

BlackStar Projects

2025 Annual Report

About

BlackStar is building a liberatory world in which a vast spectrum of Black, Brown and Indigenous experiences are irresistibly celebrated in arts and culture. We create fertile spaces for ongoing imagination, learning and community building for artists of the global majority to have the resources, support and shine we need to create visionary work.



[2025 Year-in-Review Video?](#)

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Board Letter

Denise Beek & Sekou Campbell
BlackStar Board of Directors, Co-Chairs

For time immemorial, human beings have gathered to learn, laugh, interpret the world, and discover a deeper truth through collective storytelling and listening. In ancient times, a fire served as a source of light and warmth—a central place for community, justice, and education. Today, film serves a similar function. BlackStar has sought to carry this illuminating tradition, one that all people throughout history and all over the world share, with an express purpose to make meaning and reimagine freedom. Film, like fire, requires a special spark and kindling. For the past 13 years, BlackStar has worked to brighten the shine of contemporary storytelling and storytellers of the global majority. It has fanned the flames of creativity, fueled by the courage, ingenuity, thoughtfulness and determination of BIPOC artists, world builders and visionaries.

2024 posed significant threats to BlackStar's mission, with evergrowing dis- and misinformation, extreme levels of state-sanctioned and outright state violence, and cascades of harmful rhetoric. However, to quote last year's William and Louise Greaves Seminar keynote speaker, Anisia Uzeyman, a "fragile expression of resistance [conducts] the transfer of power." For BlackStar, such potency arises, not from militarism or colonialism, but from a story told freely and truthfully, and from meeting the challenge of dominance at every turn with a joy and passion that can't be extinguished.

As always, BlackStar's unique approach to people-centered art and activism engenders a unity that binds us in the name of equity, care, and love. Filmmakers, critics, writers, and other industry and non-industry members attended

public programming in record numbers, yet again. The organization deepened its relationships with academic and cultural institutions throughout the country, as well as with artists around the world. The organization showcased films and filmmakers that most other places either would not or could not present.

The stories that BlackStar present through films, articles, lectures, screenings, and exhibitions grow the capacity of every member of human society to live fully in their own mind, body, and soul, free from the shibboleths of oppression and colonialism. Storytellers continue to bring us together around light to restore faith and hope. Educators, critics, and advocates provide rigorous analysis and historical context from which we can reflect, dream, and evolve. And audiences, warmed



by community and inspiration, light their own torches to warm the lives of even more.

Flames do not feed on air alone. The BlackStar Board is committed to garner more support for the work of the organization, beginning with you. As you take in the accomplishments of 2024, think about how you'll bask in the brilliance of the 14th annual BlackStar Film Festival from July 31 to August 3, how you will celebrate with us at the third annual gala in the winter of 2025, and what you'll do with the enlightenment offered by a year's worth of exhibitions, screenings, and publications. Please also consider the investments required to do this work and be empowered in knowing that BlackStar only shines with the light from your flame.

CEO Letter

Maori Karmael Holmes
BlackStar Chief Executive & Artistic Officer

Dear Friends,

Back in March of this year, during our Greaves Filmmaker Seminar at Stanford, filmmaker and artist Suneil Sanzgiri spoke about the role of art in times like our current moment: “Movements need art...to remind us not just what we fight against, but what we fight for.” That message echoed in the room again this summer, after the world premiere of Louis Massiah and Monica Henriquez’s *TCB: The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing* on opening night of our 14th film festival. Within that sold out theatre in Philadelphia, while the world seemed to fall apart around us, we were reminded of a long history of resistance to White supremacy and censorship before us.

Toni Cade famously said “the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible,” and in 2025

I was proud of BlackStar’s ability to continue to provide platforms for necessary, irresistible art. We did so as our field and communities were under attack, from Israel’s ongoing genocide of Palestinians to the terrifying ICE abductions across the United States. This has been paired with devastating cuts to documentary and public media funding and a roll back on much of the support for Black-led institutions that emerged in the wake of the racial justice uprisings of 2020. BlackStar has not been immune to these shifts, and as a result, this was a year of upheaval for us as well. We’ve managed to navigate them, but not without considerable challenges.

Our brilliant team has worked tirelessly this year as beautifully as ever. In collaboration with our wonderful board of directors, partners, donors, and others who stepped up to support

our work, we were still able to hold our largest festival to date, released two of our best-selling issues of *Seen*, and produced another unforgettable Seminar. We also pulled off a unique performance series in Bartram’s Garden, *Joiri Minaya: Venus Flytrap*, and completed the third cohort of our Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab.

