



# Creating Space: How Film Festivals Like NewFilmMakers LA Are Empowering a Global Wave of Creators

Film festivals have become crucial launching pads for independent storytellers. More than just glitzy red carpets and acceptance speeches, festivals today are about access—to audiences, industry connections, professional growth, and creative autonomy.

At the forefront of this movement is NewFilmMakers LA (NFMLA), a monthly festival that's quietly become one of the most impactful platforms for independent creators in the U.S. and beyond. With programs tailored to elevate marginalized voices and emerging talent, NFMLA does more than showcase films—it cultivates careers.

"We wanted to create an alternative," says Larry, NFMLA's director. "NFMLA programs and supports over 200 independent films annually, but there are tens of thousands of independent films being made each year that are vying for support."

22 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

## Why Film Festivals Matter More Than Ever

For independent filmmakers, especially those without access to studios or big-name agents, film festivals serve as a proving ground. It's where industry professionals discover talent, where audience buzz begins, and where filmmakers connect with future collaborators.

NFMLA stands out by doing things differently. Each month, they host a full week of programming, from professional development panels (Monday to Thursday) to industry showcases, public panels (Friday) and public screenings (Saturday), followed by media and press engagement on Sunday.

"A lot of people think 'new filmmaker' means student or first-timers," Larry explains. "But for us, it means independence. You can be just starting out or a veteran like Miranda Bailey, who's produced over ten films. What matters is that you're working independently—and you have a story worth telling."

In addition to its monthly festivals, NFMLA runs initiatives like InFocus, which centers on underrepresented communities in film, and the Stars program, focused on supporting television writers. Their support continues long after a screening—NFMLA often pitches their alumni to major studios like Sony and beyond.

"Find your power by creating your own work."

For Andrew Chung, a Toronto-based filmmaker and educator, the journey through the entertainment industry has been one of self-realization, adaptation, and ultimately, empowerment through creation. With over 15 years of experience spanning writing, directing, producing, casting, and distribution, Andrew understands the realities facing Canadian talent—particularly those outside the traditional entertainment hotspots like Los Angeles or New York.

"If you're an actor waiting for opportunities to come to you, you'll be waiting forever," he says. "It's not about sitting back. It's about stepping up—and creating your own momentum."

Andrew is part of a growing number of filmmakers encouraging actors and creators to diversify their skills. Many of the actors he mentors have returned to school or pivoted into writing and producing after facing consistent roadblocks in booking traditional acting roles. His message? You already have more power than you think. He believes that by stepping into the role of a creator, actors can take control of their own narratives and career paths.

"Actors today are expected to be more than just performers," he explains. "Learning how to write, direct, or even just produce a short film—these are not backup plans. They're part of building a sustainable career."

One of the most powerful insights Andrew offers is the value of building local communities before trying to break into larger markets.

23 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com



Having built a career in Canada, he understands the allure—and the pitfalls—of immediately chasing the Hollywood dream.

"There's this idea that in order to make it, you have to move to L.A. right away. But why? If you haven't built something where you are, you won't have anything to show when you get there."

He encourages artists to make use of the resources available to them locally—regional funding programs, film schools, emerging grants, and, most importantly, the thriving yet often overlooked indie scenes in cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Building a portfolio in your hometown allows you to grow organically, at your own pace, and most importantly, with creative freedom.

Andrew is also a strong advocate for self-taping and remote auditioning, which has exploded post-pandemic and leveled the playing field in many ways.

"With the rise of self-tapes, geography doesn't matter as much anymore. An actor in Calgary can audition for a role in New York. That didn't happen ten years ago. Now it's about whether your performance can cut through the screen—not whether you're standing in the room."



He speaks of the industry's slow but growing embrace of diversity and inclusion, noting that Canadian actors and filmmakers of color, especially Asian Canadians, are finding more opportunities to share stories that reflect their real lives—not just the industry's outdated perceptions.

Finally, Andrew offers a reminder to anyone feeling stuck, regardless of where they are in their journey:

24 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

"The industry is always shifting. The people who succeed are the ones who adapt, who keep learning, who build their own work. You don't have to wait for permission to make something. You just need a vision—and the will to get it done."

