

## Orcas Island Film Festival: How this remote spot in Puget Sound attracts such high-caliber fare

Oct. 2, 2019 at 6:00 am Updated Oct. 3, 2019 at 3:35 pm



The satire “JoJo Rabbit,” featuring Taika Waititi as Adolf Hitler, shows as part of the Orcas Island Film Festival. Roman Griffin Davis and Scarlett Johansson co-star. (Courtesy of OIFF)

By [Chris Talbott](#)

*Special to The Seattle Times*

Filmmaker Jean-Marc Vallée set an ambitious goal after visiting the Orcas Island Film Festival for the first time four years ago: He wants to go back every year.

The director and producer of “Dallas Buyers Club,” “Wild” and the first season of HBO’s “Big Little Lies” thinks the laid-back festival on the biggest of the San Juan Islands is a “jewel.” It’s a little piece of cinephile heaven in the middle of Puget Sound that’s captured his heart, imagination and a permanent spot on his calendar.

“It’s a moment where now I just can’t wait for it,” the French Canadian producer and director said. “The community, you know, the place has a little David Lynch quality without the weirdness and the danger, something amazing. It’s almost like the tulips are moving to some songs, like in ‘Blue Velvet.’ There’s something so great about it. So beautiful.”

Entering its sixth year in Eastsound, the festival is quickly gaining a reputation in the filmmaking community. This year’s lineup, unspooling Oct. 10-14 at the Orcas Island Center for Performing Arts and Sea View Theatre, rivals most festival offerings. The

setting is exotic. And with a festival pass price of \$200 for more than three dozen films, it's cheaper than your local cineplex (though the commute's a bit of a bear). How did this remote island up in the San Juans get such high-caliber, awards-season fare for its film festival? The reasons are pretty simple. It starts with location, location, location, said producer Marc Turtletaub, another early festival adopter and island resident. And it's also about curation.

"It's a delight," Turtletaub said. "Orcas Island is a delightful place. So the environment is incredible. And they've sort of got this little bit of magic about it, I think, in terms of programming. It's one of the handful of best festivals in the country."

That delightful location comes thanks to the support of a local tourism grant and community business people and boosters like co-founders Jared Lovejoy and Donna Laslo, who bought into the vision from the start. And that programming magic comes from Carl Spence, a West Seattle resident who has spent decades programming festivals for movie fans.

The former festival director and chief curator at the Seattle International Film Festival, where he was involved for more than 20 years, Spence is the co-founder and chief curator of the Orcas Island event. He's also a senior programmer with the Miami Film Festival. He spends a large chunk of each year flying around the globe in pursuit of the best films he can find. "Relationships, we're in the relationship business," Spence said. "There's a lot of people that I've known who when I first started, they were just junior acquisitions people. Now, some of those same people are running many of the companies that are providing us with films." Another big draw is the growing number of executives and celebrities moving to the islands: "It doesn't hurt that Oprah just bought a place."

Thanks to Spence's curatorial prowess, though, it has caught the attention of film fans outside the islands, who arrive by ferry, seaplane and four-seater prop planes. While there's a crush of celebrity paparazzi in Cannes chasing starlets and a continent's worth of film writers in Toronto seeking industry news, most of the folks who attend Orcas Island remain focused on artistry and storytelling.

"This is the moment of the year where I become a cinephile again," Vallée said. "You can watch two or three films a day in a dark room with a crowd, and the selection is just amazing. So this is why I'm doing this. My job is a director making films. And I love to be in a dark room and just to watch films. And I have less and less occasion to do that since I've been so busy. So I take the time to go there, enjoy some rest and mainly enjoy some films for four or five days."

He'll have a terrible time choosing what to watch this year. Spence traveled to Cannes, Toronto and Telluride, among others, while chasing [this year's lineup](#). It includes top entries from Cannes — including Palme d'Or winner "Parasite," a dark comedy thriller from Bong Joon-ho, Ladj Ly's "Les Misérables" and Mati Diop's

“Atlantics ” — as well as the drama “Synonyms,” the Golden Bear winner at the Berlin Film Festival.

There’s the provocative satire “JoJo Rabbit,” the Audience Award winner from Toronto featuring Taika Waititi as Adolf Hitler. Alfre Woodard dazzles yet again in Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner “Clemency.” And Antonio Banderas meditates on the life of an aging filmmaker in “Pain and Glory,” from aging filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar.

Spence talks lovingly about the lineup, slipping seamlessly from title to title in a dreamy stream-of-consciousness riff that goes on for more than 15 minutes.

“That’s probably more than you need to know,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. Even so, there’s more. There are eight international Academy Award submissions as well as a few films that will hit very close to home in the Pacific Northwest. Those include “The Edge of the Knife,” spoken entirely in the endangered language of the Haida people of the Canadian and Alaska coasts. And “Artifishal,” a documentary that tracks the decline of wild salmon runs.

And in what is becoming something of an annual occurrence, Vallée will conduct a master class of sorts around the documentary “Big Giant Wave.” Vallée serves as executive producer on director Marie-Julie Dallaire’s documentary about the effect music has on humans. Last year, he spent time breaking down the editing on an episode of “Sharp Objects,” the HBO series he directed, for a few hundred attendees. “And it was fascinating,” said Turtletaub, whose “The Farewell,” which he co-produced, will screen at the festival. “So you have those sorts of things happening, which are sort of outside the norm of just, ‘OK, here’s the latest film that people are talking about.’ And then there’s the music. I’m sure Jean-Marc will probably DJ this year. We’ll twist his arm a bit.”

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**The Orcas Island Film Festival**, runs Thursday, Oct. 10, through Monday, Oct. 14, at the Orcas Island Center for Performing Arts, 917 Mount Baker Road, and Sea View Theatre, 234 A St., Eastsound; single tickets are \$25 opening night and \$14 thereafter, \$200-\$500 for a festival pass; [orcasfilmfest.com](http://orcasfilmfest.com)

**Chris Talbott** is a Seattle-based writer and editor.