



Transforming the BFI London Film Festival

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As director of the BFI London Film Festival, Clare Stewart is making significant contributions to the city's cultural life. By revamping the festival's program and introducing new initiatives to champion diversity and new talent, she is bringing her love of films to an ever-growing audience.

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When Clare Stewart was growing up, the town she lived in, Korumburra in rural Victoria, didn't even have a cinema. She travelled one and a half hours to Melbourne to see her first movie, the animated children's classic *Charlotte's Web*.

"I was four or five at the time, it made me and my Mum cry," she says. "I was captivated by the magic of an experience that could be so transformative."

This passion for the power of film has driven Stewart throughout her career. As director of the BFI London Film Festival since 2011, she is one of the most influential people in the city's cultural scene.

Over her six years as the BFI's (British Film Institute) Head of Festivals, where she is responsible for both the BFI London Film Festival (October) and BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival (March), Stewart has boosted audience numbers to record levels, and been a champion for new talent and diverse voices.

When the London Film Festival began more than 60 years ago, English language films dominated UK cinemas. In 2016, the festival showed nearly 250 feature films from more than 70 countries, including the first screening of *Moonlight* outside of North America, which went on to win the Oscar for Best Picture.

The previous year, Stewart was instrumental in establishing a partnership with The Geena Davis Institute and Women in Film and TV (UK) to deliver a Global Symposium on Gender in Media. In 2016, the Festival also launched the Black Star initiative – a program of film screenings and talks that celebrate black actors.

Despite living in London for almost six years, Stewart remains a staunch supporter of the Australian film industry. She loves introducing Australian films at the festival such as *Lion*, starring Nicole Kidman and Dev Patel, which was nominated for Best Film at the Oscars, among other accolades.



BFI Director Clare Stewart, Nicole Kidman and Dev Patel. (Photo by Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images for BFI)

Tackling challenges head on

Stewart says she inherited a festival that was in very good shape, but “it needed some work done around how to attract new and younger audiences and making it a festival for the future.

“Screens have become such a large part of our daily life but even though we now have much more access to filmed content online, there’s still a large number of films every year that are not necessarily making it to video-on-demand platforms,” she says.

One of Stewart’s major changes was to structure the festival differently. In the past, the program had revolved around geographical areas, such as British and French films. But Stewart revised the format to focus on genre, with themes including love, debate and laugh.

“The love section might not just include romantic films but also moving or provocative films about the love between family members,” she says.

Stewart also faced the challenge of finding venues that could hold large audiences at a time when cinemas are scaling down in favour of more boutique experiences. To counter this, in 2016 a temporary 800-seat cinema was built at Victoria Embankment Gardens. It helped grow the festival’s audience by 18 per cent that year to over 195,000.

“A lot of people talk about creating change but you actually have to do it,” Stewart says. “I think Australians are great risk-takers and are not change-averse, and that has been a really positive strength for me to draw on in terms of the transition here.”

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Taking cinema to the world

Stewart's passion for cinema grew when she studied media studies at RMIT University in Melbourne. But she never forgot her roots, and when she worked at the Australian Film Institute years later, she took a program of movies to regional Australia, hosting the launch event at a cinema in the small town of Leongatha near where she grew up.

In 1999, Stewart received the Queen's Trust award, which allowed her to travel to various film festivals around the world – an opportunity she used to get ideas about programming and the impact changes in technology was having on the way films were being shown.

“It can't be underestimated how valuable it is for people in creative industries to get out and see what's happening in the rest of the world,” Stewart says. “It really was something that changed my career completely.”

In 2006, Stewart was appointed director of the Sydney Film Festival, where she increased audiences, and broke previous box-office records, curated new experiential strands and introduced the festival's Official Competition for films that are 'courageous, audacious and cutting-edge' which in 2017 celebrates its 10th anniversary.

After five years helming the Sydney Film Festival, Stewart decided it was time to do something else. She went online and saw the British Film Institute's ad for director of the London Film Festival and flew over for an interview two days after finishing her previous role.

“The thing that drives me and I'm most passionate about is connecting films with audiences.

“You know the work that's gone into getting that film on the screen and whether it's challenging and provocative, or entertaining and funny, you know you're doing something for the filmmakers by connecting their film with the audience,” Stewart says.



Clare Stewart and guests attend the 'Queen Of Katwe' Virgin Atlantic Gala screening during the 60th BFI London Film Festival. (Photo by John Phillips/Getty Images for BFI)

During the London Film Festival, she hosts Q&As with Hollywood stars such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Tom Hanks and Johnny Depp.

“They are all creative people who come out not for the glitz and glamour but because they are passionate about the work they have done and the films that are screening,” says Stewart. “There’s still a desire for the communal experience and to hear from filmmakers, directors and creative talent about what went into the making of the film.

“The way I measure my success is by whether I have introduced a diversity of films to a wide audience, and that’s the thing that drives me the most.

“It’s about converting people to the breadth and depth of cinema,” she adds.

“There’s nothing like the thrill of the lights going down at the Odeon Leicester Square where we have our gala screenings, and the anticipation in the audience before the film hits the screen. That’s the moment that I always really love.”

Find out more about the [BFI London Film Festival](#).