In an era where creators are more empowered than ever to control their own paths, Andrew's advice is timely, practical, and deeply encouraging. Whether you're in a major city or a small town, his message resonates loud and clear: you can start building your career right now—exactly where you are.



## UPCOMING EVENTS

- May 10th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: Disabilities
- June 14th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: LGBTQ+ Cinema
- July 12th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: Canadian Cinema
- August 23rd, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: International Animation
- September 20th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: Latinx & Hispanic Cinema
- October 18th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: Veteran Cinema
- November 14th, 2025 – DocuSlate Documentary Film Festival Day 1
- November 15th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: Indigenous Cinema
- November 16th, 2025 – DocuSlate Documentary Film Festival Day 2
- December 13th, 2025 – Monthly Film Festival | InFocus: Middle Eastern & Arab Cinema

25 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

"The stories coming out of Mexico are richer than ever—and we're just getting started."

Born in Monterrey, Mexico, and now splitting her time between Los Angeles and her home country, Sofia Garza-Barba is a rising creative force in genre filmmaking. A writer, director, and producer, Sofia's work is known for its bold use of fantasy, horror, dark comedy, and surrealism, often woven together with vibrant, multicultural flair. But beyond her imaginative visuals lies a passionate mission—to expand what Latin American cinema can be and who it's for.

"I've always tried to blend genres and cultures," she says. "That was part of my voice even before it became trendy. I want to take audiences on a ride—emotionally, visually, and culturally."

Sofia got her start directing music videos and commercials for Latin American brands and artists, a path that taught her how to deliver strong visuals on tight timelines. Over the past six years, she's transitioned into narrative filmmaking with several award-winning short films—and now has her sights set on completing her first feature.

Her career has benefited from her dual citizenship and bilingualism, which have allowed her to comfortably navigate both American and Mexican productions. But she emphasizes that the strength of Mexican production—particularly in recent years—is not just about logistics or lower costs. It's about talent, infrastructure, and storytelling.

"People used to come to Mexico just to save money on production," Sofia explains. "Now they come for the quality. We have incredible crews, amazing actors, and the work speaks for itself."

26 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

Indeed, Mexico has seen a creative renaissance in both film and television. Sofia points to recent success stories, and acclaimed international projects that originated from Mexican talent. She highlights the importance of these moments—not just for exposure, but for breaking long-standing stereotypes about Mexican cinema.

One of the biggest shifts she's noticed post-pandemic is the rise of self-tapes and remote auditions, which she sees as game-changing—especially for actors and filmmakers living outside of Mexico City, or in smaller regions.

"You don't have to live in the 'right' city anymore to be seen. If there's a role that fits you—send in your tape. Reach out. Be bold."

Sofia encourages actors from smaller towns to make their case to casting directors, even when a listing is asking for someone local. She's been on the other side of those casting calls and knows that a strong performance—paired with a proactive approach—can absolutely win someone a role.



But more than just access, Sofia is passionate about changing the narrative of what Latin American stories can look like. She believes filmmakers should feel empowered to explore beyond the tropes, and to create stories that reflect the full spectrum of human experience—from the universal to the uniquely cultural.

"Feelings are universal. Whether you're in Mexico, Italy, or Japan—everyone understands love, fear, laughter, pain. That's what I aim to capture. Not just a Mexican story. A human one—with a Latin flavor."

27 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

And while her success has brought her opportunities across borders, Sofia remains fiercely proud of her roots and the creative energy emerging from her homeland.

"I'm excited to be Mexican right now," she says. "Our stories are resonating with people around the world. The more we lean into who we are—and the more we collaborate—the more powerful our voice becomes."

For filmmakers and actors in Latin America looking to break in, Sofia's message is full of hope and clarity: you don't need to leave your country to be seen. Start where you are. Be fearless. And tell the story only you can tell.



"No one has to give you permission—you can greenlight yourself."

For Jacqueline Elyse Rosenthal, a multi-talented actress, writer, and director based in Los Angeles, filmmaking isn't just a career—it's a calling built on authenticity, persistence, and a deep love for storytelling. Starting in the industry at the age of seven, Jacqueline spent over two decades as an actress before transitioning into writing and directing her own projects—partly out of necessity, and entirely out of purpose.

