

Pittsburgh LGBTQ+ film festival celebrates 35th anniversary

By Beatrice McDermott, Staff Writer

This October, cozy up with a thought-provoking romantic drama set in the Pittsburgh Hill District and a heartfelt rom-com about a gay Muslim man to celebrate the legacy of LGBTQ+ cinema with the ReelQ Film Festival.

The festival opens virtually Thursday with “Monsoon,” starring Henry Golding from “Crazy Rich Asians,” and continues until Oct. 17. The festival will also feature the renowned 1985 film “Desert Hearts” as well as contemporary films, including “Rehabilitation of the Hill” and “Breaking Fast.”

Rich Cummings founded the festival in 1985 to provide a platform for LGBTQ+ films that were excluded from mainstream media. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival is online this year, but it will have a drive-in movie screening on Oct. 17. Viewers can buy full-access festival passes or purchase tickets for individual films, with discounts available to students. Similar to an in-person film festival, the features are only available for a limited time, and audience members are encouraged to vote for their favorite film.

TJ Murphy, the executive director of the film festival, said ReelQ wanted to host an online event after collaborating virtually with City of Asylum in May.

“This is our most accessible festival yet,” Murphy said. “There’s a chat feature involved in our online platform, where the audience can talk during the film to each other.”

Murphy said he values the sense of community in film. He also said that audiences should feel comfortable discussing the films and engaging in unfamiliar storylines.

“Movies have the power to bring everyone together in a really strong way,” Murphy said. “I hope, in the virtual world this year, that people are still making those connections with each other.”

The festival catalog offers dozens of narrative features, documentaries and shorts. Murphy recommends “Alice Junior,” a Brazilian film about a trans teenage YouTuber.

“It’s a really, really fantastic film. It’s incredibly heartfelt,” Murphy said. “I’m really excited about it. It’s definitely one of my favorite films that has come out these last few years.”

Although the festival showcases several foreign films, “Rehabilitation of the Hill,” the narrative feature available Friday, hits close to home.

The film tells the story of two young women, Kelly and Gwen, working to restore Pittsburgh’s Hill District neighborhood. Even though Kelly and Gwen have conflicting plans for the future of the Hill, their dedication and passion for the neighborhood eventually evolves into romance. The film, shot in Pittsburgh, explores the impacts of gentrification and discrimination in the historically Black part of the City.

The film’s director and screenwriter, Demetrius Wren, said his decision to use the Hill District as the film’s setting was inspired by his personal connection to the community.



Photo courtesy of TJ Murphy

The ReelQ LGBTQ+ film festival opens virtually Thursday with “Monsoon,” starring Henry Golding from “Crazy Rich Asians.”

"My father-in-law's office is in the Hill District. He works for the Pittsburgh Promise. Their office is next to what used to be the Hill House," Wren said. "That's where I first felt the idea about writing it in the Hill District. There's so much history in that neighborhood, and also the current state of the neighborhood."

Wren also emphasized the importance of sharing the Hill District's story, often an overlooked chapter of Pittsburgh history. In the mid-1900s, the neighborhood was one of the country's most influential and popular centers for art and jazz. The neighborhood experienced an economic decline in the 1950s after thousands of buildings were torn down during the construction of the Civic Arena.

"When we think about rehabilitating neighborhoods, we think we're just going to pour resources into buying and building nice things, but it doesn't actually help the individuals who are there — it just displaces them," Wren said. "What people really need is resources, equity."

Wren said he took a broader, multi-layered approach to the film to recognize the value of communal success stories. For this reason, the film focuses on the neighborhood as a whole, rather than a single character arc.

"Usually, in films like this — and I'm talking about mainstream Hollywood films — there might be an individual who makes it out," Wren said. "Very rarely do we talk about an entire community coming up together."

According to Wren, Pitt's Film and Media Studies department helped fund the film, under one condition — that Wren try his best to incorporate Pittsburgh talent. As a result, Wren said he was able to work with Pitt students and hire local cast and crew members.

Christina Wren, Wren's wife and co-producer who also stars as Kelly, expressed that working on the film felt like a communal effort, and that this spirit is reflected in the film.

"It was a joyful thing every day. There was a built-in mentorship program. We had people who had taken workshops with Demetrius in the Hill District coming in and participating with the crew," she said. "It really felt like a celebration every day, like we were in some ways living the story of the film."

The ReelQ Film Festival is also screening the narrative feature "Breaking Fast," a self-described "queer rom-com about an Arab Muslim and an all-American jock." The film takes place during the month of Ramadan and follows the life of Mo, a gay Muslim man living in California.

According to Mike Mosallam, the film's director and writer, "Breaking Fast" started off as a short film until he decided to continue the story with producer Seth Hauer.

"We didn't set out to make a feature. After the short received the reception that it did in the festival community, we started to imagine what expanding the world would look like," Mosallam said. "I feel like almost every step of this process has been a real organic one."

Religion and sexual identity are central to the plot of "Breaking Fast." Even though Mo and Kal, the "all-American jock," come from different backgrounds, the two bond over breaking fast together during Ramadan. Mosallam said he wanted to show how Mo's identity as a Muslim and a gay man can exist in harmony.

"We are taught by society that those things should be at odds," Mosallam said. "I think if we can cancel out the noise, and just have sort of an individualized relationship with our faith, we can live in the duality, and the intersection, as comfortably as we choose."

Hauer said he and Mosallam wanted the film to be a space where viewers could connect with the characters and see their own identities portrayed on the screen.

"That's really what made me want to work in film — to tell more stories like that for people who don't see themselves represented in their immediate community, or don't see themselves represented on screen, and feel a little less alone," Hauer said.

Hauer said one of his goals for the film was to prove that people have more in common than they may think. He also pointed out that the rom-com genre is all about reconciling differences — two seemingly incompatible characters meeting and falling in love.

"Even if people look different from us, we're all human and we all want the same or similar things," Hauer said. "That was our whole goal in doing this as a romantic comedy. It's about people who are, in theory, so different, until they realize they're not."

The film also features something a lot of LGBTQ+ stories don't get — a happy ending. Mosallam said filmmakers should feel comfortable telling positive LGBTQ+ stories, not just ones that deal with conflict.

According to Mosallam, his decision to portray the relationship between Mo and Kal as a rom-com reinforces the idea that combining religion and sexuality doesn't have to be a struggle — it can also be a triumph.

"What I want people to understand is that no matter who we love, the themes of love, how we love, how we allow ourselves love, how we reject love — those themes are universal," Mosallam said.

A previous version of this story referred to the character Michele in "The Rehabilitation of the Hill." The character's name is Gwen. The article has been updated to reflect this change. The Pitt News regrets this error.