

BLOOMINGTON'S OWN

MIDDLE COAST FILM FESTIVAL

BY JANET MANDELSTAM



(l-r) Chelsea Sanders and Jessica Levandoski, founders of the film festival.
Photo by Tyagan Miller



There are plenty of film festivals, but Jessica Levandoski and Chelsea Sanders thought the world needed one more — right here in Bloomington.

There's no rule that dictates premiere features and shorts have to gravitate to the coasts or to the Sundance Film Festival in Utah they decided. "We met. We said, 'Let's just do it.' We threw it all together in less than two months," Sanders recalls. And that's how the Middle Coast Film Festival made its debut in the summer of 2014.

Now in its third year, the festival will welcome filmmakers and cinephiles to town July 28–30 for screenings of national and international short and feature films, web-based episodes, and music videos. In addition to the screenings, there will be panel discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and networking events at local restaurants, bars, and studios.

The co-founders' talents are complementary. Levandoski, 34, a filmmaker and self-described "big film fan," takes the lead in selecting the films. Last year's lineup included *Tangerine*, a comedy featuring two transgender actresses that became a darling of critics everywhere, as well as *The 100-year-old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*, a Swedish film that enjoyed a commercial run. Sanders, 33, a photographer and designer, handles marketing and branding. She chose the flamingo — "a bird flying in from the coast" — as the Middle Coast logo and put plastic flamingos around town to promote the festival.



The Buskirk-Chumley Theater is a primary screening site for the festival. Courtesy photo

Doubling the attendance

Attendance doubled to 500 in 2015, and the organizers hope this year to break 1,000, Levandoski says. "But we don't ever want to grow like Sundance or Toronto or like the South by Southwest Festival in Austin [Texas]," she says. A long-term target is in the range of 7,000–9,000 attendees. They hope to preserve the intimate "and equalitarian" environment that allows filmmakers to be accessible to each other and to the audience. Last year, she notes, *Tangerine* producer Darren Dean and first-time filmmaker Eliaz Rodriguez stayed at the same hotel.

What they want, Levandoski says, is for filmmakers to see Bloomington as "an amazing place" to shoot a film. "We're positioning ourselves to make Bloomington a hub where films are made," says Sanders. "We have big dreams. Our goal is to create a microfilm industry here." They have another, more personal goal, too. By year five, Levandoski says, "We want to make [the independent film news website] *Indiewire's* top 50 festivals in the country." Sanders feels that what currently draws people to Bloomington is sports. "We want it to be art," she says.

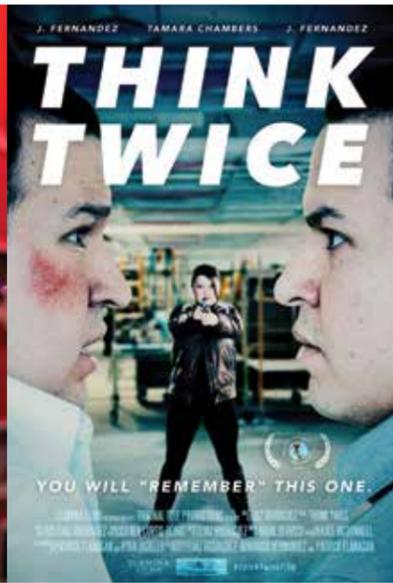
Initial discussions focused on holding a festival at French Lick Resort. "But Bloomington is the cultural center of the area," Levandoski says. Once the location was fixed and that first festival planned, a website was built and they began marketing on social

media. "We were engaging with filmmakers via Facebook and Twitter," says Sanders, owner of Blueline Media Productions. And Bloomington has rallied around the festival. Local businesses have provided accommodations for visiting filmmakers, each of whom receives a gift bag filled with local products. Indiana University Cinema and the Buskirk-Chumley Theater offered rent-free venues for the first festival. The organizers have since incorporated the festival as a nonprofit and this year have attracted national sponsors such as Yelp and *Indiewire*.

Support from IU Cinema

One of the early backers of a film festival in Bloomington was Jon Vickers, director of IU Cinema. "I asked myself what would make a festival in Bloomington unique," he recalls. His answer: "This community is unique. It's arts-minded and has great art venues. The energy and a community of cinephiles were here to support a festival."

Vickers helped contact filmmakers and distributors and acquired some feature films for the first festival. There's no competition between the festival and IU Cinema, he says. "We're really proud of what Jessica and Chelsea have started. The festival satisfies the appetite for cinema that exists here," Vickers says. And he agrees that the informal interaction between filmmakers and with the audience is important to the success of the festival.



(left) Filmmaker Eliaz Rodriguez will return to Middle Coast this year with his film *Think Twice*. (below) Writer-director Katie Cokinos at last year's festival with David Anspaugh, who directed hits *Hooters* and *Rudy*. Courtesy photos



New York state but ran the Austin Film Society for five years. This year she will lead a screenwriting workshop at Middle Coast.

When Rodriguez comes to Bloomington from Chicago this summer, he will bring a short film, *Think Twice*, that he wrote himself and produced with a 15-person crew. It is, says Levandoski, “levels above” the work he submitted in 2015.