At the Seminar, Suneil also left us with a question: “What are the conditions under which the conversation you really want to have can occur?”. It feels pertinent as we look ahead at what promises to be simultaneously a more focused and more urgent year of programming. In 2026 we will be celebrating 15 years of BlackStar Film Festival’s spotlighting of “cinema for liberation,” and will move into a new office on Broad Street, right next to our primary festival venues. We will also



operate with a smaller team, due to budgetary restructuring, working to ensure that we can maintain the same conditions visionary artists need to speak truth to power. It’s a major moment for everything we’ve been building since 2012, but we’re approaching it as thoughtfully as ever.

**Many Lumens,
Maori**

2025 At-a-Glance

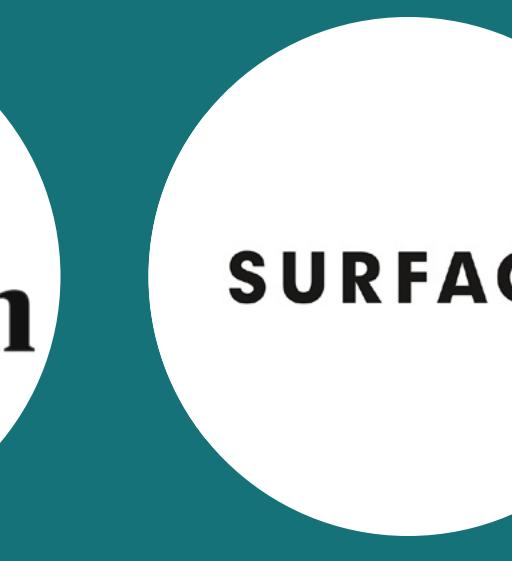
Instagram Followers: 50K+



Other Social Followers: 20K+



Newsletter Subscribers: 23K+



BlackStar Film Festival 2025

July 31 – August 3

BlackStar Film Festival 2025

- [Watch our 2025 Festival recap video.](#)

The 14th annual BlackStar Film Festival took place July 31-August 3, 2025 and had record-breaking attendance, with more than 23,000 tickets issued. The Festival included both virtual and in-person screenings of 94 genre-defying films, a central stage featuring interviews and panels, a filmmaker brunch and awards ceremony, and opening and closing night parties.

For the third year, BlackStar took over the Avenue of the Arts in downtown Philadelphia, activating three different venues on Broad Street — Perelman Theater at Kimmel Center, Suzanne Roberts Theater, and the Wilma Theater— while continuing to increase accessibility.

The 2025 BlackStar Film Festival was presented with major support from Open Society Foundations. The full list of sponsors can be found on [our website](#).



Press Mentions

- *Cinema for Liberation: BlackStar Film Festival Returns July 31–August 3* – ***Hyperallergic*** (July 2025)
- “The upcoming lineup spans wide thematic terrain, including films that center music as resistance, climate resilience and communal healing.” – ***Hypebeast*** (July 2025)
- “While it’s grown immeasurably since its earliest days, the festival has continuously maintained its focus on providing a platform for works and visionaries that defy the constraints of genre.” – ***Surface*** (July 2025)

BlackStar Film Festival 2025 — Awards

Juried Awards

Best Experimental

The River
Dir. Herrana Addisu

Best Feature Documentary

TCB - The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing
Dirs. Louis Massiah and Mónica Henriquez

Best Feature Narrative

Sugar Island
Dir. Johanne Gomez Terrero

Best Short Documentary

Correct Me if I'm Wrong
Dir. Hao Zhou

Best Short Narrative

The Last Harvest
Dir. Nuno Boaventura Miranda

Audience Awards

Favorite Experimental

Untitled (How High the Moon)
Dir. Rashida Bumbray

Favorite Feature Documentary

TCB - The Toni Cade Bambara School of Organizing
Dirs. Louis Massiah and Mónica Henriquez

Favorite Feature Narrative

Love, Brooklyn
Dir. Rachael Abigail Holder

Favorite Short Documentary

Talking Walls
Dir. Marcellus

Favorite Short Narrative

Food for the Soul
Dir. Chisom Chieke

BlackStar Pitch

Pitch Winner

Hysterical
Dir. Kya Lou

Pitch Runner-up

Wahnish Keeps Me Free
Dir. Amil McGinnis,
Produced by Resita Cox

“This is a festival that feels like home every time I come. I love that experimental films from around the globe are platformed and films with untraditional narrative structures are celebrated. Thank you so much for welcoming my work. It is an affirmation that inspires me to keep creating and to keep trying new things — especially if it scares me.”

