

AMERICAN BLACK FILM FESTIVAL | MIAMI BEACH

Black filmmakers in spotlight

BY COLLEEN WRIGHT
cwright@MiamiHerald.com

With celebrities in tow, plenty of movie premieres and film workshops, the American Black Film Festival returns to Miami Beach on Wednesday for a packed four-day event.

Showcasing multicultural films directed, produced and performed by “people of color,” ABFF co-founder Jeff Friday boasts his festival has the nurturing and intimate atmosphere ideal for young filmmakers and film lovers.

“It’s not exclusionary, but empowering,” he said.

The festival will feature some 30 films at the Colony Theater and Miami Beach Cinematheque.

The film festival is no stranger to South Florida. During its 16-year history, the area has played host the most. The festival has also visited Los Angeles and Acapulco, Mexico.

When it comes to “sun, sand, sea and sexiness,” South Florida delivers, Friday said. The vacation hot spot is ideal for young filmmakers, he said.

For the event dubbed “the little festival that could,” Friday is estimating a crowd of

5,500 during the four days, more than double the first festival in 1996. The festival’s mantra, “Because Hollywoodn’t,” reflects people of color’s exclusion of the elite Hollywood scene back in the 1980s.

Among the celebrities expected at the festival: filmmaker Robert Townsend; actors Mekhi Phifer, Boris Kodjoe, Laz Alonzo and Jesse Williams from *Grey’s Anatomy*; CNN host Don Lemon and Baltimore Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs.

With top-dog sponsors like HBO and Gold Peak Tea, the ABFF has grown since the festival’s humble beginnings.

Among the rising stars attending this year, producer Datari Turner will debut on Thursday his new film, *Luv*, starring rapper and actor Common. *Luv* has been nominated for best narrative feature.

The festival’s ambassador this year, picked for her “spirit,” is actress Tracee Ellis Ross, best known for her lead role on the UPN/CW series *Girlfriends*. She is also the daughter of singer Diana Ross. “We need a star that’s accessible,” Friday said of

Ross.

The festival has spawned many of today’s top directors and producers, including Will Packer and Rob Hardy of *Think Like a Man* fame.

Packer and Hardy, a director and producer team, credit much of their cinematic success through their breakthrough at ABFF.

When their first film, *Trois*, was rejected by Hollywood, Packer and Hardy turned to Friday. *Trois* premiered at ABFF in 2000.

“The festival is successful by anybody’s standards,” Packer said. “It’s a testament to the power of a dream.”

Now veterans of the festival, the two men are returning to celebrate their latest hit movie, which has grossed over \$90 million worldwide.

“They’re poster men for what this is all about,” Friday said about the duo. “The festival is a springboard for exposure into this business.”

Miami City Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones will officially welcome the ABFF on Wednesday at an invitation-only VIP reception in Miami.



If you go

Screenings, \$12 each:

Wednesday, 8:30 p.m.: 'Beasts of the Southern Wild',
Colony Theater.

Thursday, 6:25 p.m.: 'Ties That Bind', Colony Theater.

Friday, 2:40 p.m.: 'Luv', Colony Theater.

Saturday, 10 p.m.: 'Raising Izzie', Colony Theater.

For more information: www.abff.com.