

17–21 OCT

2023 

**sjiwff**

34



34<sup>th</sup> St. John's International Women's Film Festival



/WomensFilmFestival



@sjiwff

#sjiwff34

womensfilmfestival.com

**festival report**



# festival report



## staff

Jenn Brown — Executive Director  
Chantal Lovell — Office Manager  
Glen Paul — Interim Office Manager  
Natalie Dignam — Marketing Manager  
Victoria Wells — Technical Director  
Erin Whitney — Programming Coordinator  
Amelia Curran — Industry Producer  
Jenna Dufton — Lead Programmer  
Sophie Rowe — Marketing Coordinator  
Cayley Blair-Steele — Events Services  
Jennifer Dick — Volunteer Coordinator  
Alejandra Monreal — Guest Services  
Mary Beth Waldram — Forum Coordinator  
Madelyn Meadus — Technical Coordinator  
Sarah Brush — Social Media & Web  
William Briffett — Marketing Assistant

## board

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Jennifer Massey — Vice Chair  
Nancy Winsor — Treasurer  
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Esraa AbouAmin — Member at Large  
Lisa Smith — Member at Large  
Mary Walsh — Member at Large  
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## land acknowledgement

We respectfully acknowledge the land on which we work, Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland), as the unceded, traditional territory of the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq. We recognize all First Peoples who were here before us, those who live with us now, and the generations to come. We commit to working in a spirit of truth and reconciliation.



## **A community-building Festival like no other.**

**St. John's International Women's Film Festival (SJIWFF) is Canada's longest-running women's film Festival.**

Established with a bold vision of advancing gender equity in the screen industries, SJIWFF has championed the creative work of women and gender-diverse artists worldwide since 1989. A respected leader in the sector with growing accolades, SJIWFF plays a vital role in the Canadian film circuit and has become a must-attend event.

**Our 34th edition marked a triumphant return after three years of hybrid programming.** Renowned as one of the province's premier cultural events, this year's Festival was more than just a showcase of films—it was a celebration of art and culture aimed to reignite the spirit of in-person connection that we all missed.

In addition to incredible films, this year's Festival was about offering a safe space to share and connect with other engaged artists and audiences alike. The backdrop of the city of St. John's is truly reflective of the SJIWFF experience: **energetic, colourful, fresh, and inspiring.**

Over five days, we captivated audiences with some of the best new cinema worldwide, thoughtfully curated with local talent at the forefront. The emphasis on bringing filmmakers, delegates, and audiences back together created an atmosphere that honoured the remarkable success of our film sector, elevated a love of cinema, and planted seeds for growth.



# meet **sjiwff**

A highlight was the reveal of a long-awaited downtown screening venue at the newly renovated Majestic Theatre, poised to become a new home base for film enthusiasts and professionals alike, much like our Industry Hub at the Alt Hotel. The decision to centralize entirely downtown had significant impact, particularly with a record number of visiting guests.

**Combined with our Film Industry Forum, we welcomed nearly 4,000 attendees.**

The week was a perfect blend of work and play, featuring stellar parties and fun networking events that added to its vibrancy. The result was a palpable sense of love and enthusiasm permeating the entire week, a testament to our team and supporters in creating a Festival truly like no other.

## SJIWFF34 **box office**

**\$21,329** sales

**1981** screening attendance

**2000** Forum attendance

**21** Screening Passes

**197** Delegate Passes

**46** Industry Passes

"I've been to many film festivals, and a lot of times you're just competing for air. Here, people are very generous. They listen and they care about each other. **They freely share what they've learned; they're not holding on to it, they're giving it away.**"







**This year, we received 1,074 film submissions written and/or directed by women and gender-diverse filmmakers globally.**

While short film submissions remained steady, our features leapt by 54%. Although submission fees represent an important revenue stream (\$27,300 gross), supporting our programming process, we lowered our rates to ease the financial burden on filmmakers and distributed fee waivers.

Our Programming Team consists of Festival staff and a skilled volunteer film jury to help select our short films. We selected 47 diverse jury members, representing a combination of filmmakers and film enthusiasts locally and abroad. **This intersectional lens guided our selection process.**

#### **SJIWFF34 directors**

**90%** women

**10%** gender-diverse

**25%** 2SLGBTQIA+

**30%** BIPOC



## film **selections**

**We showcased seven features and 33 shorts from 11 countries in 14 languages.**

Encompassing genres from comedy to drama to documentary, these films delved into intimate personal narratives and daring adventures. Spanning home-grown world premieres to circuit favourites, our features explored themes of identity and representation, determination and strength, family dynamics, emotional ownership, and personal resilience.

