road?"

Baxter: Slamdance on the Road finds outlets throughout the United States. It also has found outlets in China, Poland, Germany, Africa and other places around the world. Sometimes communities invite us to show one or two feature length films, for example, or they may ask for a collection of

short films. On some occasions, filmmakers are asked to show their films and they make arrangements for us to bring Slamdance films to communities outside of the Festival.

Blizek: One of the things you are rightly proud of is the number of distinguished filmmakers who have participated in the Festival. Who are some of your famous alumni?

Baxter: Our alumni include Steven Soderbergh (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Out of Sight*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Traffic*, and *Oceans 11, 12, and 13*); the Russo Brothers, Anthony and Joseph (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Avengers: Endgame*); Christopher Nolan (*The Dark Knight*, *Dunkirk*, *Memento*, *Inception*, *Interstellar*); Oren Peli (*Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious*, *Area 51*, *Chernobyl Diaries*); Sean Baker (*The Florida Project*, *Tangerine*, *Starlet*, *Prince of Broadway*); Gina Prince-Blytheswood (*Love & Basketball*, *The Secret Lives of Bees*, *Beyond the Lights*, *Before I Fall*, *Shots Fired*); Ari Aster (*Hereditary*, *Munchausen*, *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons*); Lena Dunham (*Tiny Furniture*, *Girls*), among others.



Steven Soderbergh was presented with the Founder's Award by Peter Baxter. Photo by Lauren Desberg.

As always we want to thank the Slamdance Press Office for all of the help they give us during and even before the Festival, thereby making it possible for us to see more movies than we would ever be able to see on our own. This year the Press Office included Sylvia Desrochers, Tiffany Wagner, Liz Ogilvie and Karen Tran of Big Time PR. Thanks to the four of you for all of your help. It was a pleasure working with you.

Below, from left: Sylvia Desrochers, Liz Ogilvie





From left: Tiffany Wagner and Karen Tran.