

120-PLUS REASONS TO LINE

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UP FOR THE VAFF



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all joys have arrived. The air is chilly, leaves crunch underfoot, and the Virginia Film Festival begins. The lights dim, and our annual portal to cinematic excellence opens to films, documentaries, and discussions from renowned creative voices.

In these pages, we barely scratch the surface with a small sample of (the many) films that deserve attention—Kevin Jerome Everson’s thought-provoking shorts, the hyper-local filmmaking of Ricardo Preve and Danny Wagner, plus the honor of hearing poet and activist Nikki Giovanni reflect on her muse.

And there’s so much more. This year’s VAFF is bookended by musical greatness, opening with Bradley Cooper’s Leonard Bernstein biopic *Maestro*, and closing with Jon Batiste’s poignant, personal journey depicted in *American Symphony*.

The Disappearance of Shere Hite introduces a forgotten sex educator and feminist, whose groundbreaking research on female pleasure rocked American society in the ‘70s. And in *No Ordinary Campaign*, the camera bears witness to a couple’s battle with ALS, and their efforts to spark a healthcare revolution.

Time and reality warp and bend in *All of Us Strangers*, a romantic and dreamy ghost tale starring Andrew Scott and Paul Mescal. In *Dream Scenario*, Nicolas Cage stars as a directionless family man who starts appearing in the dreams and nightmares of strangers. Stars like Natalie Portman, Julianne Moore, Anne Hathaway, and Colman Domingo give moving performances in the films *May December*, *Eileen*, and *Rustin*.

In a festival with 120-plus programs that inspire, challenge, and surprise, there’s just too much to write about. You’ll have to see it for yourself.



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COURTESY OF VAFB

Known as one of the foremost authors in the Black Arts Movement, poet Nikki Giovanni has published political and inspirational work since the 1960s.

To Mars and back

This year's Virginia Film Festival features *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*, a new documentary that chronicles the life, work, and enduring legacy of the titular poet. *Going to Mars* has already garnered much buzz: At its Sundance premiere earlier this year, the film received the U.S. Grand Jury Prize: Documentary award.

Produced and directed by Michèle Stephenson and Joe Brewster, the film features Giovanni's poetry, which has enjoyed the popular spotlight for over half a century, overlaid by captivating visuals as well as archival footage. *Going to Mars* places Giovanni's work in the context of historical events, social movements—from the Black Arts Movement to Black Lives Matter—and the poet's personal life. This contextualization illustrates how Giovanni's appeal is rooted in her ability to weave the political and personal into deeply evocative poems. Ahead of the festival, C-VILLE Weekly had the opportunity to ask Nikki Giovanni a few questions.

C-VILLE: Many folks—including myself—are so looking forward to viewing *Going to Mars*. Could you talk about what the filmmaking process was like for you? How much were you able to contribute to the artistic vision of the project? **Nikki Giovanni:** Mostly I tried to stay out of the way. My contribution was already [there], so I wanted Michèle and Joe to create from my thoughts and creations. I must add I was thrilled at how they used the future with history, which is pretty much how I think.

You are well known for writing poems that reach across generations, chronicling family and societal histories. What impact do you hope this film might have on writers, especially Black poets, who view it now and in the future? If I could compare this documentary to any other film I would say *The Godfather*. The history and the love and the acceptance of duty are, I hope, in it.

What excites you most about where American poetry is today? The voice of Black Americans has continually evolved. We are now at rap but another tone is coming. People all over are writing and reading poetry. There are festivals and there are classes. Wow! A lot of folk used to not even know about poetry who are now a part of its growth.

Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project

October 28 | The Paramount Theater | With discussion

You've talked elsewhere about your quest not to let the world negatively influence you. At a time when so much is happening, and news of these happenings is so readily available to us 24/7, what helps you maintain that inner sanctum?

I avoid what I believe is called social media. I never argue to, at, or with people for whom I have no intellectual respect. I have a great belief in the strength of our ancestors who passed their wisdom along through The Spirituals. I prefer happiness.—*Irène Mathieu*

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The making of *Taking*



COURTESY OF VAFF

Shot on 16mm film in Charlottesville, Danny Wagner's *For the Taking* fuses a homegrown heist plot with a cast of varied acting experience.

Danny Wagner knows he's a baby in the modern movie biz.

The young filmmaker has worked as a production assistant for major television studios on shows like "Young Sheldon" and as a production coordinator on multiple feature films. But he says he's still "not there yet" when it comes to making it in Hollywood.

Wagner's own first feature film, *For the Taking*, could be the break he's been looking for. The movie will premiere at the Virginia Film Festival on Sunday.

