

Movie festival gives voice, vision to Black LGBTQ filmmakers

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In the second year since its inception, the Black Alphabet Film Festival (BAFF) has found a way to creatively tell the stories of the marginalized. This year's festival, which kicked off its event reception at Circuit Nightclub, showcased a myriad of films to festivalgoers—all with the purpose of empowering Black LGBTQ storytellers.

Additional photos at the

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Founded in 2013, BAFF was borne of the need to organize a festival that recognizes Black LGBTQ films that have been overlooked by the larger national and international venues. In one year, BAFF grew from one sponsor to eight. The festival's success is due largely to the community partnerships with organizations like Affinity Community Services, No Wire Hangers Productions and Center on Halsted.

BAFF took place over two nights: July 2 at The DuSable Museum and July 3 at the Center on Halsted.

Sponsors for the festival ranged from UIC Gender and Sexuality Center to AIDS Foundation of Chicago. On hand to represent the foundation was Anthony Galloway, who spoke about the contributions of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago to Patrik-Ian Polk's film *Blackbird*.

"We are excited to support this film and BAFF," said Galloway. "We look forward to seeing what kinds of conversations [the film] will start surrounding youth being separated from their parents due to coming out as LGBT."

The film short, *Hero Mars*, explored the complexities of gender non-conformity. Skyler Cooper, recently touted on a list as one of the top 100 LGBTQ Black women people should know, created a film that directly challenges the hetero-normative nature of our society. Judging by the audience's response, her debut as writer/director/actor in the film was a success.

Also shown was *The Way to Kevin*, a documentary by Erin Davis and Nathan Edmondson. The film covers a year and a half in the life of Philadelphia native Kevin Mines. In the documentary, Mines—known for his roles as a porn star—makes the transition from his former life to running his own production company.

The feature for the opening night was Polk's much-anticipated film, *Blackbird*, based on a novel of the same title by Larry Duplechan. The film follows 17-year-old Randy Rousseau, played by newcomer Julian Walker, as he comes to terms with his sexuality in a conservative town in the heart of the Bible Belt. Big names in the film include Mo'Nique, Isaiah Washington and Terrell Tillford.

A post-screening Q&A, led by Sampson McCormick, was a lively discussion surrounding the making of the film and the conditions within the lives of the characters. Polk answered questions about his relatable experiences and his process for making the film.

Polk, who is well-known for films such as *The Skinny* and TV projects like *Noah's Arc*, said he was a fan of the book the first time he read it. "I knew I wanted to bring it to the big screen," he said. "It's an important story for us to see."

Polk also had words of advice for youth who are interested in breaking into the filmmaking industry. "Education is always key," said Polk. "It's an art form like any other, so you really have to learn the craft of filmmaking."

As for the organization itself, "[BAFF] is by the community, for the community," said Brennikki Floyd, co-manager of marketing and fundraising. When Floyd and her colleagues started BAFF, their tagline became "Telling Our Stories Beyond the Rainbow."

This year's festival also included McCormick's concert film *That Bitch Better Be Funny*.

Otis Richardson, of *Lavenderpop Greeting Cards*, was on hand for the festivities as well. He expressed his excitement to see *Blackbird*. "I am always looking for positive representations from our culture and experiences," said Richardson.

BAFF is always on the lookout for sponsors and volunteers. David Dodd, director of community engagement, expressed his appreciation for those in attendance and gave advice for those interested next year. For more info, visit WWW.BLACKALPHABET.ORG or email INFO@BLACKALPHABET.ORG.