

# *Star Power*

IT'S A GALAXY OF STARS AND SCREENINGS AT THE MAUI FILM FESTIVAL

By RICK CHATENEVER



**Actor Colin Farrell gets it.** Shortly after arriving at last year's Maui Film Festival at Wailea, he had it all summed up. "It's so laid back," commented the soulful, Golden Globe-winning Irishman before accepting the 2015 Navigator Award. "I was here for an hour and I was going, 'Which other award can I receive? Do I have to wait for a lifetime now?'" Illustrating his point, during the press interview he wore a vest, white shirt, loosened tie ... and beach flip-flops.

Maui's cinema celebration, returning for its 17th season June 15 to 19, is all about the Big Picture. It raises cosmic questions, such as how do you measure the distance from a star to a movie star? At the Maui Film Festival, they're close enough to fit in the same frame. Night skies crowded with stars provide the ceiling for the festival's signature venue, the Celestial Cinema. The rest of the year, this grassy natural bowl at the foot of Haleakalā volcano is the driving range for Wailea's world-renowned Gold and Emerald golf courses.

But for one week in June, enhanced by crystalline Dolby Sound, the 50-foot screen becomes the centerpiece of a sublime outdoor projection room. Astronomer Harriet Witt leads a tour of the heavens each night before the awards and the screenings. Sometimes there's hula dancing. Audiences numbering in the thousands spread out comfortably across the natural amphitheater on blankets and beach or low-back chairs. There's golf-cart seating for VIP guests.

It's the place Hollywood comes to get Mauied.

Besides nightly double features at the Celestial Cinema, the festival offers free, family-friendly films at the Toes-in-the-Sand Cinema on the beach. Indoor screenings are across the island at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center. On view are Oscar contenders and quirky indies. Environmental and music documentaries are programming staples, along with the most spectacular celluloid surfing action in any given year. The festival embraces thought-provoking, challenging and uplifting themes—founder and director Barry Rivers dubs it "life-affirming storytelling"—but that doesn't preclude rollicking comedies or feel-good escapes.

Awards recipients include legends such as Clint Eastwood, Willie Nelson and Pierce Brosnan. Oscar, Emmy and Golden Globe veterans like Geena Davis, William Hurt, Clare Danes, Joan Allen, William H. Macy, Patricia Clarkson, Dennis Quaid and last year's Rainmaker recipient, Laura Dern, have been honorees. The list goes on and on.

The Maui Film Festival also has a knack for spotting upward-bound artists before they become the industry's next big thing. Lupita Nyong'o, Andrew Garfield, Zoey Deschanel, Olivia Wilde and Elizabeth Banks were recognized by the festival just before the rest of the world took notice, and so was Brie Larson. In 2013 she accepted the Maui Film Festival's Rising Star award; earlier this year at the Golden Globes,

Larson was voted Best Actress in a drama for her role in "Room."

Six months before his co-starring role would help make "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" the film event of the year, 29-year-old Adam Driver accepted the Shining Star Award. "It feels completely undeserved and humbling at the beginning of what you hope will be a long career," Driver commented during his hilarious interview award presentation.

"I mean, what am I doing here ... on this golf course?"

When "Star Wars" did open, Marine veteran Driver used the occasion to focus attention on Arts in the Armed Forces, a non-profit organization he founded.

"He's this very cool, smart, hip, honorable guy, and that's the bull's-eye of what we're trying to do with these awards," says Rivers.

Another festival signature is a commitment to the host culture of the islands. The world premiere of "Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau" touched the hearts of more than 3,000 audience members. Aikau's disappearance at sea while seeking help for the stricken ocean-voyaging canoe Hōkūle'a added to the mythology surrounding him, and "Eddie would go" became a cultural anthem.

Last year's Rising Star honoree Scott Eastwood was keenly aware that his dad had accepted the festival's Silversword plaque more than a decade earlier.

"It's wild to be able to share a family business," added Laura Dern, "which many of us

have, whether it's surfing, or skateboarding, or farming or acting."

Filmmaker panels Saturday at the Wailea Beach Marriott Resort & Spa offer glimpses into the minds of the behind-the-camera artists and the provocative themes they raise with their labor-of-love projects.

On the other hand, you could get a full festival experience without seeing a single movie. Wailea twilight provides the lighting and spectacular sets for the casually elegant Taste of Summer party that launches the festival at the Grand Wailea, as well as the culinary delights of the Taste of Wailea on the hill above the Celestial Cinema on Saturday. A Taste of Chocolate at the Four Seasons Resort is also a backdrop for stardom.

As director Rivers says, "Maui Film Festival: It's where Maui meets Maui ... and Maui meets the world."



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