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Miami Dade College's stewardship of Miami International Film Festival is starting to pay off for movie buffs, students

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MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

HOT TICKET: Andros Perugorria, Andrea Duro, Alexis Diaz de Villegas and Jorge Molina prowl the streets of Havana looking for zombies to kill in 'Juan of the Dead,' which has sold out the 1,700-Gusman.

With the 29th Miami International Film Festival unspooling Friday, fans are scrambling to conquer as many of the festival's more than 100 movies from 35 countries as they can between now and March 11.

But behind the scenes, away from the films and parties and on-screen depictions of Cuban zombies and gringo mariachis, parent Miami-Dade College is pushing to become an integral part of a festival until now known primarily for glamour and popcorn and fun. Nine years into the college's stewardship of the festival, its

stated goal of turning the event into a star-studded educational tool is hitting its stride.

This year's festival offers the usual mix of world premieres (including the Spanish drama *The Sex of the Angels* and the pilot episode of the upcoming shot-in-Miami TV series *Magic City*), hot tickets (*Juan of the Dead*, a horror comedy about a Cuban zombie epidemic that has sold out the 1,700-seat Gusman Center for the Performing Arts and the Ethan Hawke drama *The Woman in the Fifth*), Oscar nominees (*Monsieur Lazhar*, from Canada) and new films by directors familiar to South Florida (David Trueba's *Madrid 1987*, Sebastian Cordero's *Pescador* and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *The Kid with a Bike*).

And away from the red carpet and the ticket rush lines, education is happening, too:

- Architecture students from MDC and the University of Miami will gather at the Freedom Tower on Sunday afternoon for a panel lecture in conjunction with the festival entry *Unfinished Spaces*, a documentary about the construction of Cuba's National Art Schools.
- Two Miami-born childhood friends — Phil Lord, co-director of the upcoming *21 Jump Street*, and David Fenster, who specializes in experimental movies — will present a "Master Class" seminar free to MDC students at the Miami Beach Cinematheque on Friday.

- The winners of the 2012 CinemaSlam, the festival's competition for film students, will be announced and screened Sunday at the Tower. Out of a total of 34 entries, 11 were directed by MDC students.
- Eight hundred students from Miami-Dade public schools will storm the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts Thursday morning for a free screening of *In the Name of the Girl*, a comedy from Ecuador making its North American premiere at the festival.

"When [MDC President] Dr. Eduardo Padrón took over the festival in 2004, his first goal was to pair our students with the community's love of cinema and the arts," said Lula Rodriguez, a Clinton administration veteran who is MDC's vice president of advancement and external affairs. "While the guiding principle is still the love of movies, the festival is now also a teaching tool."

Rodriguez says one of the reasons the college and the festival are in such sync this year is that Executive Director Jaie Laplante really "gets" the school's mission. Laplante, who previously worked with the Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival and the South Beach Wine and Food Festival, is in his second year heading the event. He has been a much smoother fit than previous festival chiefs such as Tatiana Finzi and Patrick de Bokay, whose vision didn't always blend with the desires of the college. "A lot of these events happen off the radar, outside the attention of the press," Laplante said. "But we start thinking of ways to involve students with the festival the moment the program is finalized."

Before the film roster had been announced, MDC faculty were sent titles and descriptions, then offered first dibs on blocks of free tickets for their students before the public could buy them.

"We do that early on to ensure all the students can get in to see whichever movie they want," Laplante said. "One of the French teachers is bringing his class to see a French movie, because an extension of learning the language is also learning the culture."

Miami's is the only U.S. film festival of its size housed by an educational institution, and the internal and external views of the festival couldn't be more different. If MDC sees the festival, in part, as a way to enhance the experience of students, industry executives and distributors are looking forward to a vibrant place to find and screen movies, enjoy warm weather and take in the kind of South Florida experience that has helped Art Basel turn into a major contemporary art fair and the Wine and Food Festival into a must-visit for star chefs.

Ed Arentz, managing director of Music Box Films, is bringing two movies to this year's event: *Monsieur Lazhar* and *The Deep Blue Sea*, the first film in 11 years by the esteemed British director Terrence Davies.

"The directors of both our films are coming this year," said Arentz, who previously screened *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *Potiche* at the festival. "Filmmakers love to go there, so it's easy to get them to attend. And South Florida is a good market for us, so the festival is a way for us to introduce our movies to that audience."

In 2011, Music Box screened the French comedy *The Names of Love* at the festival. When the film opened later that summer at the Coral Gables Art Cinema, it grossed nearly

\$12,000 in two weeks — one of the best showings in the country outside of New York and Los Angeles.

Aside from a business opportunity, Miami in March is also an offer a lot of people can't refuse.

Mitch Glazer, the Miami native who created Magic City, says he was aware of the festival but hadn't attended until this year.

"Andy Garcia, who is a friend, and Bruce Weber, who is a dear friend, both showed movies there and had a great time," said Glazer, who will attend Sunday's 5 p.m. screening of Magic City at the Colony Theatre. "I don't know how Art Basel became what it is, but you could look at that as a template: It's a real marketplace, but it's also a destination, too. And Mitchell Kaplan made the Book Fair epic by force of personality and passion. There's no reason the film festival can't be the third jewel in that crown."

Festival organizers agree.

"Next year is the 30th anniversary," Rodriguez said. "This year's festival is over on the 11th, and Jaie and I are meeting on the 12th to start planning the next one.

"You can expect big things."

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