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Roxbury film fest expands reach

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This year's event brings milestones and 50-plus films

By Loren King, Globe Correspondent | July 25, 2010

Instead of bemoaning the under-representation of people of color both onscreen and behind the camera, the Roxbury Film Festival 12 years ago took matters into its own hands and established an event where such visibility is not a novelty but the norm. The festival has grown steadily. In 1999, when it was called the Dudley Film Festival, it showcased 14 films; this year's event boasts more than 50. It continues to expand in scope and ambition as it balances community outreach with an increasing global vision.

This year's event runs for four days beginning Thursday, with a lineup that includes dramas, documentaries, comedies, shorts, and youth-produced works, screened at various venues in Boston. The festival also serves as a forum for sharing information about creativity and craft, including events such as this year's Conversation With Peter Allen, co-writer of the crime thriller "Takers," set for theatrical release in late August. Allen will discuss the business of screenwriting and the process of getting a film produced Saturday morning at the Wentworth Institute of Technology Auditorium.

This year also marks a milestone for the festival, which recently officially became the Roxbury International Film Festival. "We've been international for some time now, but the name change is very important as we expand on a global front," says Lisa Simmons, co-producer of the RIFF. "Now we have an even greater visibility. We've focused on creating a festival that celebrates people of color and we've kept to that theme. We're now the largest festival of its kind in New England."

This year's RIFF opens with "Speed Dating," a romantic comedy directed by Joseph A. Elmore Jr., and starring Vanessa Simmons and Wesley Jonathan, about three bachelors racing through life in pursuit of women and money. It screens Thursday at the Museum of Fine Arts.

One of the festival's buzzed-about films is Roxbury native and acclaimed director Robert Patton-Spruill's "Do It Again" (Saturday at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design), which documents the efforts of Boston Globe writer Geoff Edgers to reunite one of his favorite 1960s rock bands, the Kinks. After making his feature debut with the Boston-set "Squeeze" in 1997, Patton-Spruill directed videos for rap legends Public Enemy, later documenting the band in the 2007 film "Welcome to the Terrordome," which explored Public Enemy's influence on pop music. He revisits similar themes with "Do It Again," which mixes archival concert footage of the Kinks and interviews with Kinks fans such as Sting, Zooey Deschanel, and REM's Peter Buck.

Another anticipated documentary, "Off and Running" (Saturday at Massachusetts College of Art and Design), earned accolades after screenings at the Tribeca Film Festival and its area premiere as part of the Boston Jewish Film Festival last November. Director Nicole Opper, named one of the 25 new faces of independent film by Filmmaker Magazine, follows Brooklyn teen Avery Klein-Cloud, adopted and raised by white Jewish lesbian parents, as she seeks out her African-American roots by contacting her birth mother. This choice propels Avery into her own complicated exploration of race, identity, and family that threatens to distance her from her parents and her two adopted brothers, one Korean and the other mixed race, and her dreams of running college track.

Youth and family are also the focus of Tze Chun's drama "Children of Invention" (Saturday at the MFA).

Partially shot in Boston and in Randolph, where Chun grew up, the film is about two Asian-American children left to fend for themselves after their mother gets embroiled in a pyramid scheme and disappears.

Producer and director Katherine Cecil's feature documentary "Race" (Saturday at Wentworth) examines the political aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In April 2006, eight months after the hurricane devastated New Orleans, Mayor Ray Nagin, who had been expected before the disaster to win reelection with ease, faced the fight of his political life. A record number of white challengers entered the race, adding a chapter to the city's often divisive political history. Nagin's main challenger was Mitch Landrieu, scion of an old Louisiana Democratic family and son of the last white mayor. The film focuses on the events leading up to the run-off between these two men, one black and one white, a race that revisited the city's racial tensions.

Events that bring the community together are another important part of the festival. On Friday, a Dinner and a Movie program takes place outdoors at Haley House Bakery Café, 12 Dade St., Roxbury. The \$25 ticket includes dinner and a screening of "Machete Joe," described as an "urban horror thriller" that proved popular with audiences at the San Diego 2010 Black Film Festival.

For ticket information and show times, visit www.roxburyfilmfestival.org.

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