– BSFF25 Filmmaker



“What sets BlackStar apart from other festivals is the way the films, especially the shorts programs, are curated with such care and intention. Each piece doesn’t just stand alone, they speak to one another thematically or emotionally. That thoughtful sequencing creates a richer viewing experience. It lingers with you, giving you time to sit with what you’ve seen before fully unpacking its meaning.”

– BSFF25 Attendee

Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab

2024 – 2025

Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab

The 2024-2025 Lab was presented with support from People's Media Fund, Mellon Foundation, William Penn Foundation, and the Wyncote Foundation.

BlackStar's Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab is a year-long fellowship for Black, Brown, and Indigenous filmmakers that provides selected fellows with resources, mentorship, and hands-on training and support to produce a short film. BlackStar acts as an executive producer on each short film created during the Lab and premieres the films at our annual film festival.

In 2024, BlackStar launched the third cohort of Lab Fellowship. In January 2025, fellows participated in a post-production and sound design workshop. They also submitted the rough cuts of their respective films. In February, we had a workshop session where film professionals viewed the rough cuts of their films and offered feedback. In March, we held a workshop on distribution and festival strategy and later that month, the fellows submitted the final cut of their films. In June, we held a virtual workshop for the fellows on how to leverage their short film into professional careers. In August, fellows premiered their films to a sold out audience at the 2025 BlackStar Film Festival. In September, we had a wrap dinner to celebrate the fellows' work over the course of the last year and we held exit interviews to go over the fellowship period and how each of our fellows experienced the programming and pace of the lab program.



Adamstown

Andrew Bilindabagabo
Rwandan-born filmmaker and educator and co-founder of INGOMA Films



Las Cosas Que Brillan

Kristal Sotomayor
Peruvian American director, producer, journalist and curator



Food for the Soul

Chisom Chieke
Nigerian-American multimedia artist and second-generation storyteller with a lifelong passion for narrative



The Voyagers

Walé Oyéjidé
Nigerian-American filmmaker and designer who dispels bias with beauty

“The team’s generosity, availability, and willingness to offer guidance helped me feel more grounded and confident in moving the project forward. It’s not every day you get to be part of a program where you truly feel seen and supported.”

– Chisom Chieke, Lab Fellow

Food for the Soul (2025)
BlackStar Film Festival 2025

“The BlackStar Filmmaker Lab was nothing short of transformative. The workshops, mentorship, and supportive community gave me tools, confidence, and inspiration that will guide my career for years to come. Premiering my film at BlackStar was the culmination of that journey and an experience I will cherish forever.”

– Kristal Sotomayor, Lab Fellow

Las Cosas Que Brillan (2025)
BlackStar Film Festival 2025

**“I found the lab to be
tremendously enriching,
supportive, and informative
- exactly what I had hoped
to experience when initially
applying. I can only offer the
highest compliments to the
organizers of the Lab and
gratitude to its sponsors.”**

- Walé Oyéjidé, Lab Fellow

The Voyagers (2025)
BlackStar Film Festival 2025

Seen Journal

Issues 008 & 009



Seen

Seen is our journal of film, art, and visual culture. The journal presents critical cultural discourse from Black, Brown, and Indigenous perspectives to a wider audience of tastemakers, academics, funders, critics, and film enthusiasts.

In 2025, we released Issue 008 in May 2025 and Issue 009 in October 2025. Issue 008 was guest edited by artist and filmmaker Sky Hopinka and issue 009's cover star was Andre Holland and featured a piece with him by writer Murtada Elfadl.

Our Seen Advisory Board remains the same as last year. Our art director, Raquel Hazell, had to depart from her role after completing issue 009. We have hired the duo from Parallel Work to art direct the upcoming issue, 010, due in May 2026.

Issue 008 was celebrated with a launch event at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia featuring a conversation between Maori Karmael Holmes and guest editor Sky Hopinka. The event welcomed visitors who engaged in a Q&A following the conversation, and a reception.