## opening night **gala**

We were thrilled to open the Festival with director Ruth Lawrence's *Party Pirate*, written by and starring her son, Luke Lawrence. Ruth holds a rare honour as one of only two directors who have opened our Festival twice. This local feature is an outrageous comedy following lovable loser Tommy as he learns to navigate the world with learning disabilities and revel in what makes him unique.



# the films

## documentaries

Three feature documentaries dug deep into the stories of change-making women. Through expert storytelling, our audience got to know millennial witches seeking to understand their ancestry and channel their power (*Coven*); the Mattel employee who changed the world by asking, "Why not make a Barbie that looks like me?" (*Black Barbie*); and the young Siksika woman preparing for one of the most dangerous horse races in the world (*Aitamaako'tamisskapi Natosi*).



## queer stories of resilience

Two stylistically distinct films shared parallel narratives of queer women excelling in their fields while grappling with internal struggles. D.W. Waterson's debut, *Backspot*, explores the journey of an overwhelmed cheerleader navigating her voice and forging a healthier connection with her beloved sport. Chloé Robichaud's *Days of Happiness* sees a rising orchestra conductor confronting her demons to realize her full potential.



## rbc closing night gala

Fawzia Mirza made a striking return with her feature debut, *The Queen of My Dreams*. This vibrant, Bollywood-inspired story narrates the coming-of-age tale of a mother and daughter across different eras, weaving through real and imagined memories.

Nurturing the next generation of filmmakers, Closing Night also hosted the premiere of *Poster Child* from Brianna Russell, our 2022 RBC Michelle Jackson Emerging Filmmaker Award winner.





# film industry **forum**



Industry **Forum**  
**2,000** attendees  
**224** delegates  
**74** Speakers

## **SJIWFF's Film Industry Forum is Newfoundland & Labrador's flagship industry event.**

Boasting a dynamic lineup of industry luminaries, candid panel discussions, and welcoming and inclusive networking events, we curated four days of learning, outreach, and inspiration for content creators of all levels and created opportunities for impactful professional training.

## **Picturesque downtown St. John's offered the enviable backdrop to the Forum events.**

Festival-goers enjoyed the daily trek between our venues: the Hub at the Alt Hotel, lunch panels at Bannerman Brewing, and films at the Majestic Theatre. With beautiful harbour views and the encouragement to explore our City, the informal meeting spaces, both indoors and outdoors, allowed countless connection opportunities.

## panel **discussions**

Artists together in a room, made to feel they own and are in charge of the space, will peel away the facade of typical conference speak in favour of what needs saying – in many cases, all the things that shouldn't need saying, but do. We outlined subject matter along a swath, from heady instructive perspectives like distribution and marketing to more explorative topics like authenticity and collaboration.

The result was a tide pool of thought. Seasoned professionals spoke unguardedly about career anxieties and imposter syndrome. People wanted to talk about isolation, vulnerability, and, as women, our unique relationship with assertiveness as an acceptable leadership trait. The unspoken sacrifices we make to raise children, and what happens to us while we try to be good at everything.



# film industry **forum**

**We have spent a long time learning to be apart, but we are at our best as artists and leaders when we are together.**

## face **2** face

**Face 2 Face** expanded in 2023 to offer a rare opportunity for filmmakers at any career level to introduce themselves and their projects to some of the country's biggest broadcasters, funders, producers, distributors, marketing experts and financiers.

Formerly reserved as pitch sessions alone, this extended knowledge offered a wide range of opportunities for private project consultations. **25 Industry Leaders hosted 140 one-on-one meetings over three days.**

These meetings contributed to the overarching spirit of SJIWFF as a platform for meaningful connections and tangible opportunities.



**"This year's Forum events were not only the best SJIWFF panels I've ever attended, but **they were some of the best panels I've attended—anywhere, on any topic, period.**"**





# partnerships + outreach



## welcoming filmmakers

Our **expanded filmmaker travel bursary program** provided 13 filmmakers complimentary accommodations at the Alt Hotel in St. John's, airport shuttle, and a \$1,000 travel stipend, allowing artists from as far as Vancouver, Texas and the UK to make the journey to join us. This support allowed many of them to bring additional members of their team, or their family.

This year's Forum events were open to Delegates and **Industry Passholders** – a new pilot program where film professionals could apply for accreditation.

