

Sundance comes to Detroit for screenwriting lab

Julie Hinds, Detroit Free Press Pop Culture Critic Published 5:27 p.m. ET Nov. 5, 2015 | Updated 6:27 p.m. ET Nov. 5, 2015



(Photo: Bree Gant, Sundance Institute)

Sundance is building bridges to Detroit.

The influential institute and film festival founded by independent film champion Robert Redford is getting to know artists in the Motor City region and offering them opportunities to work and grow together.

"We're interested in thinking about how can we reach out beyond our usual places," says Moira Griffin, senior manager of diversity initiatives for the Sundance Institute, which has offices in Park City, Utah, and Los Angeles and New York. "There always has been historically a very strong artist community in Detroit and there's a growing community of young artists who are going there to be part of it."

On Saturday, 13 men and women from metro Detroit who were chosen by Sundance will attend a daylong event called Screenwriters Intensive. The screenwriters at the workshop are currently in the process of developing feature-length scripts.



(Photo: China Moore, Sundance Institute)

Joan Tewkesbury, whose credits include Robert Altman classics like 1975's "Nashville," will be there to head the session.

Sundance is partnering with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation on the event, whose 13 participants (and 12 scripts, one by a two-person team) range from current students and recent college grads to short film and feature directors, college educators, radio and TV broadcast veterans and one former official for the Michigan Film Office.

They include J.B. Armstrong, Sydney Britton, Tinisha D. Brugnone, Ken Droz, Ann E. Eskridge, Josh Gibert and Rochelle Rose, Alisa Lomax, Randy Holloway, Jeremy Olstyn, Jasmine Rivera, Terri Sarris and Brentt Slabchuck.

"We did a lot of outreach and just ended up getting a really diverse list of applications, but it's really about the quality of the project, says Griffin. You can read more about the screenwriters and their scripts [here \(https://www.facebook.com/login.php?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fsundance%2Ftimeline%2Fstory%3Fut%3D43%26wstart%3D0%26wend%3D1448956799%26hash%3D-7526899022112104507%26pagefilter%3D3\)](https://www.facebook.com/login.php?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fsundance%2Ftimeline%2Fstory%3Fut%3D43%26wstart%3D0%26wend%3D1448956799%26hash%3D-7526899022112104507%26pagefilter%3D3).

The screenwriting event is part of continuing efforts to bring talented filmmakers from outside Park City, L.A. and New York a little bit of the Sundance Institute, whose various labs have been steppingstones for writers and directors like Wes Anderson and Darren Aronofsky.

"We're doing outreach across the country," says Griffin. "A lot of people are familiar with the festival but not always with the work we're doing at the institute."

Such events also have the advantage of strengthening local bonds. Says Shira Rockowitz, Sundance Institute feature film program manager: "By creating a very intimate work environment and spending a day of sharing ideas and talking about writing, that has legs. The writers continue to communicate and help each other. It expands our reach and helps them get to know and support each other."

In June, Sundance's Film Forward initiative hosted a four-day event in Detroit, Dearborn and Ann Arbor that offered free public screenings of independent movies and discussions with their directors. Filmmakers with two acclaimed documentaries, producer Razan Ghalayini of "We Are the Giant" and director Brian Knappenberger of "The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz," were involved.

Sundance also held two programs for artists, a New Frontier Day Lab and New Frontier Native Forum, that month at Wayne State University as part of the Allied Media Conference.

Another Sundance connection? Ann Arbor has become a regular stop of Sundance Film Festival USA, a national drive to share a sample of the Sundance Film Festival experience that happens annually in Park City. For several years running, Ann Arbor's Michigan Theater has showcased a movie from the festival as the event takes place — an outreach that happens in only 10 cities.

Detroit will continue to be on the Sundance radar. On Feb. 22, the Sundance Institute's Native American and Indigenous Film Program will be holding a community movie screening and question-and-answer session with one of its alumni filmmakers at American Indian Health and Family Services in Detroit.

Plans also are under way for a Sundance documentary program here in 2017.

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