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WSBA editor, Michael Walls, talks with Tropfest founder, John Polson

Q: Why does TF work?
A: I think the short film format and being able to see such diversity on the big screen, really resonates with people from all walks of life. Every year, we screen everything from heartrending stories straight out of warzones, to uplifting coming-of-age tales, to hilariously crude animations and everything in between. One of the best things about Tropfest is how it combines the punchiness of the content we scroll through daily, with the visual splendor of the big screen – if you don’t like a film, just wait a few minutes for the next one!

Q: How does it differ from film festivals the world over (how does it compete for participation)?
A: Tropfest differs in that every film must incorporate the Tropfest Signature Item, which changes every year. We encourage everyone to be as literal or as subtle as they like, so it’s a great way for people to showcase their ingenuity. This way, we can also ensure each film is being made specifically for Tropfest and has never been seen before. You don’t need to be a huge Hollywood star or have a big budget to win – you can be anyone with a camera and a story to tell.

Q: Please describe your top two TF moments (of all time)?
A: Last year, we celebrated one of the most culturally diverse finalist line-ups in Trop history, as well as achieving substantial gender diversity again, and it was an awesome reminder of what Tropfest is all about – showcasing stories on the big screen that might not otherwise be told. On the list of best moments has to be when we first closed down Victoria Street in Darlinghurst for Tropfest in the mid-90s (I believe it was the first time it had been officially closed to traffic since cars were invented!). And definitely when we first moved from Victoria Street to Rushcutters Bay Park, thereby taking our audience from a few thousand to 25,000 overnight. But there have been countless other special moments along the way as well, and every year when the winner takes the stage, you can hear a pin drop as you realize this person’s career is about to get a massive boost — and Tropfest has played a role in that. It’s an amazing feeling that only gets stronger each year.

Q: How can/will you continue to innovate the TF purpose?
A: For us, moving forward means really building on diversity and representation on-screen. Now that we’re nestled in the cultural heart of Sydney, we want to showcase stories from everyone, from all backgrounds and identities. People are always asking me what kind of stories we’re looking for… my answer: Yours.

Q: Your biggest TF success in terms of TF being a launch pad for talent?
A: Over the years, Tropfest has acted as a launch pad for some of the biggest names in the industry today, from Sam Worthington to Rebel Wilson. Our 2012 winner Alinea Jones’ debut feature Fun Mom Dinner starred Toni Collette and Adam Levine, and she’s now working on the upcoming web series Queen America, which will star Hollywood legend Catherine Zeta Jones.
Winner recounts her Tropfest experience

Last year’s winner, Greta Nash, talks to WSBA about her Tropfest experience.

Q: What was your motivation for entering Tropfest last year?
A: I entered Tropfest because I had made another short film earlier in the year, which did well at film festivals in the end - but at the time I was frustrated by how much time and effort had gone into it and how few people were getting to see it. I wanted to counteract that by making a film that would be seen by a lot of people at once and would go up online immediately! Something accessible I could share with everyone, to publicly show what I cared about as a filmmaker.

Q: How has being crowned Tropfest winner changed your film making goals?
A: I don’t think my goals so much have changed, but the path to achieving them certainly has. It has opened up doorways and introduced me to so many great people in the industry and given me a recognizable credit to my name. Also, the confidence boost has been wonderful - it helps me feel like there’s a chance I will be able to continue my career and make more films.

Q: What did you learn from the experience?
A: The experience of making the film itself was a massive learning experience - to pull something together so fast meant I really had to think on my feet and make my decisions from instinct and gut feeling. Tropfest also taught me a lot about the subjectivity of competition - particularly in the arts. I see myself as very lucky that I was accepted into the finalists in the first place, and even luckier that the jury happened to choose my film as their favorite. With other people on the jury it could have gone a totally different way.

Q: What surprised you most about the Tropfest experience as in preconceived notions about the event?
A: I had always thought of Tropfest to be a great platform for laugh-out-loud comedy or heavy-hitting drama, so I was totally surprised that a film like mine - which I see as being quite gentle and simple - would win. I think I was pleased to see that the festival is also making more and more of an effort to improve the diversity of their finalists.

Q: What does the future holds for Greta Nash as a filmmaker?
A: I am currently working on a proposal for my first externally funded short film, which would be incredible if it all comes together. I’ve only ever self-funded before! I’ve spent most of this year steadying myself as a filmmaker financially - through learning the ropes of commercial directing - but hopefully in the year to come I will be able to get back to the creative side of things and work towards making a debut feature.

Key information for Tropfest 2019

TROPFEST, the world’s largest short film festival, supported by foundation partner CGU Insurance, returns on Saturday, February 9 2019 to Parramatta Park. Pack a picnic and a few cold ones (Tropfest is BYO!), gather the loved ones and head down for a free night of phenomenal short films.

Entries are now open to anyone with a camera and a story to tell - all you have to do is start shooting. Films must be no longer than seven minutes, and must contain the Tropfest Signature Item (TSI) – “CANDLE.” Entries close January 4 with submissions through the Tropfest website.

Trop Jr is also back and calling for submissions from filmmakers 15 years and under. Trop Jr’s Signature Item (TSI) for all films is PIZZA so get cooking up some ideas!

Tropfest Brief History

Tropfest has grown incredibly since its humble beginnings at the Tropicana Café in Sydney’s Darlinghurst in 1993, where an eager crowd of 200 showed up for a short film screening organized by Tropfest founder John Polson.

Relocating to Parramatta in 2016, the event now attracts tens of thousands of Trop fans, with past jurors including Susan Sarandon, Julianne Moore, Nicole Kidman, Liev Schreiber, Cate Blanchett, Naomi Watts, Billy Crudup and George Miller.

How to Get To Tropfest & Seating

Getting to Tropfest is a breeze. Parramatta is just a quick 25-minute train ride from Sydney’s Central Station, and Parramatta Park is an easy walk from both Parramatta and Westmead railway stations, with plenty of bus services available too.

In true Tropfest fashion, Trop fans are invited to pack a picnic and nab themselves a spot anywhere along the grassy hill of the Crescent. Spots are first come, first served though, so be sure to get in early!
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