**This new Pass opened the doors to seven out-of-province and 45 local companies to attend, and we offered a fee subsidy to 25 local film organizations from across Newfoundland and Labrador.**

Our enduring partnerships with national stakeholders continue to thrive. For over a decade, we've partnered with **Women in the Director's Chair** and this year we once again partnered with the **Black Screen Office** and **Women In View**.

## networking & celebrations

VIP Red Carpet events at the Majestic Theatre added glamour to both our sold-out opening and closing night feature films. **Lawnya Vawnya** collaborated to host an energetic Festival Wrap party with local artist.

The Alt Hotel was the venue for the Festival's *Eat, Drink & Be Scene* meet and greet reception, hosting 175 guests. **CBC NL** hosted an interactive reception and **PictureNL**, a strong Festival ally, launched a Producer's Accelerator Program at Theatre Hill. **Quidi Vidi Brewery** contributed in-kind products for our receptions and introduced a new Director's Cut Festival beer available across the province.



**"I can easily say that SJIWFF has impacted my career and future work. The access to people in power who make decisions is unparalleled – I was able to grow relationships, create new ones and create new work opportunities."**



# partnerships + outreach



## hikes & hospitality

Renowned for our outstanding hospitality, each morning featured a special treat for our guests: a guided hike of Signal Hill. This unique opportunity to explore the UNESCO World Heritage site, just a minute's walk from our host hotel, provided a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many. It was a delightful way to embrace the outdoors, be active, connect with others, and fall in love with St. John's. This new initiative is integral to our mission of positioning SJIWFF as a destination event.

**Furthermore, we facilitated extended stays and supported guests in crafting personalized itineraries, enhancing their visit and economic impact.**

SJIWFF donates a ticket surcharge to the **Cultural Artists Plan for Emergencies Fund**, a province-wide emergency fund for cultural workers in our province.



## community partners

We collaborate with **Inclusion NL** each year to assess and enhance the accessibility of our Festival. Their expertise was pivotal in evaluating our new venue.

Our partnership with the **Newfoundland & Labrador Public Libraries ConnectPass** program offered residents free tickets for select screenings. We also extended complimentary tickets to **First Light** and **Quadrangle** and collaborated with the **Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra** for giveaways.

We also had **over 100 local film enthusiasts apply to volunteer with us!**





# new venue

Over the years, we have grappled with finding suitable screening venues. Providing the highest quality exhibitions is non-negotiable for us. In early 2023, we initiated discussions with the Majestic Theatre during the planning stages of their building renovations. We successfully worked with them to deliver a fully DCI compliant Festival, ensuring top level projection and security for film screenings.

**This move was a game-changer.**

We consolidated all our screenings into one central Downtown location, streamlining our box office, enhancing patron access, and positioning us more favourably with distributors. The Majestic meant a significant reduction in capacity for gala events, but an increased capacity for regular screenings.

**The joy of celebrating here was undeniable.**

Collaborating with a new venue as its inaugural major renter presented challenges but our shared learning epitomizes the strength of our community support system and fosters growth.



**“You realize how essential being in the same room and sharing is to the betterment of your work and your quality of life – the beautiful part of sharing is that you feel a part of something. It’s a wonderful thing.”**

## rbc mj emerging filmmaker award



The **RBC Michelle Jackson Emerging Filmmaker Award** was founded in honour of filmmaker and student mentor Michelle Jackson. This annual peer-juried award, run by SJIWFF, is open to women and gender-diverse filmmakers in Newfoundland & Labrador who have not yet directed a feature film. With a total value of over \$60,000, the prize includes in-kind services, mentorship, and cash to create a short film. We premiered last year's winning short by **Brianna Russell** at this year's Festival and announced **Elizabeth Hicks** as our 2023 recipient.



# economic impact



**The St. John's International Women's Film Festival is a vital cultural ambassador in nurturing a sustainable future for filmmakers in Newfoundland & Labrador.**

Over the past decade, the Festival has experienced remarkable growth, doubling its revenue, expanding audiences, gaining international prominence, and steadily increasing out-of-province attendance. By showcasing local and international films, the Festival fosters dedicated audiences with a profound appreciation for independent cinema, a key factor for long-term success.

**Newfoundland & Labrador had the strongest year for production activity since the inception of PictureNL in 1997. In 2022–2023, our film and television industry generated \$97.5 million in economic activity, which resulted in over 1,650 full-time employment opportunities.**

Our province continues to provide productions with professional, skilled crews and epic locations. Combined with our competitive incentives, more and more productions are looking to film in this province, especially with the increase of an all-spend tax credit to 40%.

