June 12, 2018

Film festival programmer receives Distinguished Alumni Award

Edmonton – When Brenda Lieberman goes to the movies she often isn’t concentrating on the big screen. She’s listening for every cheer, clap or snicker from the audience. That’s because she’s the lead programmer for the Calgary International Film Festival (CIFF).

Lieberman graduated from the Arts and Cultural Management program in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Communications in 1998.

As a programmer she watches hundreds of movies each year, but it’s the audience response to a perfectly selected film that gets her most fired up. “It’s the best feeling when you program a film you think is perfect for an audience and you can feel that excitement in the theatre,” says Lieberman. “There’s a vibe that you can’t get by sitting at home and watching a movie.”

Lieberman is now at the top of her game in Calgary, but it wasn’t always that way. She got there by creating opportunities for herself by volunteering relentlessly. For eight years she volunteered as the programmer for the Fairy Tales Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Calgary. She also played a lead role in the fundraising efforts that led to the creation of the CIFF in 1999.

In 2003, Lieberman helped create the Calgary Underground Film Festival (CUFF) as another outlet for unconventional independent films. CUFF recently celebrated its seventh season. “The goal is to increase the amount of independent films in Calgary,” she said. “I want to ensure that Calgarians have access to the best independent films.”

Her Late Show series of high-impact, over-the-top films is a top draw for the festival, partly because she has developed a following of film watchers interested in her distinct cinematic selections. “People follow film programmers like some people follow certain musicians or a particular author,” she said. “I hope that I am starting to showcase a style of programming that is unique for Calgary and that people trust me enough to show up to a movie just because I selected it.”

For Lieberman, audience engagement is what it’s all about. “You need bums in the seats to validate why you exist as a festival.”

Lieberman will receive her Distinguished Alumni Award during the spring convocation ceremonies on Thursday, June 21 at the Winspear Centre.

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