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## Where monsters meet Christmas sweaters: Cool Filmfest opens Thursday at OMSI

Portland Festival of Cinema, Animation & Technology brings hundreds of shorts and animation to OMSI for a four-day blowout

Joseph Gallivan  
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1 of 7



“We were very selective of what kind of AI projects that we took into the festival,” said festival founder Peter Issac Alexander. “We looked for AI projects that didn’t use AI to do all the heavy lifting, but treated it as a new tool, just part of the process.” CRITTERZ is it.

Courtesy Photo: Portland Festival of Cinema, Animation & Technology

For Peter Issac Alexander, technology moves quickly, but great filmmaking comes from a certain craft and magic. Alexander is the founder of the [Portland Festival of Cinema, Animation & Technology](#), which from Aug. 3-6 is showcasing 68 animated films. The festival features a total of 119 films, including numerous shorts and 111 premieres of world or regional premieres.

Scrolling through the titles is like stumbling upon a decent streaming channel — not Crackle, Starz or Tubi, or even the tired old wares of Amazon and Netflix. And at \$40 for an all-access, four-day pass, it’s a bargain for anyone who loves the big screen.

The Portland Festival of Cinema, Animation & Technology is kid-friendly, with everything before 5 p.m. being suitable for children.

Animator Bill Plympton will be at the festival (who could forget “[Guns on the Clackamas](#)”?). Plympton, now 77, will be doing a special presentation, showcasing some of his favorite works from his career, including five minutes from his new feature “Slide,” which he animated himself — all 44,000 drawings of it. He’ll also be giving one free drawing to each person at his meet-and-greet.

Other highlights include: The stop-motion short “Of Wood,” where everything is carved into a block of wood. The director is Owen Klatte (“The Nightmare Before Christmas,” “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1” and Disney’s “Dinosaur”). Characters emerge from the wood, Michelangelo-style.

Besides sci-fi, drama, comedy and gaming, there is work made using artificial intelligence as a tool, rather than relying on Artificial Intelligence entirely.

For example, “CRITTERZ” is an AI project by Chad Nelson. While filming an unexplored forest, a stuffy science documentarian gets more than he bargained for when he meets a gang of feisty little Critterz with unforeseen personalities.



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## **Walls have ears**

The Advanced Technology Showcase will show films made using the hottest thing in (penny-pinching) Hollywood: LED walls, which are backgrounds made of many monitors tiled together, for virtual production, like what was used in “The Mandalorian.”

Real actors stand with high resolution video screens on three sides. The background — mountain, castle, evil villain’s lair — look more realistic than green screen CGI, and actors don’t have to pretend so hard since they can see what we can see.

In “New Air” on a distant planet, human explorers are forging a new future on a brutal, resource-scarce world. “That (nine-minute) project was shot in four days on an LED stage and was produced entirely using virtual production in real time. People that come out to the festival and see that project are going to be very impressed, especially if they realize how it was produced,” said Alexander.

## **Docsetera**

Only at [PDX Fest](#) can someone utter these immortal words: “We have a really cool documentary about copyright infringement,” but Alexander said that of CJ Hendry’s movie “Copyright Infringement.” It explores the law of copyright infringement, social media and the value systems of the contemporary art market.



Another short to watch out for is “Fear Incarnate” directed by Dylan Coburn, the visual effects art director on the “Lord of the Rings” TV series, “The Rings of Power” on Amazon.


“Our Males and Females” is an interesting look at gender in the Muslim world, when a family in Jordan can’t agree on who should wash the corpse of a transgender female member. “It’s a very well shot, very, very hard-hitting drama,” said Alexander.

“Quantum Cowboys” might thrill actor-trackers. The cast includes David Arquette and Lily Gladstone, who is also the lead in Martin Scorsese’s Apple TV movie “Killers of the Flower Moon,” about the Osage tribe and their oil money. “She’s definitely a rising star for sure.” And for locavores, Portland-based filmmaker Justin Graham made “As Seen on TV” about an inventor who makes a TV robot which becomes his friend. Graham was the roto lead on “ParaNorman” at Laika, and the piece sings with urban grime and analog energy.

## Winning of Hallmark

The festival is giving out 28 awards, and the jury includes director David Winning.

Winning has been a friend of the festival since his early sci-fi days, when he was making “Dinotopia” (2002) and “Stargate Atlantis” (2004), although he made his first feature film, Storm (1985), at 22, with just \$50,000.



He has time to come to Portland because of the writers and actors strikes in Hollywood. Normally he’d be super busy on his stock in trade these days, directing Christmas movies for the Hallmark Channel.

