

2025 Edition of BlackStar Film Festival Breaks New Ground



Photo by Deonté Lee / BFA

BlackStar Projects celebrated its 14th annual film festival this past weekend and is proud to announce the jury and audience award winners.

The 2025 edition of the festival continued to break ground and push boundaries by spotlighting genre-defying films and hosting critically incisive conversations with an expansive community of filmmakers, artists, panelists and festival goers, all of whom met the moment with enthusiasm as this year's festival welcomed thousands of attendees and record-breaking sales, including sold out screenings of Louis Massiah and Monica Henriquez's *TGB — The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing* on opening night, Kahlil Joseph's *BLKNWS: Terms & Conditions* on Friday and multiple other films throughout the weekend.

From the 93 films screened, juried awards for Best Feature Documentary were given to Louis Massiah and Monica Henriquez's film; for Best Feature Narrative to *Sugar Island*, directed by Johanne Gomez Terrero; for Best Experimental film to *The River*, directed by Herrana Addisu; for Best Short Documentary to *Correct Me If I'm Wrong* (如你所愿), directed by Hao Zhou and for Best Short Narrative to *The Last Harvest*, directed by Nuno Boaventura Miranda. The Philadelphia Filmmaker Award was given to *Talking Walls*, directed by Marcellus.

In collaboration with Blackbird, BlackStar hosted the sixth annual BlackStar Pitch at the festival and announced the winner as *Hysterical*, a forthcoming project from filmmaker Kya Lou. Jamil McGinnis' *Wahnish Keeps Me Free* was selected as the pitch runner-up. Lou will receive \$75,000, mentorship from Multitude Films and other benefits, while McGinnis' production will receive \$25,000.

Winners were announced at the annual Director's Brunch and Awards Ceremony, celebrating all of the festival's directors.

BlackStar also invited its audience to select awards in Favorite Feature Narrative (*Love, Brooklyn*), Favorite Feature Documentary (*TCB - The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing*), Favorite Short Narrative (*Food for the Soul*), Favorite Short Documentary (*Talking Walls*) and Favorite Experimental (*Untitled (How High the Moon)*) categories. More information on the award winning films from all categories is below.

The BlackStar panel series saw audiences overflow from The Daily Jawn Stage co-sponsored by NEON, with panelists and moderators engaging in lively conversation, inviting global perspectives and challenging dialogues on various topics, including a spotlight conversation with *Killer of Sheep* director Charles Burnett.

Notable guests and speakers at this year's festival included Letitia Wright, André Holland, Kahlil Joseph, Cauleen Smith, Elegance Bratton, Adam Piron, Kevin Jerome Everson, Rachael Abigail Holder, Stanley Nelson and Meg Onli.

Beyond film, the festival's activation of the city provided wonderful opportunities for artists, filmmakers and film enthusiasts to engage at sold out parties and events throughout the weekend. BlackStar is committed to furthering this international communal experience as it looks ahead to next year's film festival, which will take place from August 6-9, 2026.

Jury Awards

Best Feature Documentary

TCB — The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing directed by Louis Massiah and Monica Henriquez

Jury Note: This elegant, intergenerational film stretches the imagination not merely around what art can do, but what an artist can do. The film serves as a manual, it is the medicine that we need right now to uplift and inspire us. It is intimate and epic at the same time and a film that's clear in its commitment to community.

Short Narrative

The Last Harvest directed by Nuno Boaventura Miranda

Jury Note: Multi-sensorial, gorgeous, abstract and palpable, this film is loaded with subtle gestures and a clever use of repetition which renders it cinematically breathtaking. The visual choreo poem contains a surprising sonic personality, seamless weaving together of two narratives and beautifully executed acting.

Honorable Mention: *Oceania*, directed by Valentin Noujaïm

Experimental Film

The River directed by Herrana Addisu

Jury Note: In this wonderfully edited film, the filmmaker weaves together sound, image, acting, movement and story into a cohesive and deep transgenerational narrative. The use of beautiful cinematography, symmetry and the rhythm of music tells of the barriers faced by women with a subtle nod to classism.

Honorable Mention: *A Luta Continua // Ataraxy 44*, directed by Curtis Essel

Feature Narrative

Sugar Island directed by Johanne Gomez Terrero

Jury Note: This is an intentionally and carefully made film, characterized by a complex texture that the filmmaker maintains throughout their storytelling. The film felt visceral in its spiritual elements and it managed to bring its audience in without minimizing those practices. The jury applauds the visual-emotional environment conveyed in this beautifully shot film.

Short Documentary

Correct Me if I'm Wrong directed by Hao Zhou

Jury Note: The jury awards a film that is replete with juxtapositions—spaciousness and claustrophobia, tolerance and intolerance, energy and calm. This film evokes a feeling of discomfort that is difficult to shake after the film is over. Yet in that discomfort, the filmmaker handles the subject with care and nuance, featuring strong characters, sound design and intimacy.

Philadelphia Filmmaker Award

Talking Walls directed by Marcellus

Jury Note: The Independence Public Media Foundation jury awards a film that honors the voice and strength of a queer black elder with a creative, beautiful, and unexpected approach.

Audience Awards

Favorite Feature Narrative

Love, Brooklyn directed by Rachael Abigail Holder

Favorite Feature Documentary

TCB — The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing directed by Louis Massiah and Monica Henriquez

Favorite Short Narrative

Food for the Soul directed by Chisom Chieke

Favorite Short Documentary

Talking Walls directed by Marcellus

Favorite Experimental

Untitled (How High the Moon) directed by Rashida Bumbray

BlackStar Pitch

Winner — *Hysterical* directed by Kya Lou

Runner-up — *Wannish Keeps Me Free* directed by Jamil McGinnis, produced by Resita Cox

This year's festival was presented with major support from Open Society Foundations. Other sponsors include American Friends Service Committee, Andscape, Black Public Media, The Chamber of Commerce of Greater Philadelphia, Color Congress, Criterion, Critical Minded, Eventive, Firelight Media, Hyperallergic, Impact Partners, Independence Public Media Foundation, ITVS, Kashif, Monarch Yoga, NEON, PECO, Philadelphia Foundation, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pillars Fund, Runway, SAGIndie, State Representative Rick Krajewski, StoryCorps, Ten to One Rum, Twenty43, University of Pennsylvania Department of Cinema & Media Studies, Visit Philadelphia, Xfinity, and WORLD Channel.

BlackStar Projects and its year-round programs are generously supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, Critical Minded, Department of Community and Economic Development, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, Independence Public Media Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, NEO Philanthropy, The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Pop Culture Collaborative, Ruth Foundation for the Arts, Surdna Foundation, Wallace Foundation, William Penn Foundation and Wyncote Foundation, in addition to its board of directors, community partners and a host of generous individual donors and organizations.

About BlackStar Projects

BlackStar Projects, founded in 2012 by Maori Karmael Holmes as BlackStar Film Festival, creates the spaces and resources needed to uplift the work of Black, Brown and Indigenous artists working outside the confines of genre. Beyond the annual film festival the organization produces year-round programs, including film screenings, exhibitions, a filmmaker seminar, a film production lab and a journal of film, art and visual culture.

These programs provide artists opportunities for viable strategies for collaborations with other artists, audiences, funders and distributors. BlackStar is working towards a liberatory world in which a vast spectrum of Black, Brown and Indigenous experiences is irresistibly celebrated in arts and culture.