**SJIWFF orchestrates one of Atlantic Canada's largest gatherings of film professionals and substantially drives this sectoral success.** Hosting top-tier industry events, the Festival substantially catalyses growth and innovation, fosters new business, and advances filmmakers. SJIWFF's efforts in building meaningful relationships contribute to cultivating the next generation of local talent.

In a testament to its growing influence, SJIWFF attracted major streaming providers like Amazon Studios, Paramount+ Canada, and Warner Bros. Discovery as panellists and to host private project pitch meetings with local creatives. This impact underscores the Festival's esteemed reputation.

**Fair compensation for artists and workers is central to SJIWFF's ethos. The Festival invested \$51,000 in artist fees and \$60,000 in travel expenses, bringing 70 guests to St. John's in October—a notable contribution to the province's cultural tourism.**

With five full-time employees, ten seasonal staff, and over 25 independent contractors, SJIWFF, a living wage employer, is committed to equity on-screen and at the core of its evolving business model.



# marketing + communications



## telling the **SJIWFF** story

Our marketing plan focused on understanding our unique position and defining our goals:

### **Tell our Story**

- Share the identity and essence of SJIWFF, capturing the vibe.
- Elevate Downtown St. John's and SJIWFF as a destination event.
- Increase national delegation, positioning the Festival on a broader stage.

### **Build Community**

- Spotlight local films, artists, and industry achievements.
- Provide an exceptional and inclusive in-person experience.
- Enhance access for locals.

### **Meet our Audience**

- Reconnect with our foundational local audience and foster the next generation of arts patrons.
- Identify the target industry audience.

We collaborated with Perfect Day for a brand refresh, creating comprehensive brand guidelines and a plan to effectively convey the Festival's essence:

***SJIWFF is a unique and inviting organization, creating a home-like atmosphere for all participants. For visitors, it offers a retreat, a space to explore fresh ideas, forge new relationships, and immerse themselves in the distinct character of Newfoundland and Labrador.***

Our poster concept portrayed St. John's as a travel destination. Vintage travel posters, boarding passes, and passport stamps served as inspiration. The background image is Harbourside Park, a recognizable sight to locals and an accessible view for our visitors.

This thematic approach extended to our robust individualized outreach for attendees, ensuring easy access to bursaries, travel and how-to guides, passes, and overall support.



# marketing + communications

## visibility & **media**

**SJIWFF34 saw a renewed focus on visibility and connections.** Our advertising strategy targeted Newfoundland and Labrador, concentrating on St. John's metro area through digital, radio, print, and billboard campaigns. Local partnerships and collaboration with fellow arts organizations strengthened visibility.

Consistency in branding across various mediums, from lanyards, car decals, video trailers to giant billboards, ensured a cohesive presence throughout St. John's.

Digital advertising and good SEO practices made it easy to find us online. Still, local reporting and mutual support in our City's art sector was an important component of creating buzz for local ticket-buyers. The grand opening of The Majestic Theatre and extensive media coverage, including partnerships with CBC, Stingray, Coast, Le Gaboteur, and others, contributed to a **39% increase in earned media coverage.**

We enlisted a group of photographers to cover the Festival and Industry Forum. We assembled a small team to capture interviews with filmmakers and footage throughout Downtown St. John's and during our events. We intend to leverage this footage to create promotional videos to share our story and Festival essence. Investing in this comprehensive coverage will be invaluable to our year-round outreach.

"Watching people speak here **feels like when you come home and take your bra off. We can just be, and we can be honest.**"

## rediscovering **our audience**

Our mission-driven marketing strategy effectively identified and targeted key audience segments. Through a comprehensive data collection process, we aimed to answer crucial questions about our audience, such as who they are, what draws them to our work, and where they engage with us the most.

From our audience survey, word-of-mouth remains our primary recruitment source, closely followed by our social media, website, and newsletter platforms. Our newsletter boasts an impressive **70% average open rate**, marking a 15% increase from 2022. Facebook also stands out as a platform with solid visibility and engagement.

We gathered expanded datasets on our ads and website audiences. Consistent social media reports reveal clear trends, providing insights that will aid in tailoring our digital marketing content. Our paid digital advertising contributed to sustainable online audience growth. All digital platforms show steady increases in reach and impressive engagement.