"I didn't see women directors on my sets growing up," she recalls. "So I didn't know that could be me. I always loved writing and directing, but I didn't have a model for it. I had to create it for myself."

Jacqueline speaks from lived experience when she talks about the often unseen grind of the industry. Despite landing countless roles as a young actor, she felt creatively boxed in—frequently cast as the same "cute L.A. girl on a bad date." While grateful for the work, she longed for something deeper, more meaningful, and more aligned with who she was. That desire led her to writing scripts—first privately, for over 15 years—and eventually to directing them herself.

28 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

"The roles I was being offered didn't reflect my voice. I wanted to make films that mattered. So I stopped waiting and started creating."

Her advice to other actors is clear: don't wait for someone else to tell you that you're ready. Start now, with what you have. She believes the actor's instinct to build character and emotional truth is already a kind of writing—and a sign that they're capable of so much more.

"Actors are natural storytellers. They already understand beats, emotional arcs, and vulnerability. That's writing. That's directing. You just have to recognize it in yourself."

Jacqueline is deeply passionate about helping actors evolve into multi-hyphenates—people who write, direct, produce, and act not just to survive in the industry, but to thrive within it. For her, becoming a director wasn't about abandoning acting; it was about reclaiming agency and crafting the kinds of roles she wanted to see on screen.

But she's also refreshingly honest about the journey. She opens up about the rejection, the doubt, and the reality that even after directing a major sci-fi project at Sony, she still occasionally takes on server jobs to fund her next film.

"It's not glamorous. But I do what I need to do to make the art I care about. And there's zero shame in that."

Jacqueline emphasizes that the path to success is rarely linear—and even when things start going well, the pressure doesn't magically disappear.

"There's this strange whiplash when things finally start to click. You feel like, 'I've worked so hard for this—what if it disappears?' That fear can keep you on the hamster wheel. But the truth is, your timeline is your own. You don't have to race. You just have to keep going."

For actors outside of major hubs like Los Angeles or New York, Jacqueline offers tangible hope. She points to the post-pandemic rise of remote auditions and self-tapes as a major equalizer. In her own projects, she's cast actors from all over the country—people who submitted a compelling tape and wrote a note that resonated.

"One of the best actors I've worked with was a child living nowhere near L.A. She sent in a self-tape, and I knew instantly she was the one. She flew in for the role. The talent is out there—you don't have to live in a big city to be seen."

She also stresses the importance of starting small, building locally, and making something—anything—that proves you're serious.

"Find your local theater. Join a regional production. Make a short film on your phone. It doesn't have to be perfect. You just need to start."



29 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com

Perhaps the most inspiring thing about Jacqueline is her heart. She speaks not as someone who's trying to "make it," but as someone who's fighting to create a more human, more inclusive industry—where passion trumps pedigree and where the next breakout star could be anyone brave enough to try.

"The new generation of filmmakers, people like me, we want to lift others up. We know what it's like to be overlooked. When I cast, I look for people who connect to the story—not for names. I want to bring new talent with me."

Her message to actors and filmmakers everywhere is simple but profound: "Be patient. Be persistent. Be kind to yourself. And never let someone else define what success looks like for you."



## Film Festivals as a Catalyst, Not a Destination

As the interviews show, film festivals like NFMLA aren't just events—they're ecosystems. They empower filmmakers to showcase their voice, build community, and ultimately take ownership of their careers.

Whether you're in Canada, Mexico, or the U.S., the common message is clear:

Don't wait. Create. Build community where you are. Your story matters—even if no one's told it before.

And as Larry puts it, "We're not looking for people who are sitting on the sidelines. We want filmmakers and artists who are doing the work—and we'll help them go even further."

30 | APRIL 2025 | theworkbook.com



## Sharon Lieblein

The Casting Director who was instrumental in discovering Ariana Grande, Emma Roberts, Lily Collins and more!

### FILM FESTIVAL PREVIEW

WE SAT DOWN WITH ANNA LAMARDE AND ALYSHA OCHS TO DISCUSS HOW THEY HOW THEY ASSISTED ACTORS IN LA

### ACTORS HELPING ACTORS

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### THE SELF-TAPE FIX

ACTOR TARIAN JOHNSON HIGHLIGHTS THE TRUTH ABOUT SELF-TAPES NO ONE'S TELLING YOU

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