"The Virginia Film Festival is the first film festival I ever knew, and getting to have our world premiere there is in some ways a climax," Wagner says. "Its reputation is prestigious, but it also gives movies like ours that are made in the area a chance to shine in a larger venue."

Wagner, a Charlottesville native and UVA grad, has filmmaking in his blood. Both his parents are documentarians, and he began learning about producing movies when he was "in the single digits."

The single digits wasn't so long ago for Wagner—he graduated from UVA in 2018—and his passion for cinema has persisted over the past two decades. He found his voice as an actor in school productions and at Live Arts, and while the university doesn't have a film

department or offer a filmmaking major, Wagner cut his teeth in the media studies department with a film theory concentration and by taking on internships. A work-study he completed with casting and production agency arvoid. was particularly enlightening, he says.

"That was an amazing way to understand the film scene not just in Virginia, but along the East Coast and Eastern Seaboard," Wagner says. "I made a reel of the actors they had in big projects—'House of Cards,' 'Turn,' and others—and all the talent they had helped cultivate in Virginia really opened my eyes."

Wagner says *For the Taking*, a 77-minute heist flick, was a happy accident of the 2020 pandemic. The emerging filmmaker and then-Los Angeles resident was forced back to his hometown of Charlottesville when work dried up. Staying in touch with other industry folks in Virginia, New York, L.A., and beyond, he hatched an idea: Write a script about a guy down on his luck and forced into a caper, cast two unknowns as lead actors, bring in more experienced thespians to guide the newbies, and film the whole thing in rustic 16mm.

The result is an eccentric movie with a raw edge that Wagner believes he was only able to capture using a couple guys new to the silver screen.

"I got really excited about the idea of capturing their little idiosyncratic mistakes to create natural moments," the filmmaker says. "And I think the natural occurrences make you feel excited for them to succeed. It has been a long, rocky process to get it finished, but it does live by that principle—a spontaneous, authentic, and organic set of characters."

Wagner also sees *For the Taking*'s home-made quality as a plus in modern distribution. Could he move the film over to YouTube at

For the Taking

October 29 | Culbreth Theatre |
With discussion

some point? Cut the whole thing up and turn it into TikToks? Take it on the road and show it outdoors on projectors? He's open to anything if it means more people see his movie.

"*For the Taking* has only taken my money so far, but everyone who has worked on this film has equity in it, and if the film succeeds, we all succeed," Wagner says. "We all see it as a stepping stone, and I am really happy with what we made. It's breezy, authentic, and heartfelt. I think there's an audience for it."—Shea Gibbs

Five films you don't want to miss at VAFF 2023

The Holdovers

Director Alexander Payne is a devoted cinephile who loves the style of intimate, wryly funny, character-driven films that were plentiful 50 years ago but are now nearly extinct. Payne's films honor this bygone era of storytelling in welcome ways, including his newest work, *The Holdovers*. Set in 1970, the reliable Paul Giamatti stars as a miserable New England boarding school teacher who forges unlikely bonds with a student (Dominic Sessa) and the school's chief cook (Da'Vine Joy Randolph) while they're stuck together over Christmas break. Based on extensive positive buzz, *The Holdovers* looks very promising. (October 28, The Paramount Theater)



IMAGES COURTESY VAFF

Immediate Family

Denny Tedesco's excellent 2008 documentary *The Wrecking Crew* shone a spotlight on some of the 1960s pop music industry's greatest unsung session musicians. In *Immediate Family*, Tedesco continues his coverage of extraordinary studio players into the 1970s singer-songwriter movement. Tedesco's interviewees include these backing musicians, professionally nicknamed "The Immediate Family," and many of the musical superstars whose sound they contributed (largely anonymously) to, like Stevie Nicks, Neil Young, Carole King, James Taylor, and Linda Ronstadt. (October 27, Violet Crown 3)



Maestro

Director and star Bradley Cooper's biopic *Maestro* explores composer and conductor

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The good and the bad



COURTESY OF VAFF

Filmmakers trace William Faulkner's complicated southern identity in *Faulkner: The Past is Never Dead*.

Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner arrived at the University of Virginia more than 60 years ago to begin his tenure as the first writer-in-residence. During his time in Charlottesville, Faulkner visited English classes, kept office hours, worked on his novel *The Mansion*, and left a lasting impact on the area's literary, and wine, scene (His descendants own and run Knight's Gambit Vineyard in Crozet.)

Faulkner: The Past is Never Dead, a new documentary from director Michael Modak-Truran, explores the life and work of the renowned-yet-flawed literary figure. Using a variety of storytelling techniques, including interviews, archival photographs, and newspaper images, the film immerses viewers in Faulkner's world, paying special attention to his sometimes paradoxical words on race.

