

CALGARY HERALD

'Movie belongs to Calgary': Film festival screens Alberta-shot western **The Thicket** at opening gala

The evening offered a glamorous lift-off for the film festival in its 25th year, which will feature more than 200 movies at various venues until Sept. 29

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'The Thicket' actor Leslie Grace and director Elliot Lester pose on the red carpet at opening night of the Calgary International Film Festival at the Jack Singer Concert Hall on Thursday, September 19, 2024. Brent Calver/Postmedia

For the first time since 2019, the Calgary International Film Festival held a red carpet opening gala Thursday to kick off 10 days of international, national and local films, and to celebrate the homegrown film industry with a screening of the Alberta-shot western *The Thicket*.

Director Elliott Lester, actress Leslie Grace, Calgary producers Chad Oakes and Mike Frislev, and author Joe R. Landsale — who wrote the original novel the film is based on — joined members of the Alberta crew for the opening at Arts Commons Jack Singer Concert Hall. The film was for years a passion project of actor Peter Dinklage, who plays a bounty hunter named Reginald Jones. He was initially set to walk the red carpet in Calgary on Thursday but scheduling conflicts forced him to cancel.

“He was as broken-hearted as much as we were that he couldn’t make it tonight,” said Oakes, co-founder of Calgary-based Nomadic Pictures. “He was on that private jet up until yesterday.”



*Members of the cast and crew of *The Thicket* pose on the red carpet at opening night of the Calgary International Film Festival at the Jack Singer Concert Hall on Thursday, September 19, 2024. Brent Calver/Postmedia*

The evening nevertheless offered a suitably glamorous liftoff for the film festival in its 25th year, which will feature more than 200 movies at various venues until Sept. 29.

“This is what it’s supposed to be like and it’s so nice to be back to that,” said Brian Owens, artistic director of the film festival. “I feel like this is laying the foundation for our post-pandemic rebuild. This is what we imagined would happen.”

The festival is enjoying a significant growth spurt, receiving an all-time high of 4,300 submissions from around the globe, he said.

“With 200 films in the festival, that’s a less than five per cent chance of making it,” Owens said. “It’s really exciting to see how the reputation keeps stepping up year to year.”



Chad Oakes, producer at Nomadic Films, speaks to press on the red carpet at opening night of the Calgary International Film Festival at the Jack Singer Concert Hall on Thursday, September 19, 2024. Brent Calver/Postmedia

Screening a made-in-Alberta film as the opener was a bonus, particularly since it was one that showcased the beauty of the province’s locations and landscapes, he said.

Also starring Levon Hawke, Esme Creed-Miles, Metallica’s James Hetfield, Gbenga Akinnagbe and Juliette Lewis, *The Thicket* filmed in rural areas outside of Calgary in late February and March of 2023, including Albertina Farm on the Bow and Highwood rivers, CL Ranch west

of Calgary, the Bow River Ranch near the Springbank Airport and on the Stoney Nakoda reserve.

“The movie belongs to Calgary,” said Lester. “It’s like coming home to be able to celebrate, thank the people you worked with, look at their faces. I’ve never seen Calgary without snow, I don’t recognize it.”



Wrangler and Alberta film icon John Scott poses on the red carpet at opening night of the Calgary International Film Festival at the Jack Singer Concert Hall on Thursday, September 19, 2024. Brent Calver/Postmedia

Like many Alberta productions, *The Thicket* faced some harsh winter climes during a month-long shoot. Production was shut down a few times when the wind chill pushed temperatures below -35 C, Lester has said.

“I’ve shot around the world and I’ve worked with dedicated crews,” he said. “But I haven’t worked with a committed crew like that. They were able to deal with it. We were like, ‘How are you doing this? How are you pushing a dolly in -25?’ They were never complaining. We didn’t have one complaint. I’d love to come back and shoot another movie — in the summer.”

“They also laughed at us at times,” says Grace. “Because they knew we were so not used to this kind of weather.”

Grace plays Jimmie Sue in the film, a take-charge prostitute who joins Reginald and former slave Eustace (Akinagbe) in helping a young man (Hawke) track down the group of ruthless outlaws led by Cutthroat Bill (Lewis) that has kidnapped his sister (Creed-Miles).

“What was beautiful about it was that I think extreme circumstances expedite the bonding process, and it really did,” Grace says. “We got to know each other so well. I was walking around earlier today when I got here and I was like, ‘This looks vastly different than it did when we were shooting.’ It’s alive and people are outside. When we were shooting here, there was really nothing going on, so we got to bond on and off set more than you normally would.”

While *The Thicket* was produced for Tubi, the American streaming service, it was also rolled out into theatres in the past few weeks. The \$10-million production has received positive reviews since its release.

Oakes said the film and television industry has suffered worldwide, damaged by recent strikes and COVID-19, and said Alberta’s most pressing need right now is to build its crew base.

His company, Nomadic Pictures, is set to do nearly \$200 million in business this year in productions around the globe.