



BY SABINA COVO
PHOTO BY SCHERLEY BUSCH

HOMEGROWN FILM FEST YOUNG MOVIEMAKERS CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF SOUTH FLORIDA'S DIVERSITY



If you had to name a Miami film festival you might come up with something sexy and spicy – the Tropical Salsa Film Festival or the Bikini and Beach Film Festival, for instance. But a group of local filmmakers have curiously titled their festival after an Eastern European soup: borscht.

It's "a very original word that describes a very original plate. Borscht is a mouth-watering soup, as diverse as Miami," says Lucas Leyva, a 22-year-old Fordham University film graduate. Leyva founded the Borscht Film Festival in 2004 with fellow New World School of the Arts grads Yara Travieso and Andrew Heiva, along with Matt Berkowitz, Alex Fumero and David Tamargo. He currently leads the group effort.

Between them, the twenty-something-year-old Miamians contribute expertise in filmmaking, producing, acting, directing, photography, dancing and choreography – along with boundless energy – to the endeavor.

“It takes a combination of blood, sweat and tears to make this thing happen,” says Leyva. Their ultimate goal is twofold – showcase South Florida’s new wave of filmmakers and “show the Miami that goes beyond legendary South Beach, the palm trees and the fancy cars.”

That includes South Florida’s urban sprawl and rural farmlands – stories of common everyday life, with an uncommon touch. The richness of Miami’s cinematographic character and the breadth of “amazing stories that can be revealed,” Leyva says, have the potential to make it a world-class film location equal to Fellini’s Rome, Woody Allen’s New York, or Godard’s Paris.

“Five years ago the festival was a way for a handful of friends to stay together and collaborate on fun projects,” he says. Within the next five to 10 years, however, he and his colleagues envision the festival among the top in the world.

The first Borscht Film Festival took place in December 2005. The 2008 festival was a two-day affair held at the Tower Theater in Little Havana. Typically strapped for funds, the festival got an important boost this year from the Miami New World Cinema Center (NWCC), South Florida’s first not-for-profit film studio.

Largely funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s Arts Challenge grant, the NWCC opted to help the Borscht Film Festival “because we believe that they are one of the strongest pools of young creative talent in South Florida, and with the proper nurturing they are sure to flourish,” says director of communications Joshua Miller. “This festival and group of young emerging artists embodies NWCC’s mission to identify local talent, tell unseen or unheard Miami stories, and promote independent productions.”

While last year’s festival commissioned and showcased 16 films about different neighborhoods, this year just six proposals were selected from ideas submitted by directors and writers all over South Florida. Each was allocated a production budget by the NWCC. As an extra perk, the filmmakers are getting advice from South Florida resident and Miami New World Cinema Center board member, David Frankel, director of “Marley & Me,” and “The Devil Wears Prada,” among other hit movies.

“The response to our call for entries to young Miami filmmakers and [for] screenplays that tell Miami stories was overwhelming. The fact that there were over 100 entries is incredibly inspiring,” says CCCV spokesman Milton Garcia. “It says that there is enough interest, talent, and drive in place to sustain a thriving independent film scene... the next step is to inspire one another to action, support each other in creation, and turn these ideals into tangible works of art.”

The Borscht Film Festival takes place Nov. 28 at a venue yet to be announced. As in the past, it will be an iconic Miami location, Leyva says, and there will be no admission fee. The featured films are:

- “Cuban Mint,” by Laimir Fano, 26, recipient of awards from the Tribeca, Kustendorf, and Shanghai film festivals;
- “Velvet,” by Peter Glanz, 26, whose films have been shown at the Cannes and Sundance film festivals;
- “Xemoland,” an animated film by Daniel Cardenas, 26, creator of the webseries, “Sloth;”
- “Day N Night Out,” by Tarell Alvin McCraney, 28, winner of the New York Times Outstanding Playwright award, and named one of Forty under 40 by The Advocate;
- “Of Metrorails and Megasaurs,” by Norah Solorzano, 27, whose work has been showcased in several festivals, including South by South West;
- “What the Tide Brought In,” by Jonathan Kane, 25, recipient of the Haskell Wexler Award for Cinematography at the Woodstock Film Festival, and the Special Jury Award for Cinematography at the Atlanta Film Festival.

Neighborhoods spotlighted in the films include Westchester, Key Biscayne, Coconut Grove, Liberty City and Homestead, ideal ingredients for perfect borscht – Miami style.