

AUDREY'S SOCIETY WHIRL

By Audrey J. Bernard, Society Editor



American Black Film Festival celebrates 20th year anniversary

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Society Editor

The American Black Film Festival (ABFF) is the nation's largest gathering of Black film and television enthusiasts. Commemorating its 20th anniversary in June 2016, ABFF returned to South Beach for fun in the sun in Miami Beach, Florida from June 15-19, and festivalgoers celebrated non-stop for five days with an enhanced program that included entertainment, expanded networking opportunities and a reunion of many favorite stars. Also included were many annual movie premieres, master classes, panels and celebrity conversations culminating in a black tie awards ceremony on Saturday, June 18, 2016 at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel where top awards went to *Destined*, *Daddy Don't Go* and *Service to Man*.

This year's ABFF was filled with informative and innovative programming that included film premieres, panels, workshops and master classes led by Hollywood notables. The star-studded lineup included this year's Celebrity Ambassador Common, Omari Hardwick, Robert Townsend, Cedric the Entertainer, Gabrielle Union, Nate Parker, Will Packer, Tichina Arnold, Teyonah Parris, Nicole Bahari, Soledad O'Brien and T.D. Jakes, who joined in the festival's activities in support of new filmmakers and artists of color.

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) presented the festival's opening film, *Central Intelligence*. The charismatic buddy action film, starring Kevin Hart and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, was screened at the historic Olympia Theater in downtown Miami. The film's leading lady, Danielle Nicolet, greeted attendees and introduced the film, along with a video welcome from her two leading co-stars. Following the screening, the opening night party took place at Story, one of South Beach's hottest night spots. The wildly popular DJ D-Nice provided sounds well into the night, later joined by Amb. Common for an impressive spontaneous performance.

The ABFF master classes continue to be a high point for those with interests centered on film and television. This year's classes included "Writing for Television," with Comcast NBCUniversal's SVP of Programming Talent Development & Inclusion for NBC Entertainment and Universal Television Studios.

"A Conversation With," presented by American Airlines, is part of the ABFF's top-rated Talk Series. The intimate and powerful exchange between



Will Packer, Nicole Friday, Salli Richardson Whitfield, Jeff Friday, Emiyatzy Corinealdi and Anthony Anderson

TV One host and journalist Roland Martin and ABFF Celebrity Ambassador Common was particularly revealing and compelling, as they discussed the industry, what it means to be a person of color within it and how levels of success are achieved.

ABFF First Look: *The Birth of a Nation*, presented by the MPAA, courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures. Journalist and author Star Jones moderated a discussion with filmmaker and actor Nate Parker (*Beyond the Lights, Red Tails*) and actor Gabrielle Union ("*Being Mary Jane*," *Bad Boys II*) about this provocative film and the journey from conception to distribution.

The Making of *Almost Christmas*, presented by Comcast NBCUniversal, provided an inside look at Universal's new comedy with writer/director/executive producer David E. Talbert (*Baggage Claim*), producer Will Packer (*Roots, Think Like a Man*) and actor Gabrielle Union ("*Being Mary Jane*," *Bad Boys II*). Another highlight of the festival was an Industry Coaching Seminar with Akil Productions, where husband and wife team Salim Akil and Mara Brock-Akil presented how to navigate a career in screenwriting and introduced a new ABFF initiative: ABFF Women's Writers Lab.

The Spotlight Screening schedule was filled with informative and stimulating topics and conversations, including a screening of TBS's *Angie Tribeca* and Q&A with star Deon Cole; *Stepping Up: Stories of Jazz & Caregiving*, sponsored by AARP; *United Shades of America* screening and conversation with W. Kamau Bell, courtesy of CNN Original Series; the world premiere of TV One's *Bad Dad Rehab* followed by a Q&A with the cast, Malik Yoba, Wesley Jonathan, Robert Riley, Rick Gonzalez and Robert Richard; and Next On HBO, presented by HBO, a conversation with Jacob Anderson, Andre Holland, Nathalie Emmanuel (*Game of Thrones*), Jazmyn Simon and John David

Washington (*Ballers*).

ABFF was filled with great connecting and networking opportunities for attendees. This year's "Power Lounge," sponsored by Cadillac, was a three-day lounge for Deco passholders and included meet and greets with actors Omari Hardwick and Tichina Arnold. McDonald's sponsored ABFF Game Night, hosted by actress and blogger Skye Townsend. Guests enjoyed complimentary McDonald's breakfast sandwiches and pies, specialty cocktails, courtesy of Zacapa Rum, and of course games, including air hockey, pool, poker, karaoke and traditional card games. Time Warner hosted a Mojito Mixer for Writers with the goal of connecting with emerging content creators. Kwese' Media was the host of a private reception to discuss international distribution options with festival filmmakers.

For the past three years, HBO and ABFF have partnered to find the next comedy star with the Comedy Wings Competition. This year's host was Cedric the Entertainer. Out of five finalists, Daphnie Springs deservedly took home the coveted award.

The McDonald's "My Community" Video Competition encourages filmmakers to produce a 90-second video illustrating what being deeply rooted in your community means. Director Tyshun Wardlaw won the film equipment prize package valued at \$2,500 for her film, *Be the Seed*.

Comcast NBCUniversal partnered with ABFF for two talent initiatives at the festival this year: The Star Project, searches to find the next fresh face for film and television, and the NBC Television Hosting Workshop, designed to help emerging TV hosts sharpen their skills and identify dynamic personalities ready for on-air opportunities.