40+
Writers & Artists
Commissioned

27
Articles Published
in print & online



Seen — Launch Events

Issue 008 Launch: ICA Philadelphia



Issue 009 Launch: Percy Restaurant & Bar



Seen — Current Stockists

Available in 37 museums, galleries, bookshops, library collections, and other retailers worldwide.

Philadelphia

american grammar
ICA Philadelphia
Omoi Life Goods
Philadelphia Art Museum
Ulises

Los Angeles

Reparations Club
Skylight Books
Vidiots

New York

Amant
Center for Art, Research, and Alliances
Mag Club
McNally Jackson
Mono No Aware
Printed Matter

Baltimore

Good Neighbor

Boston

Minara

Detroit

Periodicals

Portland

Chess Club

Toronto

Issues Magazine Shop

London

magCulture

Academic Libraries

Baltimore Museum of Art, E. Kirkbride
Miller Art Research Library
California Institute of the Arts (CalArts)
Cornell University
Free Library of Philadelphia
Haverford College
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Rhode Island School of Design
Rice University
School of Visual Arts
Southern Methodist University
Stanford University
Temple University
The University of Georgia
The University of Pennsylvania
University of the Arts Library at Forman
Arts Initiative
University of Washington Libraries
The Wexner Center at Ohio State
University



William + Louise Greaves Filmmaker Seminar

March 7 – March 9

William and Louise Greaves Filmmaker Seminar

The William and Louise Greaves Filmmaker Seminar is presented in collaboration with Stanford University's Institute for Diversity in the Arts and presented with the Wyncote Foundation.

The William and Louise Greaves Filmmaker Seminar is an annual, three-day gathering for Black, Brown, and Indigenous artists working in cinematic realms. The 2025 Seminar, hosted for the second time in California at Stanford University, was presented in collaboration with the university's Institute for Diversity in the Arts. The fifth edition of the seminar welcomed 127 participants for three days of programming consisting of workshops, screenings, and other enriching learning experiences. Highlights included a keynote speech by Suneil Sanzgiri titled "Kinships Beyond the Grave", a director's commentary by Zeinabu irene Davis on her film "Compensation", and an in-process presentation with filmmaker and actor Numa Perrier on her forthcoming film about Audre Lorde, "The Erotic."

