

Poland's American Film Festival Unspools 13th Annual Showcase of Contemporary and Classic American Cinema

By Christopher Vourlias ▾



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A cross-section of works from revered masters and fresh faces will take center stage at Poland's [American Film Festival](#) (AFF), whose 13th edition takes place Nov. 8 – 13 in Wrocław, Poland.

Established in 2010 as the sister event of the [New Horizons Film Festival](#), a showcase of independent and arthouse cinema launched in 2001, the AFF bills itself as the first film event in Central Europe solely devoted to the works of contemporary and classic American cinema.

"We are searching for those voices, those auteurs, those talents and tendencies, and those waves of American film that are the most original and show some vibes of the current moment," said festival director Ula Śniegowska.

Similar in spirit to France's long-running Deauville American Film Festival, which this year will host its 48th edition, the AFF aims to spotlight the breadth and diversity of contemporary American filmmaking.

Śniegowska describes last year's opening film, Wes Anderson's "The French Dispatch" (pictured), as a "perfect example of the spectrum of the festival that we're covering," ranging from "studio films with an auteur's stamp on it" to smaller indies that showcase "new talent and new tendencies in American film."

"To satisfy and attract audiences, that's usually done with bigger names. Luckily, America does have those auteur names that are supported by the studios, like Wes Anderson or Jim Jarmusch, not to mention P.T. Anderson. Recognizable names and talent that draws larger audiences," she continued. "But we also want to go underground and look there and present experimental and lowest-budget but highest-creative-energy films as well."

The selection process naturally draws from events showcasing the best of indie American filmmaking, with many of the titles screening in Wrocław having premiered at festivals such as Sundance, SXSW or Tribeca. The programming team, however, also has a call for general submissions that can "sometimes find films that are not yet on the circuit," said Śniegowska.

The festival has two competition strands, with the Spectrum section offering a panorama of contemporary American cinema focused on mid-career filmmakers and those making significant directorial debuts, alongside the American Docs competition for non-fiction films. Last year's winners, which are chosen by audience members, were Diego Ongaro's "Down with the King" and Angela Washko's "Workhorse Queen."

Along with non-competitive sections spotlighting the work of more established directors, the AFF each year presents its Indie Star Award to a recognized master of independent filmmaking. Past winners have included Todd Solondz, Jerry Schatzberg, Sarah Driver and John Waters (below), who accompanied his 2021 award and retrospective with a performance of his stand-up show "This Filthy World" and a drag show featuring performers from around Poland.

Another highlight of the festival is the U.S. in Progress program, which invites American narrative feature projects in rough or final cut seeking finishing funds, pairing them with European buyers and top Polish image and sound post-production companies. This year the event will offer cash and in-kind awards totaling \$100,000.

"It's a really great way to approach American, independent, smaller-budget filmmakers by inviting them to Poland in the earlier stage of their production," said Śniegowska. "It's just so wonderful to have the first audience in Europe and hear the feedback from [the industry]...and to hear their criticism and support." Recent alumni of the program include Pete Ohs, whose genre-bending horror film "Jethica" premiered this year at SXSW.

Also in the cards is the first chapter of a two-part retrospective dedicated to Robert Altman, the prolific, iconoclastic filmmaker who was Oscar-nominated five times as a director. "Altman's America," said Śniegowska, will spotlight "those Altman movies that are an acute criticism of American society." Next year the American Film Festival will present "Altman's Women," a selection of the director's female-centric films.

The program of this year's American Film Festival is yet to be announced, though the fest has racked up an enviable track record for landing critically acclaimed films, including the Polish premieres of titles including Kelly Reichardt's "First Cow," David Byrne's "American Utopia" and Eliza Hittman's "Never Rarely Sometimes Always."

Last year's hybrid event racked up 36,000 admissions for both in-person and online screenings, a turnout that Śniegowska described as "super good" in light of the scope of the five-day event. Nevertheless, she admits, "there is still room to grow."

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