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International Film Festival shines spotlight on Miami

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The boldface names have shown up in droves: Gregory Peck, Sofia Loren, Candice Bergen, Michael Caine. And so have Miamians — about 70,000 each year.

Few events in the Magic City have commanded the sort of spotlight as the Miami International Film Festival. The grand dame of festivals that are increasingly putting Miami on the international map turns 30 this year. And there will be more stars and film industry luminaries on the red carpet Friday night when the festival begins its 10-day run at the Gusman Center.

Getting to this point wasn't easy, as its founder Nat Chediak would tell you. But Miami has much to be proud of in what this festival has achieved over three decades.

If all the festival did was bring industry giants to town for a couple weeks in February, that in itself would be an achievement worthy of praise. But it has done more than that. Some have credited it with helping to raise Miami's profile internationally as a place to watch cutting-edge films — as well as produce them. Witness the succession of Bollywood films being shot in the city. Or the increasing number of independent films and made-for-TV movies and series. The cast from *Burn Notice*, for example, have become familiar neighbors in Coconut Grove.

There have also been a long list of festivals or film series that MIFF has spawned promoting Jewish life, women, blacks, Latinos and gays, among others. Also witness the vibrant film programs at many of the area's major universities and colleges, including Florida International University, the University of Miami and Miami-Dade College.

The film industry is a multibillion-dollar business in the Sunshine State, with South Florida accounting for much of it.

Graham Winick, former president of Film Florida, which assists production companies, is correct when he says that a major film festival is not solely responsible for growing Miami's prominence in the film industry. But it sure helps. What also helps is forging a closer relationship between festivals like MIFF and the production industry.

It's also important to innovate, something the festival's director, Jaie Laplante, has been busy doing. This year, two dozen young film critics will be reviewing the films and handing out their own award. And three chefs have been invited from Brazil to prepare a brunch on Sunday before the North American premier of *Why Did You Leave?* That's how you keep the festival fresh in a city "where everybody loves the cinema," Mr. Laplante said.

Still, MIFF has undergone many growing pains since Mr. Chediak founded it in 1983. He then ran it for 18 years before parting ways over “creative differences.” Today, Miami-Dade College has taken the event to new heights.

The festival was the first of the big international events that have since come to define the city, such as the South Beach Wine & Food Festival and Art Basel. Some companies “used to lure talent to the city by bringing them into town at the time of the festival so they would think of Miami as a cosmopolitan city,” Mr. Chediak said.

It also brought the city together. Mr. Chediak recalls watching hundreds of local Chinese residents leaving the Gusman after *Raise the Red Lantern*. “I had never seen that many Chinese together in Miami before,” he said.

Thirty years on, the festival continues to bring people together. The preeminent showcase of Ibero-American films in the country, it has screened films from more than 60 countries in the past five years alone.

In a city as diverse as Miami, that’s a fitting legacy for the next 30 years of lights, camera, action!

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