"Faulkner's 'unflinching gaze' dissected issues of race relations, equality, and civil rights—themes that continue to resonate today," says the doc's Executive Producer Anita Modak-Truran, who speaks at this year's Virginia Film Festival. "Faulkner's relevance is painfully obvious. The issues of race and change that animated Faulkner's writing were, and are, at the forefront of the American zeitgeist."

Though Faulkner is frequently lauded for his at-the-time progressive views about Black Americans and racial equality in his writing, he sometimes made racist remarks. Modak-Tru-

ran says the documentary avoids presenting Faulkner through a revisionist history lens, and instead lets viewers untangle the good and the bad for themselves.

What sets *The Past is Never Dead* apart from other documentaries is its captivating reenactments, historical locations, and original score. The camera follows Faulkner through five decades, and steps inside real haunts from his past, including his Mississippi home Rowan

Faulkner: The Past is Never Dead

October 29 | Violet Crown 5 | With discussion

Oak. When casting an actor to play the writer, filmmakers landed on Academy Award-nominee Eric Roberts.

"It gave me chills watching Eric from the set monitor navigating a spectrum of emotions," says Modak-Truran. "[He] cracked through the contemplative Faulkner's surface and traveled to internal places we may not want to see, like when he tells his daughter Jill, that 'no one remembers Shakespeare's child.' It's like a gut punch. Eric makes Faulkner's words his own. His narration, in particular, is so richly nuanced that it lulls us into the heart of a troubled soul who is trying to understand the world around him."—Maeve Hayden

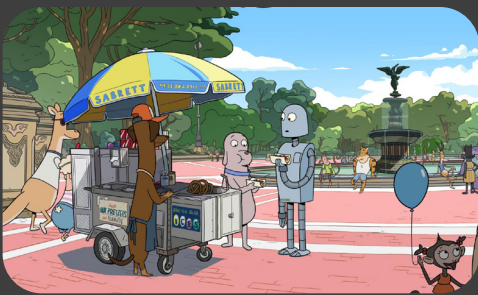
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Leonard Bernstein's (Cooper) complex relationship with his wife, actress Felicia Montealegre (Carey Mulligan). Bernstein's extraordinary career and his romantic life are definitely rich material to work with, and the initial consensus is that Cooper has noticeably matured as a director since his acclaimed *A Star is Born*. (October 25, The Paramount Theater)



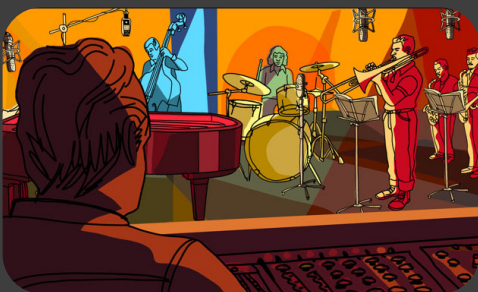
Robot Dreams

Spanish animator Pablo Berger's *Robot Dreams*, based on Sara Varon's graphic novel, looks to be the kind of thoughtful, challenging animated feature that rarely gets made or released in America anymore. Sadly, ambitious productions like this usually get ground under by big studios' animated spectacles. Grab your chance to see this film about a lonely anthropomorphic dog and his robot companion in 1980s New York while you can. (October 28, Violet Crown 1 & 2)



They Shot the Piano Player

Directors Fernando Trueba and Javier Mari-scaI filmed *They Shot the Piano Player* in stylized "limited" animation built on Trueba's research into the 1976 disappearance of bossa nova pianist Francisco Tenório, Jr. Jeff Goldblum voices Trueba's on-screen stand-in, a fictional reporter seeking closure to this gifted musician's story. Audio from actual interviews with Tenório's family and peers are interwoven in animated form throughout this visually and musically vibrant film. (October 27, Violet Crown 6 & 7)—Justin Humphreys



Iconoclastic as ever

For many years, filmmaker and UVA film professor Kevin Jerome Everson has figured prominently in Charlottesville's moviemaking community. His experimental films have continually bypassed cinematic conventions in favor of "formal exercises," he explains. A regular Virginia Film Festival guest, Everson will screen nine shorts on Friday, "all shot this calendar year," he notes, and marked by his idiosyncratic style.

Everson's suite of films focuses on disparate subjects, including birdwatchers; a drive-in theater; and a zoologist returning an

A Suite of Short Films by Kevin Jerome Everson

October 27 | Violet Crown 5 |
With discussion

endangered Puerto Rican crested toad from the Detroit Zoo to its homeland. Conventional Hollywood fare, this is not.

Practice, Practice, Practice meditates on monuments' removal through its subject, Richard Bradley. "They call him 'the original monument taker-downer' because he climbed a flagpole three times to take

down a Confederate flag in San Francisco," Everson says.

