

Lights, Camera, Arizona Action

by Selina Schuh Dopp

Last year it was Kevin Bacon. This year, Laurence Fishburne will be in town.

The Phoenix Film Festival is well on the way to becoming a nationally recognized event. With more star power and an extended running time of eight days, organizers hope this festival will attract an even greater crowd than last year. The schedule includes evening screenings during the week, day and evening weekend films, celebrities, workshops and special events. One special treat for festival goers is the appearance from Fishburne, as he will open the festival promoting his new movie, *Akeelah and the Bee*.

Bringing Hollywood celebrities to town is really only a side mission of the Phoenix Film Festival. The main focus is to promote film in Arizona. The good news is it seems to be working. The festival has doubled in attendance and organizers are expecting 20,000 visitors this year. Unfortunately, such interest in Arizona film hasn't always existed. Festival co-founder and local filmmaker Chris LaMont has been trying to change attitudes and interest in local film events. In 1999, friend Golan Ramras and he decided to infuse the local film scene with some much-needed energy, and thus founded the Phoenix Film Festival. The event was designed so Arizona filmmakers could show their works, and view their peers' at the same time. LaMont says it wasn't easy to strum up support, as people often do not consider film an art form and, therefore, do not think of donating to this industry. Thanks to the support of the City of Phoenix, Festival board members, the Arizona Republic, Harkins Movies, KTAR and volunteers, the festival has been able to grow into the exciting event it is today.

The founders' efforts to build a vibrant film community in Arizona did not stop at the film festival itself. LaMont became a board member of the AZ Film and Media Coalition, which worked with legislators to make Arizona a financially appealing place to make movies. They were able to push legislation allowing film investors and filmmakers to receive sizable tax credits. LaMont says his motto is "Build up the people here, instead of bringing in talent from somewhere else."

High-caliber local filmmakers are now choosing to film in the state, rather than going to Hollywood. LaMont cites Oscar-nominated *Transamerica*, with Felicity Huffman, as an example. He says local director Duncan Tucker shot many of the scenes locally. The fruits of LaMont's labor are also on display at the Festival. One-third of all films shown at The Phoenix Film Festival are from Arizona filmmakers. This is a substantial increase from the first festival, with only four local films shown.

LaMont also spends a lot of effort on education outreach. According to LaMont, he really missed having the support of a local film community when growing up. Now the festival organizes roundtable discussions and helpful workshops for Arizona students. They also arrange meetings and discussions with filmmakers. "Last year, Kevin Bacon met with the students. Bacon was impressed with the level of questions coming from the students," says LaMont.

Not only has the festival grown in size, but so have the number of submissions. They now receive submissions from all over the world. This year they had 800 films to choose from, of which they could only show 60. When asked about selecting from such an overwhelming choice, festival director Jason Carney mentions a few of his favorites: the documentaries *Last of the Spanish Mustangs*, *Andrew Jenks, Room 335* and the comedy *Pirates of the Great Salt Lake*. LaMont suggests seeing at least one film in each category.

The Phoenix Film Festival will be held at Harkins 101, March 23 to 30. You can get further details on the website at phxfilmfestival.com. Pricing is available online, and all workshops at the festival are free and open to the public.