“Seeing the caliber of the other films at the festival last year made me want to be a better filmmaker,” says Rodriguez, whose debut film at Middle Coast was a one-man production, a seven-minute short he adapted from a comedy sketch. “It was great to meet my new peers, to talk with other filmmakers,” says Rodriguez, a self-taught filmmaker who works at CinemaJaw, a producer of hour-long podcasts on the topic of film.

Middle Coast may be a relatively small festival, Rodriguez says, “but when you’re there, it doesn’t feel small. I was blown away by how hip it was.” Recalling his conversations with *Tangerine* producer Darren Dean, he says, “I didn’t expect to mingle with this guy or to see that he’s going through the same struggles but on a bigger scale.”

The selection process

Whether the work is submitted by first-time filmmakers such as Rodriguez or by experienced directors, Levandoski applies the same selection criteria. “When I am screening films I am mostly looking for content that I know our audiences here in Bloomington either love to see or that I know they haven’t seen before,” she says. “The perfect films are the ones that match both of those criteria.”

Unlike most other festivals, Middle Coast will show episodes from series produced for the web as well as music videos. “We’ll do five or six web series this year,”

Praise from filmmakers

That intimate environment accounts for some repeat appearances by filmmakers. Both experienced writer-director Katie Cokinos and newcomer Eliaz Rodriguez will be back in Bloomington this summer.

Cokinos brought her feature film *I Dream Too Much* to Middle Coast in 2015 after its premiere at South by Southwest. Levandoski was in the audience in Austin for that premiere and invited Cokinos to show the film here.

“It was my first festival commitment after the premiere,” Cokinos remembers. “I assumed it would be a small festival, but I loved it. I got to meet everybody — all the filmmakers — at the first party, and I’ve kept up with them.” Her film, which lists Richard Linklater, the renowned director of *Boyhood* and *Before Sunrise*, as an executive producer, has been to 15 festivals. But Bloomington was special, she says.

“There’s a real film culture here. It’s very grassroots. It reminded me of Austin in the 1990s when we put together a film series,” says Cokinos, who lives in

HERE ARE SOME OF THE FILMS THAT WILL BE SHOWN AT THIS YEAR’S FESTIVAL:



THE ALCHEMIST COOKBOOK is the work of Midwest filmmaker Joel Potrykus of Grand Rapids, Michigan. It tells the story of Sean, who isolates himself in the woods with only his cat for company. When he turns to black magic, things go awry. *Indiewire* called the film “a hidden gem” when it was shown at South by Southwest.

THE FITS is a psychological portrait of an 11-year-old girl who wants to join a dance team. It’s the first feature-length film by Anna Rose Holmer and was shown at Sundance. The film was shot in Cincinnati and is part of the festival’s support of filmmaking in the Midwest. Members of the cast and crew will be in Bloomington to talk about their experience making the film.

KRISHA is the feature-length adaptation of Trey Edward Shults’ 2014 short film of the same name. When Krishna returns for Thanksgiving dinner after 10 years away from her family, her attempts at reconciliation are increasingly rebuffed as long-buried secrets and deep-seated resentments threaten to ruin the festivities.

LADY PARTS is a web series that takes a feminist look at the film industry. It originated as a blog on Tumblr when director Katrina Day began humorously chronicling sexist casting call announcements. Several episodes will be shown at the festival, and Day will be in Bloomington for what Levandoski expects to be a hilarious Q&A.

MA is a film “that our community wouldn’t normally see,” says Levandoski. The feature by Celia Rowson-Hall has no dialogue and

is told entirely through dance. “It tells the modern day story of Mary and Joseph in the deserts of Los Angeles and Las Vegas,” Levandoski says.

THE PROCEDURE is the “shortest, most insane film that people will see,” says Levandoski. Calvin Reeder’s film, which won the award for Best U.S. Fiction Short Film at Sundance, is only four minutes long. “A man is going to a car and something happens to him along the way,” she says. The film, she cautions, is definitely “adult humor.”

SLASH is a coming-of-age comedy-drama that explores the world of slash fiction (fan fiction focusing on same-sex erotic encounters). Written and directed by Clay Liford, *Slash* focuses on high school freshman Neil and the awakening he experiences when he meets the older Julia, who encourages him to post his writing to an online adult fan fiction website.

TRANSPPECOS is a 2016 American thriller directed by Greg Kwedar. Written by Kwedar and Clint Bentley, the story follows three Border Patrol agents working a remote desert checkpoint who discover an insidious plot within their own ranks.

The complete festival schedule along with information about tickets and venues will be available at middlecoastfest.com.

says Levandoski. There’s also something else that makes this festival a little different than most: “It’s pretty uncommon for women to run a film festival,” Levandoski says.

To encourage young female filmmakers, Middle Coast is putting on a summer camp this year for about a dozen girls who will make a five-minute short film. “We will have professional actors, but the girls will run the cameras, the lights, do everything else,” Levandoski says.

Promoting film work by women is just one aspect of the festival’s emphasis on diversity. As an independent film festival, Levandoski says, “We put a lot of energy into choosing

our programming to allow diversity in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, story subject, and location.”

By creating an increasingly successful film festival in Bloomington, Levandoski, Sanders, and their team are challenging the notion that world-class cinema can only be found in big cities and on the coasts. And if their big dreams are realized, Bloomington may indeed become home to a growing film industry. ✨

Sanders and Levandoski were all smiles at the conclusion of the successful 2015 festival. Courtesy photo