Despite challenges such as the lack of dedicated arts coverage in our province's news media and restrictions on this content on Canadian social media platforms, we approached this year with clear goals and flexibility that enabled us to reconnect with filmmakers, delegates, and patrons after years of virtual programming.





# our audience



## our film audience

**74%** from Newfoundland & Labrador

**26%** from out-of-province

**We successfully met our goal to better identify who our audience is.** Through Box Office reports, a survey and our digital analytics, we learned a lot about who they are, what they're interested in, and collected valuable feedback.

## film audience

With 80% of our film screening attendees from the greater St. John's region, we identified our top-three audience personas:

### the downtownie

- Our main SJIWFF ticket buyer lives **Downtown**. They're in their early 40s, average annual income of \$56,000.
- 53% have a post-secondary education
- 75% are homeowners
- Over half are married/common law
- 43% have children.

### the east-ender

- Our second-largest ticket buyer lives in the East End. They're mid-40s, average annual income of \$68,000.
- 66% have a post-secondary education.
- 73% are homeowners.
- Half are married/common law
- 50% have children.

### the central

- Our third largest ticket buyer lives in the Central area. They're late 30s, average annual income of \$63,000.
- 69% have a post-secondary education.
- 61% are homeowners.
- 37% are married/common law
- 52% have children.

Our audience survey reflected these demographics, except there were more respondents from the Central and West End regions of St. John's, possibly due to more local filmmakers attending via Passes but not purchasing individual screening tickets.



# our audience

## survey respondents

We shared a survey with all ticket purchasers, delegates and Industry Passholders. About 8% of our total audience completed the survey.

The average survey respondent is a woman in her mid-thirties living in Downtown St. John's. She has a post-secondary education, and is married with children.

## survey highlights

37% **first time attendees**

95% had an **enjoyable experience**

top reasons **for attending**

- **leisure** & to watch films
- **work**/to attend the film forum
- **community** + networking



## the **takeaway**

### audience

- Most of our attendees are **women or gender-diverse** (90%).
- 20% identify as **2SLGBTQ+**.
- 25% identify as **BIPOC**
- 93% feel that SJIWFF provides a **safe and welcoming environment**.
- 17% have been **attending for over a decade!**
- Our **foundational audience returned**.

### filmmakers

- SJIWFF attracts **mid-career and established filmmakers**.
- Our biggest out-of-province delegation is from the greater **Toronto** region.
- Filmmakers are attending to get incredible **access** to decision-makers, connect with their peers, and build relationships.
- Our reputation for **hospitality, fun, and well organized events** appeals to artists.
- Cultural **tourism** is a strong reason to travel.

**Our digital followers are younger** – 32% 35–44, and 27% are 25–34. These followers mirror those who submit their films to us (primarily shorts and first features) and represent our growing younger demographic.







**SJIWFF is a cultural leader set apart by a profound understanding of the potential within its curated program and the individuals who engage within it.**

We create an unparalleled guest experience. The calibre of influencers and artists we attract is top-tier, and all guests are immediately part of an ego-free community, regardless of social status or where you are in your career. The access and informal connections are immeasurable.

**The real magic of attending any Festival is in the moments in between, and SJIWFF expertly sets this stage.**

St. John's is an enviable playground that generously contributes to the distinctiveness of our work. Unlike the familiar landscapes of other film festivals, Newfoundland & Labrador holds an exotic allure. The scenic backdrop of Signal Hill and the Narrows is integral to our unique offerings, serving as the platform from which we **navigate, relate, and create.**

St. John's is a long way from everywhere, which is a challenge but also one of our main assets. Hosted on an island in the North Atlantic, the logistical challenges of maintaining an immersive environment, often unattainable in larger city centres, emerge as one of our most vital assets.

You can describe SJIWFF as intimate, friendly, and a breath of fresh air, just as quickly as monumental, bespoke and life-changing. While our successes are notable, our focus for improvement lies in further fostering our beloved brand of inclusion.

**SJIWFF is a collaboration of equals.**

The Festival left us all energized and inspired. Using the lessons learned and feedback collected, our commitment to a culture of collaboration and authenticity remains steadfast, ensuring that SJIWFF remains a cornerstone of cultural celebration, empowerment, and joy.



# thank you



## Thank you!

As a registered charity and not-for-profit cultural organization, we are deeply grateful for the support of our funders, partners, volunteers, patrons and filmmakers, who are essential in making our Festival and year-round programming happen.

### PREMIERE



### PLATINUM



### GOLD



### SILVER



### BRONZE



### MEDIA PARTNERS



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