At the festival, “Mainly I’ll greet the filmmakers, and encourage people, which is kind of what I’m doing as I get into my older years, trying to give back to people and get people interested in making movies,” Winning told Pamplin Media.

Broadcast quality video cameras on our phones amazes him. “And it’s good, too, because it puts the tools in more hands, it just gets more people making movies, which is great.”

Winning recalls wanting to make movies as a kid in Canada, first by tacking short films together. Then, when he wanted to make a feature, he took the money his father earmarked for film school and used that to make “Storm.”

Paying for film stock in the 1980s, he could only afford to shoot a three-to-one ratio. Now it's almost unlimited.

Now he tells students to start by making a trailer.

"You end up with a calling card as the director, which can be used to raise some money to make your first full length movie," said Winning.

"I was editing and directing and writing and getting friends to do the music and stuff. I never liked acting, I was glad not to do that. I have great respect for actors it's a hard job."

## **Judge not**

The 10 jurors get a code and watch the movies at home online, two months in advance. He judges not as a director, but on the entertainment factor, as his sole criterion.

"It's kind of fun, (but) I much prefer the theater. It's fun to be able to get back to the theater now with COVID a little bit in the rearview mirror for everybody. It's fun to get back to that communal experience."

He prefers Spielberg's mix of CGI and rubber dinosaurs to the full-on CGI of today, but admits times are changing.

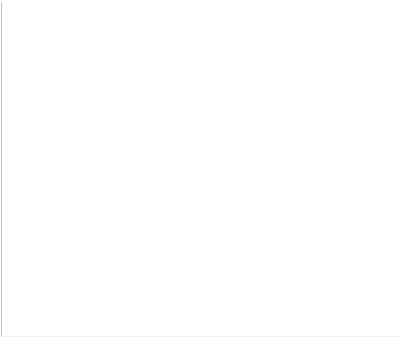
"If you don't believe a story, then you can't really get entertained by it."

Currently he's loving "The Bear" on TV and plans to watch "Succession."

"I never really got into 'Game of Thrones' kind of stuff. I like science fiction. Fantasy doesn't do much for me. I prefer the drama stuff."

## **Cookies, hot chocolate, snow, kiss**

Winning has just finished his 26th Christmas movie. "The Christmas movie genre, when I started six, seven years back, I was working on the vampire series, Van Helsing, which is a very action packed and violent. So I went in with the attitude that anything's entertainment. The challenge is that people do think they're predictable. Spoiler alert, they'll have happy endings. But how you get there is part of the challenge of being the director, and I just love trying to fool people and play around with the storylines. They allow you to do that because they're not spending more money. You know, producers are happy that it's entertaining. And I've been really proud of the movies that I've done for them."



He has two more coming out this fall. One is called “Field Day,” with Rachel Boston and Benjamin Ayers. The second is with Lori Loughlin, working title “Blessings of Christmas.”

He likes the efficiency.

“They’re all shot quickly. They’re prepped in just under three weeks, and they’re usually shot in 15 days or less. I did one of the Christmas movies in 11 days a few years ago that ended up on the New York Times top five list of Best Christmas movies of the year. A lot of fun. It was called ‘The Tree that Saved Christmas.’ (A woman returns to her Vermont hometown to try and save her family’s Christmas tree farm from foreclosure.) That was for Up TV, with Lacey Chabert, one of the Hallmark darlings, although it wasn’t a Hallmark movie.”

Winning says they’re cheap to make, \$500,000 to \$1 million dollars. “You have to organize it like a like a general, everything’s got to happen like clockwork to get it done.”

Shooting with multiple cameras just means he must do fewer takes and get it right sooner.

## **Snow**

British Columbia isn’t just for Marvel Movies and sci-fi. Now it’s for Christmas movies too.

He hopes the strikes end soon and believes it’s time the actors were paid properly. “People think of actors as all rich stars living in their mansions. And it’s just not like that. I mean, 99 percent of actors are just regular folks trying to make a living, pulling a paycheck every two weeks.”



In the lull, Winning has been writing, doing his accounts and cleaning his home.

“It’s a lot of the boring stuff that happens, that I don’t do when I’m working full time. And I get to go to wonderful places like Portland. I haven’t really had a summer off in the last 15 years because most of the Christmas movies are made in the summer. Your extras are all bundled up in 100-degree weather trying to look like it’s cold and December!”

They are greenlit at the last minute, which makes summer the shooting season. “I did one in Ontario in Canada where there's actual snow in February, 3 feet. We were filming and it wasn't fake snow for the first time. And the folks back in L.A. were saying ‘This looks so realistic!’ It was a very hard shoot to do. But it certainly looked great, not like the fake snow blankets that we must put down.

"But you know the movie magic, right? It's all about transporting people into another planet."

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Reporter