



Operator of the iconic Hi-Pointe Theatre and presenter of the St. Louis International Film Festival (SLIFF), St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase, QFest St. Louis, and Robert French Film Festival

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Cinema St. Louis Wraps 34th Whitaker St. Louis International Film Festival With Strong Attendance and Audience Choice Award Winners: “Hamnet,” “Undercard,” and “Steal This Story, Please!”

ST. LOUIS, MO., The 34th Annual Whitaker St. Louis International Film Festival (SLIFF), presented by arts nonprofit Cinema St. Louis (CSL), closed 11 days of screenings, events, and conversations that drew **22,921 participants**, a nearly 60% increase over 2024, including **12,292 public attendees** and **10,629 students from 202 schools** through Cinema for Students. Public attendance grew by roughly 24% year over year, and Cinema for Students participation more than doubled, reflecting both a major rebound in school engagement and strong demand for in-person screenings. Audiences filled theaters across 12 venues in Missouri and Illinois, casting thousands of ballots and helping crown this year’s audience and juried award winners.

This year’s festival featured **271 films** representing 39 countries and 37 languages, carefully selected from more than 2,500 submissions. Leaning into a “quality over quantity” approach, SLIFF continued its post-pandemic shift away from the nearly 400-title schedules of the past and toward fewer, more impactful screenings. Since the strategic pivot in 2022, public attendance has climbed nearly 70%, and in 2025, the festival averaged about 45 attendees per film, bringing room counts back in line with pre-pandemic levels. Even with a smaller slate, engagement remained strong and rooms were fuller, reflecting a strategy focused on creating “must-see” experiences rather than competing showtimes.

Guided by this year’s festival theme, **FILM WITHOUT BORDERS**, SLIFF invited audiences to explore how film can unite communities. From marquee events and classes to intimate Q&As, the festival highlighted stories that echoed the theme’s core ideas, challenging viewers to see the familiar in new ways and discover perspectives far beyond their own.

More than **200 volunteers** helped make the festival possible, welcoming guests, managing venues, assisting filmmakers, and keeping screenings running smoothly. Their combined hours exceeded 1,500 during the festival, underscoring how deeply the St. Louis community powers SLIFF behind the scenes.

Across the festival, audiences cast thousands of ballots, awarding the coveted Audience Choice Awards to their favorite documentary feature, **“Steal This Story, Please!”** directed by SLIFF alum Carl Deal, showcasing the incredible work of Amy Goodman with Democracy Now; favorite narrative feature, **“Undercard,”** directed by SLIFF

Cinema St. Louis’ mission is to engage the St. Louis region through educational programs, cultural connectivity, and curated film exhibitions.

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alum, Tamika Miller and starring Wanda Sykes in her first dramatic role; and favorite studio film, “**Hamnet**,” directed by Chloé Zhao.

In addition, the following awards were also given out during SLIFF:

Contemporary Cinema Award

The Contemporary Cinema Award celebrates mid-career filmmakers who are creating bold, innovative work that challenges conventions and expands the language of film. It recognizes artists whose vision and risk-taking push contemporary cinema forward and deepen our understanding of the world through their craft. Previous winners include Jay and Mark Duplass, Alex Gibney, Trent Harris, Stanley Nelson, Arsen Anton Ostojic, Doug Pray, Jason Reitman, Marco Williams, and Terry Zwigoff.

2025 Winner: Razi Jafri

Razi Jafri is a documentary filmmaker and producer. His film HAMTRAMCK, USA, premiered at SXSW and aired nationally on PBS. Razi produced THREE CHAPLAINS, which was broadcast on the PBS program Independent Lens, and ROUGE, which premiered at the Hot Docs Film Festival. He has been awarded fellowships by the Kresge Foundation, the Knight-Sundance Fellowship, the Sundance Producers Fellowship, and the Sundance-Disney Fellowship.

Women in Film Award

The Women in Film Award honors women who have made a significant and lasting impact on the film industry through their artistry, leadership, and advocacy. It celebrates those whose work has opened doors, inspired others, and helped shape a more inclusive and dynamic cinematic landscape. Previous winners of the Women in Film Award include Karen Allen, Nina Davenport, Pam Grier, Barbara Hammer, Marsha Hunt, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Melanie Mayron, Katie Mustard, Rosemary Rodriguez, Ry Russo-Young, Ricki Stern, Annie Sundberg, Kimberly Steward, Yvonne Welbon, Pamela Yates, Lisa Cortés, and Signe Baumann.

2025 Winner: Dori Berinstein

Dori Berinstein is a six-time Tony-winning Broadway producer, an Olivier winner, and an Emmy-award-winning director, producer, and writer of film & television. As a filmmaker, Dori’s award-winning work includes: SHOWBUSINESS: The Road To Broadway (Showtime), CAROL CHANNING: Larger Than Life (Showtime), and MARVIN HAMLISCH: What He Did For Love (Emmy Award – American Masters). She spearheaded creative development and production for DreamWorks Theatricals and has worked as a Producer and/or Executive for Paramount Pictures, Warner Brothers, Sony Pictures, NBC, MTV, Nickelodeon, Sesame Workshop, Oxygen Media, Vestron Pictures, and Walt Disney Imagineering.

