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Orcas Island Film Festival Is Our Cannes

There Are Neither Stars nor Yachts, but the Curation Is Damn Good

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Journeying to the Orcas Island Film Festival can be a pilgrimage for the best reason—art. CROUTON

When it comes to fancy film festivals well-stocked with internationally-acclaimed movies, few places come to mind. The breezy beauty of Cannes Film Festival where the wind blows off the Mediterranean Sea, or perhaps the romantic, stinky canals in Italy where stars boat to film premieres at the Venice International Film Festival. Here in the Puget Sound we have our own glitzy and prestigious destination-worthy film festival, the [Orcas Island Film Festival](#). Located in the dense woods of Orcas Island's Eastsound, the OIFF returns this year, October 6-10, with its first fully-fledged run since the pandemic began.

Viewers can inhale popcorn while watching dozens of movies from famous auteurs and first-time directors. It's an excellent opportunity to escape the doldrums of city life and retreat to what is, perhaps, the best movie festival in this corner of the Pacific Northwest.

Really, there's no better time to host a film festival than early fall. With three of the most esteemed industry events held in the summer months—Cannes, Venice, and Toronto—fests like the one on Orcas Island are poised to reap a glut of movies all contending for Oscar nominations in winter. In fact, when I connected with OIFF co-director and chief curator Carl Spence, he was calling me from the Deauville American Film Festival in France, having attended the Venice International Film Festival just days before.

At both fests, Spence—who recently relocated to Valencia, Spain—was on the hunt for new and acclaimed films to bring to Orcas and by the time we spoke he'd already nabbed some prime picks. Ruben Östlund's Cannes Palm d'Or-winning satire *Triangle of Sadness* and Laura Poitras's documentary on Nan Goldin, *All the Beauty and All the Bloodshed*, which took home the Golden Lion at Venice, will light up the screens in Eastsound. Still, don't expect to see a lot of showy premieres—Spence's curatorial eye is focused on the quality of films they present. "I'm just looking for great films and films that are interesting," he told me over the phone.

The last time Eastsound saw a true OIFF takeover was in 2019. In 2020, organizers scrapped the festival because of COVID, and in 2021, they hosted a truncated hybrid-fest that took place both in the theater and online. This year, the festival will look much the same as it did three years ago: a screen at Sea View Theatre and two screens at the Orcas Center, just a short ten minute walk away. Being conscious of the ongoing pandemic, the screenings will be more spaced out, and while there will still be social events for attendees to meet and greet with one another, the films are of still of the utmost importance.

"It's a different experience watching a film in a theater with a group of people versus watching at home," says Spence. "[At home] you can get distracted by the doorbell or the phone or you'll stop the film to go to the bathroom. So we're really focusing on providing that cinematic environment."

A presence that will be greatly missed at OIFF is Canadian director Jean-Marc Vallée, who [passed away unexpectedly](#) in 2021. The mind behind the HBO show *Big Little Lies* and the Oscar-winning *Dallas Buyers Club* loved coming to the Orcas Island festival, and he had been a [ubiquitous presence](#) since 2014, either presenting films-in-progress or DJing the afterparties.

"I'm still struggling with it," says Spence, adding that he thinks of Vallée quite often. He and the rest of the OIFF team are working with the late director's family to plan a tribute during this year's festivities.

Other highlights include Martin McDonagh's *The Banshees of Inisherin*, which reunites Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell as two Irishmen who find themselves at the end of their friendship; *TÁR*, a Cate Blanchett vehicle and Todd Field's [by-all-accounts-triumphant return to filmmaking](#); and *Women Talking*, a drama from Sarah Polley centered on four women from an isolated religious community who come together after enduring a series of sexual assaults.

Also, Jacqueline Bisset will be a guest of honor in Eastsound to promote her indie movie screening at the fest, *Loren + Rose*, with director Russell Brown.

For me, the appeal of Orcas Island Film Festival is its deep remove from the Seattle area. You can either take a 40-minute flight by seaplane—as [at least one of my colleagues](#) has done before me—or take a two-hour drive and a ferry to get to the idyllic island in San Juans. Far from the stresses of the city, journeying to Eastsound can be a pilgrimage for the best reason—art. In 2019, I spent my days at the festival throwing stones into the sea, eating unholy amounts of fried potatoes, and watching movies like *And Then We Danced* and *Pain and Glory*, viewing experiences that have still stuck with me.

And if you think sitting around and watching movies in dark rooms is antisocial behavior on a nature-rich island, consider this: After a late night screening of *Parasite* in 2019, I encountered several deer in the dark while on my way to my accommodations. These agile creatures, illuminated by just the moon, considered me and others on the path with curiosity before leaping off to whatever it is deers do in the dead of night. An encounter you could never have on Pine Street!

[Orcas Island Film Festival](#) runs October 6-10 in Eastsound, WA. Get your [tickets here](#).

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