

Movie Night

STARRY NIGHTS AT THE MAUI FILM FESTIVAL

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For five days each summer—June 21-25 this year—Wailea goes to the movies.

The Maui Film Festival, returning for its 18th season, turns beaches and resorts into backdrops and sets. Pastel twilight and starry night skies add the lighting design for the lively montage of screenings, culinary events, filmmaker panels and late-night parties.

This is Maui's answer to "La La Land," with screenings at Wailea and the Maui Arts & Cultural Center in Kahului. In Wailea, though, everything is al fresco, dress is tropical chic and beach flip-flops are fine for footwear.

The driving range for Wailea's Gold and Emerald golf courses at the foot of Haleakalā volcano becomes the Celestial Cinema, a screening room for the gods with a 50-foot screen and crystalline Dolby sound. Audiences of thousands get comfortable on blankets and beach chairs; VIPs sit on golf carts in the back.

The menu: potential Oscar contenders, quirky indies, great surfing action, environmental, music and animated documentaries and shorts. The Celestial screen also provides close-ups of festival honorees in live tribute interviews before the films. Barry Rivers, the festival's founder and co-director with his wife, Stella, calls the honorees "luminaries" rather than "stars," since they "radiate more light than heat." They range from venerable screen legends to young artists destined for greatness. The festival spotted Jake Gyllenhaal, Zooey Deschanel, Elizabeth Banks, Andrew Garfield and Brie Larson the moment before the Hollywood A-list and Oscar voters took notice.

"What this festival clearly shows is an appreciation for film as an art form as opposed to just a pastime," said last year's Navigator Award honoree Bryan Cranston. Iconic star Goldie Hawn showed up unannounced to watch her son, Wyatt Russell, accept his Rising Star Award. Rainmaker Award recipient Michael B. Jordan, breakout star of "Fruitvale Station" and "Creed," had no trouble getting on Maui time.

"It seems like everyone I talk to here came for one visit and decided to sell everything and move here," he said.

And, after politely asking if she could "cuss," Viola Davis—who went on to win a Golden Globe and at press time is a likely Oscar contender—punctuated a story about her "Fences" director and co-star Denzel Washington with a particularly strong expletive that elicited peals of laughter, followed by a standing ovation, from a crowd of several thousand.

There's a lot of spirit and soul, and as Rivers puts it:

*To Explore Our Shared Humanity,
Spark Visions for Better Tomorrows,
Keep Dreams Alive, and Generate
Tears of Joy, Compassion and Laughter,
Is What We Do and Why We're Here.*

