

PlaYR Festival pushes envelope into a new frame



By Brock Weir

Creative people thrive on engaging with and in the world around them, and the minds behind the Multimedia Film Festival plan to do just that with the newly rebranded PlayYR Video Festival.

PlaYR, the new moniker of the festival founded by the Children's Aid Society of York Region and Family Services of York Region, is intended to awaken a new energy in the community while engaging residents with the issues that are important to them.

"It had a very formal feeling to it," says John Watson of their old image, noting it wasn't necessarily reflective of the energy that rolled in through video submissions year after year. "I think it was really important we created something that had a more fun, flashy exciting image. It is really important in not only engaging filmmakers and their friends and family as an audience, but in engaging new audiences that haven't heard of the festival before, haven't been involved, or maybe have heard of the festival and didn't consider becoming involved.

"It is about creativity and engaging artists, and I felt very strongly that we had to approach it differently."

Film, video, and photograph submissions are now being accepted through April 1, via www.playr.info. This year, coinciding with the rebrand, puts a decreased emphasis on the world of film, encouraging anyone with a talent for video, whether with a camcorder or iPhone, to get creative and send a message.

"In the past, we framed ourselves as a film festival," says Mr. Watson. "We are a film festival, technically, but the problem is the majority of young people that are producing films don't necessarily consider themselves filmmakers, or what they do filmmaking. They are producing videos, they are digital producers, and one thing that became very apparent in our outreach last year was the difference in response to identical ads that framed ourselves as a film festival and one as a video festival. There was a significant increase in the response and engagement of participants to the ads requesting people submit their videos."

Mr. Watson came into the festival's fold in its first year. He says he was almost dismissive of the idea of making a submission because he is one of those filmmakers who doesn't consider themselves to be filmmakers. His submission was made with no budget and recorded on a point and shoot camera.

'My understanding of 'film festival' conjured up things like TIFF and large, big budget productions,' he says. 'I really made my career and established myself using platforms like YouTube. Most young people make digital content, but they don't identify as a filmmaker or photographer. The internet levels the playing field and it really, truly makes us accessible for everyone in the community, which was the intention from the very beginning.'

Despite the changes, one thing will remain consistent from years past, and that is the complete lack of reluctance to push the envelope in conveying the messages that are important to the creators and, in turn, the community.

'One of the rules that is really important is we can't and won't showcase anything that is, in any way, oppressive or hateful,' says Mr. Watson. 'That being said, we also say we welcome difficult content. We want films that deal with real issues of people that live here. This is about an authentic and often raw dialogue. I see it as our duty to provide a platform with as few limitations as possible.'

'There needs to be a line drawn at content that could be incendiary or discriminatory or hateful because that is not what we're about. I guess it is a subjective issue and we deal with it on a case by case basis. In the past, there has been some content that pushes the envelope. We hope there continues to be content that pushes the envelope because that is what we're about.'