

By Paul Eichhorn

In the film festival circles, Toronto is best known for the Toronto International Film Festival. But today, the megacity is home to numerous festivals focusing on themes varying from children to Asian culture to mental illness, and many people are unaware that Toronto's second largest annual film festival is Inside Out: The Lesbian & Gay Film + Video Festival.

"The festival is growing rapidly and it's moving forward," says Inside Out executive director, Ellen Flanders. "There's a huge necessity for the festival within the community. The film industry also uses this festival to look for new talent." Inside Out can substantiate its claim as Canada's largest city's second largest film fest by pointing to the numbers. The festival, which launches its eighth year on May 21 for 11 days, had more than 10,000 people attend last year's 51 programs consisting of 170 features and shorts. Also last year, Inside Out moved to the more convenient downtown location, the Cumberland Cinemas (now the Lumiere), a regular Toronto International Fest venue. Many screenings were sold out and box-office receipts doubled from the previous year. Inside Out '97 had a wide variety of films including the Hollywood-produced *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and the world premiere of local hero John Greyson's *Uncut*. Many films screened at Inside Out, one of the largest gay/lesbian film festivals in the world, end up playing elsewhere. "It's a great venue for the rest of the world to see these films," says Flanders. "The festival helps boost careers and gets films to other festivals."

Toronto is an ideal location for the Inside Out festival. It is the third largest film market in North America and has a huge gay/lesbian community. According to Flanders, the festival has grown to include all segments of that community. "We have a progressive agenda that reflects contemporary gay/lesbian diversity." AIDS awareness and the growing acceptability of homosexuals in pop culture, illustrated by last year's coming out episode of *Ellen*, has also contributed to the festival's growth among audiences outside the gay/lesbian community. But even with this growing popularity among Toronto audiences, Inside Out still has a relatively low media profile. Flanders admits it's frustrating that Inside Out often receives less coverage than smaller film festivals.

Along with funding from several levels of government and public agencies, Inside Out last year attracted several private supporters including AOL Canada, Air Canada, Rogers Video and Viacom Canada. To attract more corporate sponsors, Inside Out has an advisory board with members from the business community and created a detailed sponsorship handout. Flanders says more private firms are interested in Inside Out now that they realize the potential of the gay/lesbian market.

Inside Out has launched several filmmakers into the mainstream film circles such as John Greyson, Mike Hoolboom and Bruce La Bruce. That might explain why it's a popular venue for many film and video makers.

This year the 20-person screening committee,

led by programming coordinator Jane Farrow, screened 300 submissions, the majority of them shorts.

"We want to deliver the best films that would likely never be seen anywhere else," explains Farrow. "We want to bring an intensely edgy event to the public but also to screen films that bring people into the theatres."

Flanders says providing a venue for emerging film and video makers, especially Canadian-based visual artists, continues to be important to the festival. She says that's why works shot on everything from 35mm to Super 8 are accepted. "Everything has a medium here." Emerging film and video makers agree that Inside Out is an ideal venue.

"You have a chance to be more extreme at Inside Out," says filmmaker Jason Romilly, whose short film, *Alone*, was screened at the festival last year. Romilly, who also screened the film at the Toronto International Film Festival, found Inside Out made it easier to get feedback from peers and audience members. He adds the Inside Out screening has helped him access funds and people to make his next film.

Reena Katz, who has screened two films at the festival, says it's great to have a queer forum to exhibit her films. Inside Out has given her access to other film festivals and grant money.

Filmmaker Richard Fung, a former Inside Out program coordinator, says the festival's format is especially important as more filmmakers struggle to fund their films. "We need a venue for people who make low-budget films."

The upcoming Inside Out Fest will have an edgy feel and feature several documentaries, according to Farrow. "We're seeing a lot of new talent this year. Some really different work. Not as much experimental but more cheap and dirty film". Films expected to be part of the festival include *Party Monster*, *Out of the Past*, *Pretty Mean*, and the first openly gay film from Turkey, *Hamann*.

*Inside Out: The Lesbian & Gay Film + Video Festival runs in Toronto from May 21 to May 31 at the Lumiere. For more information*

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Party Monster photo courtesy of Inside Out