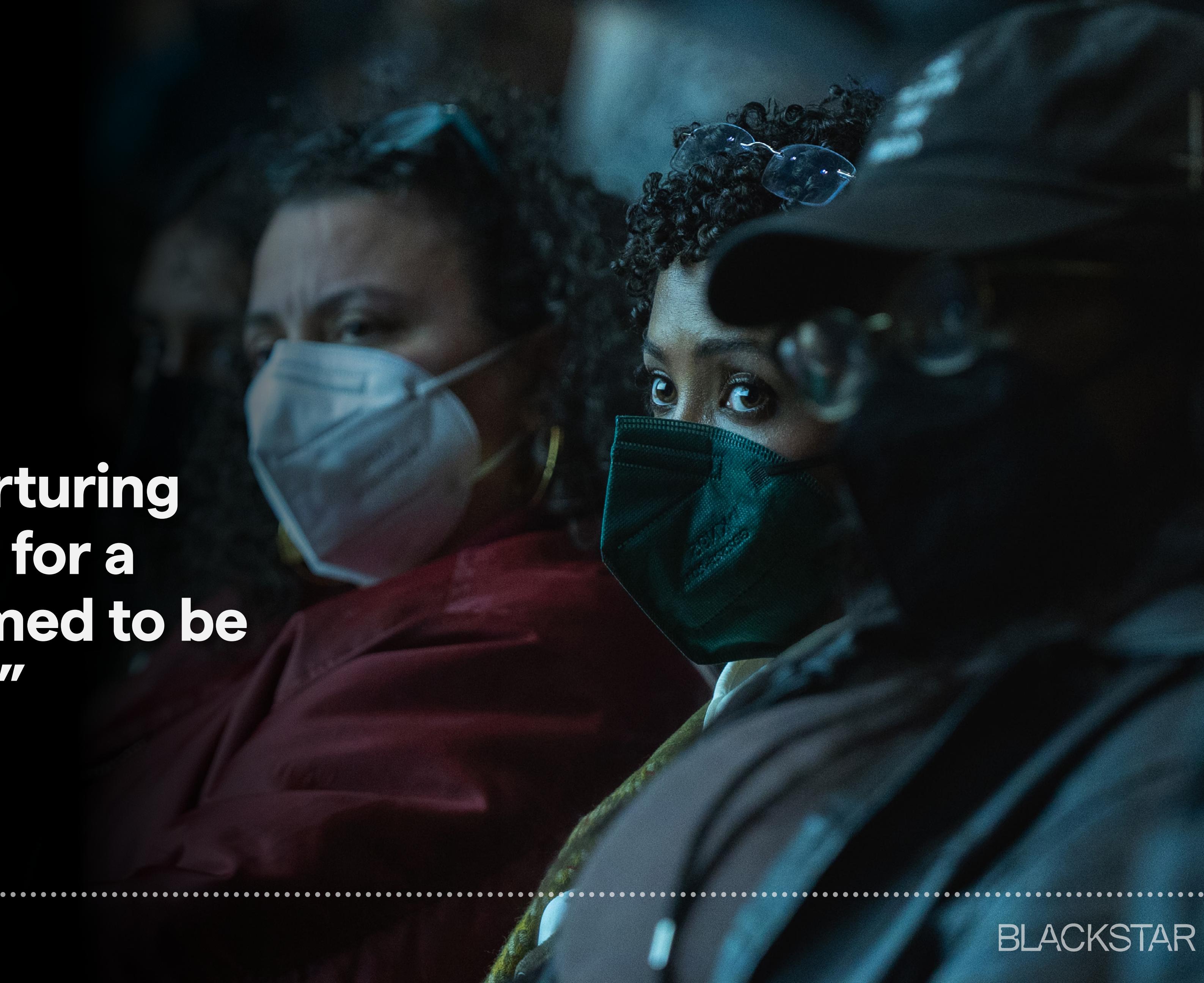


“Really grateful to be in community with folks in a way that cuts through the layers that can be otherwise present in other spaces...it convenes based on a shared spirit of values, aesthetic, and impact while leaving space for our diversity of perspectives to come through.”

– 2025 Seminar Attendee

“So well organized, I don’t know if I’ve attended anything that was so well and smoothly run. The staff was so down to earth and friendly, and the people who attended were as well”

– 2025 Seminar Attendee



“This was the most nurturing space I’ve ever been in for a seminar. The goal seemed to be to take care of people.”

– 2025 Seminar Attendee



Curatorial Projects

In 2025, we hosted and co-hosted additional screenings, events, talks, and other programming throughout the year. These included:

Winter

- January 11 — Shorts program in conjunction with *Mickalene Thomas: All About Love* exhibition at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia
- January 12 — Feature film screening of *Naked Acts* in conjunction with The Time is Always Now exhibition at Philadelphia Art Museum, Philadelphia
- January 16 — Shorts program at ICA Boston in conjunction with Wagner Foundation
- February 19 — Shorts program at Swarthmore College, Philadelphia

Spring

- March 6 — Shorts program at Colgate University, Hamilton, NY
- April 5 — Shorts program with Georgetown University and Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Washington, DC
- April 10 — Feature film screening as part of Confluence program at the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia

Fall

- November 2 — Feature film screening in conjunction with Palestine Cinema Days Philadelphia
- November 14 — Shorts program at Philadelphia Art Museum in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples Month



BLACKSTAR

BlackStar Luminary Gala

November 21

BlackStar Luminary Gala

The Luminary Gala was sponsored by Open Society Foundations, with additional sponsorship support from an anonymous donor, Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity (CARE), Cozen O'Connor Public Strategies, The Ogilvie Family Foundation, Lapine Group, Inc., Fitler Club, Mural Arts Philadelphia, PECO an Exelon Company, Pierson Ferdinand LLP, Portage & Practice, Good Mirrors (in-kind), and MidAtlantic FX (in-kind).

BlackStar hosted its third annual Luminary Gala — a celestial evening of celebration, entertainment, dancing, and the presentation of the 2025 Luminary Awards. The Luminary Gala, BlackStar's premiere fundraising event, raises crucial resources to further support our suite of year-round programming that provides Black, Brown, and Indigenous artists working in the moving image with the resources and support they need to thrive.

This year's gala returned to The Switch House in Philadelphia and honored Autumn Durald Arkapaw, Meshell Ndegeocello, Robert Townsend, and Third World Newsreel. Special awards were also presented to BlackStar's Chief Communications Officer Imran Siddiquee and Board Member Tayyib Smith.