TV One's 2nd annual Screenplay Competition highlighted three new writers who received an all-expense-paid trip to ABFF, where each finalist got an opportunity to direct a scene

from their script. Professional actors in front of a live audience at TV One's "Celebrity Scene Stealers" performed each script during the festival.

VH1 partnered with the ABFF for the first annual Unscripted Workshop, where they selected and hosted five individuals with interesting show concepts. Programming executives spent two days working with them to discuss the business of show creation and provide tips to further develop their projects.

Hosted by actor and comedian Chris Spencer, the 20th anniversary celebration concluded with "Best of the Festival" awards, a star-studded ceremony celebrating the achievements and successes of filmmakers, writers and actors. ABFF's closing night party, sponsored by Hennessy, capped the night off. "We are more than honored to have had the opportunity to serve the community of diverse artists and creators over the past twenty years," said Friday. "We are encouraged that the industry has awakened to the power of inclusion. We salute all of our partners who have sustained us over our journey, with special thanks to founding sponsor HBO and this year's presenting sponsors Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, TV One, Cadillac and McDonald's. Through their support we have been able to realize goals that 20 years ago we could only dream."

The top winners at the "Best of the Festival" awards were *The Fix*, taking the coveted "Audience Award," presented by BET; "Best Screenplay," presented by Time Warner, went to *How To Tell You're a Douchebag*, written by Tahir Jetter; and *Destined*, directed by Qasim Basir received the award for "Best Director," presented by Cadillac, with the festival's highest cash prize of \$25,000. Cory Hardrict took top honor as "Best Actor" for *Destined* and gave a powerful acceptance speech in honor of his mother.

Giving back to the community provided the perfect theme for the conclusion of the 20th anniversary celebration. As part of Miami Film Month, the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau partnered with the ABFF to host a Community Day film-screening event on Father's Day at the Lyric Theater, located at 819 NW 2nd Avenue in Historic Overtown. The host for these festivities was singer and actress Brave Williams.

Attendees had an opportunity to view three films from the 2016 ABFF's screening schedule, including *Bad Dad Rehab*, which aired on TV One on July 3, the documentary *Through My Lens*, which will air on Aspire TV in October during National Anti-Bullying Month, and *Love Under New Management: The*

Miki Howard Story, directed by Christine Swanson and starring Teyonah Parris. Throughout the day there were scheduled speakers, including Malik Yoba and Lamman Rucker.

Sponsors for the 2016 American Black Film Festival are HBO® (Founding and Presenting Sponsor), Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (Host and Presenting Sponsor), TV One, Cadillac and McDonald's (Presenting Sponsors); BET, Comcast NBCUniversal, Hennessy and Prudential (Platinum Sponsors); AARP, American Airlines, Coors Light, Kwesé Media, Miami Beach Visitor & Convention Authority (MBVCA), Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Time Warner and VH1 (Official Sponsors); Planned Parenthood of America, Tanqueray and TBS (Supporting Sponsor); 21st Century Fox, ABC, ASPIRE, Atlanta Mayor's Office of Film & Entertainment, CAA, CNN Original Series, Facebook, Fox Searchlight Pictures, Miami-Dade County Tourist Development Council (TDC), Motion Picture Editors Guild, RLJ Entertainment, SAGIndie, The Root, and Walter Kaitz Foundation (Industry Partners); Black Enterprise, Ebony Magazine, MIA Magazine, Upscale and TheYBF.com (Media Partners); and Blacknoir.com and The JDot Agency (Promotional Partners).

2016 American Black Film Festival Award Winners: Grand Jury Award for Best Screenplay, presented by Time Warner/Tahir Jetter - *How To Tell You're a Douchebag*; Grand Jury Award for Best Actor/Cory Hardrict - *Destined*; Grand Jury Award for Best Director, presented by Cadillac/Qasim Basir - *Destined*; Grand Jury Award for Best Narrative Feature Film, presented by Prudential/Service to Man, produced by Aaron Greer and Seth Panitch; HBO Short Film Award Winner/Flowers, written and directed Nikyatu Jusu and Yvonne M. Shirley; Star Project Winner, presented by NBC, Kelcy Griffin; McDonald's "My Community" Video Competition Winner/Be The Seed, directed by Tyshun Wardlaw; TV ONE Screenplay Competition Winner/Tale of a Script, written by N'Zuri Za Austin; Best Web Original, presented by Comcast Xfinity/2 Self Help Books Away from Perfect, written and created by Kimberly Young, directed by Lopez Williams; The Best of Festival Audience Award, presented by BET Networks/The Fix, produced by Paris Baldwin, Kenny Lofton and Brenton Early; Best Documentary, presented by Hennessy-Daddy Don't Go, produced by Emily Abt, Keryn Thompson, Suzette Burton, Omar Epps, and Malik Yoba.

(See Page 21 for additional coverage and photos courtesy ABFF)

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The American Black Film Festival (ABFF) is an annual event dedicated to showcasing quality film and television content by and about people of African descent. The festival is committed to the belief that Black artists and content creators deserve the same opportunities as their mainstream counterparts. ABFF founder Jeff Friday conceived the festival in 1997 as a vehicle to promote diversity in the motion picture industry, and strengthen the Black filmmaking community through resource sharing, education, artistic collaboration and career development. Today, the ABFF is recognized as the preeminent pipeline to new Black talent,



ABFF Founder Jeff Friday



both in front of and behind the camera, and is regarded as one of the leading film festivals in the world. The ABFF is a prop-

erty of ABFF Ventures, LLC, which is a partnership between Film Life, Inc., and Black Enterprise. *See AUDREY'S SOCIETY WHIRL on Page 15 for additional editorial.*