The most technically challenging film was *Boyd v. Denton*, shot at the Ohio State Reformatory in Everson's hometown, Mansfield, Ohio. The title refers to the 1990 court case that got the reformatory closed for overcrowding and brutal living conditions.

To convey a sense of the prison's environment, Everson says he shot "a maximum of four frames of 920 cells. ... It's animation—just going 24 frames per second. ... It took like six-and-a-half hours to make because I had to walk into every cell," Everson laughs.

"The Ohio State Reformatory is the highest cellblock on earth: it's six stories high. ... [Filming] it took forever."

Although these films' subjects vary wildly, Everson sees a theme that binds his more character-driven pieces. He says, "It's mostly ... just making the invisible visible. Because we always think that things are automatically being done but there's somebody waking up in the morning and doing these things for the public."

Through these shorts, Everson wants his audience to come away knowing "that there's other ways of presenting cinema," he explains. "There's other ways of presenting content. It's not just storytelling—sometimes the situations are pretty good, too. And there's all kinds of stories being told."—Justin Humphreys



COURTESY OF VAFF

Boyd v. Denton is one of nine new short films by Kevin Jerome Everson.



COURTESY OF VAFF

 Ricardo Preve reflects on his arrival in Charlottesville in *Sometime, Somewhere*, which will have its world premiere at the Virginia Film Festival.

Now and then

Things have changed a lot since Ricardo Preve arrived at the bus station in Charlottesville in 1977 without money or a passport. There weren't many Latinos in town then, and he found the locals welcoming, if ignorant about Latin America.

"It was so easy to become a citizen in the '80s," recalls Preve. When he became eligible for American citizenship, his boss called his congressman, who called a federal judge, and Preve was sworn in the next day. "I think the whole process took 48 hours from beginning to end."

Now, he says, there's no path to citizenship, and the current waiting time for a Mexican is 22 years.

"I feel the attitude toward foreigners has changed," says Preve, who was born in Argentina. He cites September 11, 2001, January 6, 2021, and August 12, 2017, as "moments that exacerbated and brought out things that may have been here, but were hidden."

His latest film, *Sometime, Somewhere*, is "a reflection on my past after being in this town for 45 years," he says. He uses Charlottesville to tell the story, not only of contemporary migrants, but of this country's history of immigration.

Preve had an advantage many immigrants don't have. His aunt, Countess Judith Gyurky, also an immigrant who fled Hungary during World War II, established a horse farm in Batesville. "They received me with open arms," he recalls.

In Preve's film, the forced migration of African Americans is remembered by Jamaican-born Andrea Douglas, executive director

of the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center, at the University of Virginia's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers.

The Irish also play a part in the local immigration story. Fleeing the potato famine, they built the Blue Ridge Tunnel in the 1850s. And on Heather Heyer Way, Preve films where white supremacy took off its mask.

Preve links *The Grapes of Wrath's* Joads, who were escaping the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma, to the immigrant experience. "Substitute Garcia or Gonzales for Joad, and it's the same story," he says. "This is a repeating story in American history. People are exploited and they're considered less than human."

Preve didn't ask about the immigration status of the people he interviews in the film, some of whom he found through Sin Barreras—Without Barriers—an organization that supports the Hispanic community.

"At first, people were worried I was undercover ICE," he says. Then they heard his Argentinian-accented Spanish. "The rest of Latin America finds it amusing," he explains. "It's like a person from Alabama going to New York City. They realized we could not be undercover."

The migrants and the immigration attorneys he talks to paint a dire picture of how the decisions to come to America are made.

"If you're facing execution or starvation or rape, your choice is to either accept your fate or cross the border," he says. "It is a death sentence to be a 15-year-old Salva-

doran boy and the MS-13 says 'either you join or die.'" Same for a young woman tapped to be a gang girlfriend.

He gave all the migrants the option to remain anonymous, and he was a little surprised at the number who gave their names. "I think that reflects a need for people to be humanized," says Preve.

Preve, 66, made a career change in the early 2000s, moving from agroforestry to filmmaking. One of his earliest documentaries, *Chagas: A Hidden Affliction*, brought attention to a rampant disease that's pretty

Sometime, Somewhere

October 28 | Culbreth Theatre |
With discussion

much unheard of in the United States. Since then, he's made almost 30 productions for television and film, most recently, *From Sudan to Argentina*.

Sometime, Somewhere is a more personal film for Preve. He tells film students at Light House Studio to pick a story they're uniquely qualified to tell. "Immigrating from Latin America to Charlottesville is something I was uniquely qualified to tell," he says.

And this story came with a special perk. "I got to sleep at home every night," he says. "It was wonderful to stay in my hometown and shoot a film here."—Lisa Provence