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HEADLINE: American Black Film Festival starts in Miami Beach

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MIAMI BEACH, Fla.

One of the most prestigious festivals honoring black cinema returned to Miami Beach on Wednesday to promote cultural diversity and recognize the contributions of black directors, writers and actors to the film industry.

Now in its 15th year, the *American Black Film Festival* promotes cultural diversity within the film industry by strengthening the black filmmaking community through four days of film screenings, networking, workshops for both actors and directors and panel discussions.

Jeff Friday, the festival's co-founder, said he wanted to change America's tone of African-American characters on television and films.

"I had always been disturbed by images of people with color in films. There was always a level of struggle," he said of black people on the television shows he grew up watching, such as "Good Times" or "The Jeffersons."

"I just didn't see enough diversity."

That was decades ago, and Friday acknowledged the industry was doing a much better job now.

In all, 20 independent films will be premiering during the festival that runs through Saturday, allowing for emerging filmmakers to showcase their work through short-film and documentary competitions. The films were either made or directed by an African-American, or have a focus on black culture.

Opening the festival will be "In the Hive," produced by Robert Townsend and starring Michael Clarke Duncan, Loretta Devine, Vivica A. Fox and Jonathan "Lil J" McDaniel. The film is based on a true story of a woman who started an alternative school for troubled youth in North Carolina.

"It's what's going on right now. At risk youths ... how do you save them?" Townsend said.

"We have a lot of stories to tell. And a lot of times Hollywood hasn't really told our stories. We need a new generation of filmmakers to tell stories that reflect truths and the humanness of the people of color."

In the film "Breathe," a woman's dream of becoming a mother turns into a nightmare as she is stalked by a silent killer during her pregnancy, a true story directed by Jerry Allen Davis and starring Robin Givens.

"The topic doesn't really get addressed in the black community," said actress Elise Neal, who also stars in "A.N.T. Farm," a TV series on the Disney Channel.

"Our race doesn't talk about complications. But having this film in the festival will resonate with women. It's about time we do more films that are topical and discuss health issues," Neal said.

Singer Eric Benet makes his lead acting debut in "Trinity Goodheart" written by Rhonda Freeman–Baraka. The film centers on a 12–year–old girl who is trying to bring her mixed–race family together.

"It's a great depiction of an American black family," director Joanna Hock said. "There needs to be an openness and acceptance to look at life in different ways and look at people in different ways and not be so dogmatic on we how approach relationships."

The festival also includes a 30–minute documentary on the making of "Boyz n the Hood," the 1991 box office hit by director John Singleton, who was nominated for a best director Academy Award at the age of 24. He will discuss "what the vibe was of the black filmmaking community" at the time.

"It was the first film that visualized what was going on in hip hop culture," Singleton said.

"Nobody like me had the opportunity to make that film. I didn't water down what I had to say with the picture. I was very focused in how I wanted the picture to feel and that's what makes it so enduring."

Singleton went on to direct Janet Jackson and former rapper Tupac Shakur in the 1993 film "Poetic Justice." He also directed the films "Higher Learning" and "Hustle & Flow," among dozens of others. He is currently in post–production of "Abduction," a thriller starring Taylor Lautner as a teenager who finds out that his parents aren't really his when he sees his baby picture on a missing person's website. The film is set to be released Sept. 23.

Comedian and director Keenen Ivory Wayans will be honored Saturday for his achievements in television and the big screen.

"He has desensitized race in films," said Jeff Friday, the festival's co–founder. "He's given us a platform to take race out of it and make it about comedy."

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