2025 Host Committee

Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Allison Acevedo, Brandon Pankey, Deesha Philyaw, Donna Frisby-Greenwood, Ernest Owens, Irit Reinheimer, James Claiborne, Councilmember Jamie Gauthier, Jermaine Jenkins, Joe Hill, Korin Williams, Loira Limbal, Louis Massiah, Senator Nikil Saval, Noura Erakat, Raymond Perkins, Val Gay, Senator Vincent Hughes





Sponsored Projects

BlackStar provided both comprehensive and one-time grant sponsorship for the following artist-led projects in 2024.

Comprehensive

- Spirits Up! - Project Lead: Sudan Green
- The Claudia Jones Project/*Palimpsest* - Project Lead: Farrah Rahman

Grant Specific

- Soft - Project Lead: Sarah Krusen
- *Honeysuckle* - Project Lead: Jon Kaufman
- *Dyana Williams: The Mother of Black Music Month* - Project Lead: Maori Karmael Holmes
- *Joy Bank* - Project Lead: Cristin Stephens
- *Ladybug* - Project Lead: Kelli Webber
- *White Meat: Appetizer* - Project Lead: David Thomas
- *Tonada Menguante* - Project Lead: Luis Arnias
- *Cosmic Egg* - Project Lead: Anula Shetty
- *Lalibela* - Project Lead: Guy Routte

Accessibility & Wellness

BlackStar is committed to centering access in our internal policies, collective culture and our programmatic offerings to artists and the public. Our work at the 2025 Festival included enhanced access in the following manners:

Program Accessibility

- Designated a full-time staff member to manage accessibility
- Provided ASL interpretation at all in-person panels and Q&As
- Provided foreign language interpreters to international filmmakers by request
- Open captioned all films screened in-person
- Closed captioned all films screened virtually
- Created audio description for thirteen films to assist blind and low vision audiences
- We distributed a detailed accessibility guide in both our printed program guide and digitally on our website, allowing us to clearly communicate accessibility accommodations to the entire audience.
- Required masks at all times indoors, including during film screenings.
- We provided childcare for participating filmmakers and panelists upon request
- Provided \$2 tickets for EBT and Art-Reach ACCESS cardholders.

Venue Accessibility

- All festival venues are wheelchair accessible.
- Restrooms were gender neutral
- Parent rooms (also known as lactation rooms) were available.
- A quiet space/sensory-friendly room was available to all attendees, outfitted with sensory toys and decompression activities.
- Assistive listening devices were available at all venues by request.



Wellness

At the 2025 festival our wellness coach Kimberly Hunter-Bryant led the audience in a pre- and post-screening moment of grounding for four films that have distressing themes. We also designated a wellness space this year at the Kimmel Center where Kimberly provided guided wellness sessions to festival-goers during a daily 90-minute window. We also invited back the safety team for another year, and they were incorporated more organically with the festival staff.

Supporters

Foundation Supporters

Critical Minded
Doris Duke Foundation
Ford Foundation
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Knight Foundation
Mellon Foundation
Nathan Cummings Foundation
NEO Philanthropy
The Ogilvie Family Foundation
People's Media Fund
Perspective Fund
The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage
Philadelphia Cultural Treasures
PopCulture Collaborative
Ruth Foundation for the Arts
Samuel S. Fels Fund
Surdna Foundation
Wallace Foundation

William Penn Foundation
Wyncote Foundation

Government Grants

City of Philadelphia
PA Department of Community & Economic Development
State Representative Rick Krajewski, 188th District

Nonprofit Supporters

American Friends Service Committee
Arab Film & Media Institute
Black Public Media
The Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia
Color Congress
Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated
Doc Society
Firelight Media
Forman Arts Initiative
Impact Partners
International Documentary Association
ITVS
Kashif
Mural Arts Philadelphia
Peace is Loud
Penn Cinema Studies

Philadelphia Foundation
Philadelphia Art Museum
Pillars Fund
Points North Institute
SAGIndie
StoryCorps
Twenty43 Ventures
WORLD

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Fitler Club
Hyperallergic
Indego
Lapine Group, Inc.
Monarch Yoga
NEON
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PECO, an Exelon Company
Pierson Ferdinand LLP
Portage & Practice

Plant & People
Runway
Urban Outfitters
Visit Philly
WORLD



Thank you!