Impact Award

The Impact Award, introduced in 2025, recognizes those who use the power of cinema to spark dialogue, inspire action, and create meaningful change in the world. It honors artists whose work goes beyond the screen, illuminating vital issues and amplifying voices that move audiences toward a deeper understanding of our shared humanity.

2025 Winner: Christine Handy

As a breast cancer survivor, mother, international speaker, and author, Christine uses her platform to uplift, inspire, and empower others to overcome adversity. Christine Handy, the subject of “**Hello, Beautiful**,” has turned her personal journey through illness and recovery into a powerful story of resilience, self-worth, and

hope. Her courage and openness remind us how film can inspire empathy and empower others to see beauty in their own struggles.

Trailblazer Award

Introduced to SLIFF in 2025, the Trailblazer Award honors an artist whose work has boldly expanded the possibilities of film and storytelling. It recognizes individuals who defy expectations, take creative risks, and use their voice to challenge convention.

2025 Winner: Wanda Sykes

Comedy icon Wanda Sykes received this year's Trailblazer Award, which honors artists whose work has expanded the boundaries of film and culture through courage, innovation, and authenticity. Throughout her career, Sykes has redefined what it means to be both hilarious and fearless—using her sharp humor and unmistakable voice to challenge convention and spark conversation across television, film, and stand-up.

Lifetime Achievement Award

The Lifetime Achievement Award honors an artist whose body of work has left a lasting mark on the world of film and culture. It celebrates a career defined by excellence, vision, and a deep commitment to telling stories that endure across generations.

2025 Winner: W. Kamau Bell

W. Kamau Bell has built a career that defies boundaries—blending comedy, commentary, and conscience to challenge audiences to think critically about race, justice, and community. Through his television work, stand-up, and documentaries, he's used storytelling as both a mirror and a catalyst, helping viewers see the world and themselves more clearly.

New Filmmakers Forum

As SLIFF's longest-running juried competition, this program celebrates bold new voices in independent American cinema. Showcasing debut features from emerging filmmakers, it highlights the future of independent film—offering fresh perspectives on enduring themes of connection, identity, and self-discovery.

Films:

The War Between (Deborah Correa), Magic Hour (Jacqueline Christy), If You Should Leave Before Me (J. Markus Anderson, B. Robert Anderson), Forge (Jing Ai Ng), American Comic (Daniel J. Clark)

New Filmmakers Forum Winner - Forge (Jing Ai Ng)

St. Louis Film Critics Association's Joe Pollack and Joe Williams Awards

In conjunction with the St. Louis Film Critics Organization, SLIFF holds juried competitions for documentary and narrative features. The awards honor the late St. Louis Post-Dispatch critics Joe Pollack (narrative) and Joe Williams (documentary). The winners are picked by two juries of St. Louis film critics. SLIFF chose eight films to compete in each category:

Documentaries: Night Fight, Land of Canaan, For Venida, For Kalief, Underland, Taking Up Serpents, WT0/99, The Track, 25 Cats From Qatar

Joe Williams Documentary Award - WTO/99 (Ian Bell)

Narratives: Tow, The War Between, Mistura, Beautiful Evening, Beautiful Day, I Had The Heart, We Shall Not Be Moved, Aontas, Magic Hour

Joe Pollack Narrative Award - We Shall Not Be Moved (Pierre Saint Martín)

Oscar® Qualifying Shorts Competition

SLIFF's Shorts program is one of 182 Oscar® Qualifying Festival Competitions. Short films that win the Best Animated, Best Documentary, and Best Live-Action are eligible for Academy® nominations for the 98th Academy Awards in 2026.

Best Animated Short - Papillon (Florence Mialhe)

Best Documentary Short - Love Birds (Elliott Kennerson, Angel Morris)

Best Live-Action Short - Magan's Fare (Chris Knoblock, Dana White)

In addition, SLIFF presented awards to the following short films:

- **Best Local Short - Mondele (Daniel Kayamba)**
- **Best Comedy Short - Giving Mom The Talk (Vidhya Iyer)**
- **Best Short Short - Say To You (Nuodi A)**
- **Best of Fest - Moment Of Choice (Yunghan Chang, Huai-Yu Chang)**

Spotlight on Inspiration Award

This juried competition honors a feature documentary that spotlights individuals striving to create positive change in the world. The winning film—awarded a \$5,000 prize—will inspire audiences and leave them with renewed hope for what lies ahead.

Films: 25 Cats From Qatar, A Man With Sole: The Impact of Kenneth Cole, For Venida, For Kalief, Really Me: At the Diary Of A Soul In Transition, Remaining Native

2025 Spotlight on Inspiration Winner - Remaining Native (Paige Bethmann)

SLIFF is Made Possible Thanks to:

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About Cinema St. Louis:

Cinema St. Louis is a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to promoting the appreciation of cinema as an art form and fostering a vibrant film community in the St. Louis area. Through its year-round programming, including festivals, screenings, and educational initiatives, Cinema St. Louis strives to celebrate diverse voices in filmmaking and cultivate a deeper understanding of cinema's cultural significance.

More information about SLIFF is available at <https://festivals.cinemastlouis.org/sliff2025/>.

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