

## Coup de projecteur sur le cinéma francophone à la Nouvelle-Orléans

*Interview originale en anglais*

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*La classe de 2nde Euro Anglais au lycée Pierre BAYEN à Châlons-en-Champagne veut en savoir plus sur le cinéma à La Nouvelle-Orléans et en Louisiane. Leur envoyée spéciale, Marine LEDUC, rencontre Clint BOWIE, directeur artistique de New Orleans Film Society.*

*Une transcription réalisée par la classe de 2nde Euro Anglais au lycée Pierre BAYEN.*

### Question 01

#### **Could you identify yourself ?**

My name is Clint BOWIE. I'm the artistic director of the New Orleans Film Society. I've been in this position for about fifteen years, so I've had an opportunity to see how both the organization has shifted and changed over the past fifteen years but have also had a front row seat to the changing film-making landscape here. So, what we do as an entity is provide support and resources to the local and regional filmmaking community. We support New Orleans and Louisiana-based artists, but we also extend our focus to the entire southeast. We support artists who are based everywhere, from Florida up to Virginia, over to Oklahoma, Texas : a pretty large territory that we support artists in.

We also produce the annual New Orleans film festival, which is an Oscar qualifying event that takes place in the fall and we produce a French language film festival in the spring, so that one is coming up next month. The French film festival is February 22th through 28th. And this year, the New Orleans film festival will be in October.

### Question 02

#### **Are New Orleans and Louisiana well represented in Cinema ?**

Yeah, I would say in a pretty big way within the independent film landscape. And that has evolved over the years, for sure, and it's also dovetailed with the growth of the production industry here, and by "production". I'm speaking more of the Hollywood presence here in Louisiana ; there are a lot of tax incentives to bring more film productions to the state. That world is a little bit separate from the independent film world, so artists who are developing their own stories and bringing a really small budget to tell more of a personal meaningful project. One of the Marvel films that happens to be shot in Louisiana, that has a much larger, multimillion-dollar budget.

But the two have really grown in tandem and I think there have been some overlap and some touchpoints here and there, and that has been exciting to see people who you know live in Louisiana and make a living by working on some of those larger productions who are also working on and supporting some of the smaller films that have been more homegrown in nature.

I'd say over the past decade we've had a number of filmmakers who have gone on to receive major national support from institutions like Sundance and ITVS, which is the biggest funder of documentaries in the country. We have some really well-regarded documentary filmmakers and fiction filmmakers, a number of Oscar voters and members of the Academy who are now based in New Orleans. So, you know, just speaking right now: the

Sundance film festival just happened and an artist who we supported through one of our programs had a film at Sundance. Also, a local producer was invited to take part in the Sundance producers lab.

I'm talking a lot about Sundance because it's happening right now, so it's on my mind, but I think that Sundance is one of the bigger film entities in the country and is a barometer of how one measures success in relation to proximity to big, well resourced, funded entities like Sundance.

So, certainly, yeah, New Orleans has a particularly thriving filmmaking industry and community: so, both individuals who are developing their own work, as well as a production space and production infrastructure to support larger projects.

### Question 03

#### Can you name some film productions that took place in Louisiana ?

Sure, so, in terms of some of the bigger budget productions, Gosh, I'm drawing a blank, of course, and I mean I mentioned the Marvel universe and *Green lantern* was shot here, which was a pretty big production. I think that was maybe ten years ago, but more recently, the new *Interview with a Vampire* series has been shot here. Also, *the Mayfair Witches* series was shot here.

In the new film from Yorgos Lanthimos, who directed *poor things*, which is now being released and getting a lot of academy attention - That film was not shot here, but his newest film, the one that followed that was that just wrapped last summer.

That's a sense of kind of the bigger budget productions and then, in terms of more, of the smaller local projects, a film called *time*, which was acquired by Amazon Studios and was nominated for the best documentary feature Oscar two years ago, was made here and developed by Garrett Bradley, who is a filmmaker based in New Orleans and a producer named Lauren Domino. Lauren also produced a film called *American Symphony*, which is a documentary about Jon Batiste, which was recently released on Netflix, and executive produced by Michelle Obama.

And so those are some high-profile local films. You asked about the film that's in Sundance. It's actually a documentary short film from an Iranian American filmmaker, currently based in New Orleans, named Andy Sarjahani. He went through a program that we have called "Emerging voices". That program provides a small grant and year-round support for a filmmaker to develop a project and connect with gatekeepers and industry and other artists to help hone their creative voice.

### Question 04

#### Which film would you suggest to discover the society, the culture or the landscapes of Louisiana ?

This is an older film, but *Eve's bayou* is a film that came out in the, I think, the early nineties and was directed by Kasi Lemmons, and I think it's a really interesting look at the Creole culture in in South Louisiana and I think it's aged pretty well too. You know, it's one of the few films of that era that really focused on an all-black cast, was directed by a black woman, looks at, you know, black communities in South Louisiana - that do have a connection to French heritage - but I think that film really captures a Southern Gothic aesthetic that is a really important part of this place.

Other films : I mentioned *Time*, which I think is still streaming on Amazon. But that is a look at incarceration and what the prison system is, its effects on families here, and New Orleans is one of the most incarcerated cities in one of the most incarcerated states in a country that has more incarcerated people than anywhere else in the world. So I think that film is really important if you're trying to understand what life is here like for the average person, and just because everyone is touched by incarceration in some capacity.

So those are two films. They're very different and then, I dunno. I think that's a good start, a good primer for just two films to kind of give you a start and a look at into culture here.

### Question 05

#### Is French cinema still influential today?

For sure, for sure, there's a presence. We're actually, we're about to launch the twenty seventh iteration of the French film festival. That was started with an acknowledgement of the importance of French heritage and in connection to the city. There are a lot of people who either grew up with the language in their home or, you know, who've learned it in school through one of the immersion programs here, so it's important for us to be able to provide access to French language cinema and people who are working within that space.

So, this festival will feature twenty-five films from the whole world of francophone cultures. We're showing films from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we're showing films from France, obviously, Belgium, from

French-speaking Canada and we even have several films that were made here in Louisiana, two that were recently restored, from the late nineteen seventies, featuring an all French-speaking Cajun cast, and also another film that will be world premiering, a short film about a young woman who is kind of discovering her own Creole, French-speaking familial heritage and learning more about that. I mean, I think you know there's a lot of interest in French cinema, French language cinema, and having that French heritage become part of people's lives in some way, so we... that's in large part why we have continued the French film festival for so long.

**I don't know if you've mentioned it but how long has the French festival existed?**

The French festival is in its twenty-seventh year, so I would have to go back. What is twenty-five years ago ? Nineteen, nineties, mid-nineties, I guess, something like that. Am I doing my math correct?

**So, it's a success every year if it's still going on?**

For sure, for sure. We see, and you know, I think last year we had an attendance of twenty-five hundred who came out to the festival, which is, you know, pretty exciting. It's a smaller scale festival. It's less than a week. We're only in one venue, one screening at a time, but people really love to come out and see French cinema. We show everything with English subtitles, but I think there are a lot of people out there who come to kind of immerse themselves in the language and the cultures represented onscreen.

#### **Question 06**

**Beyond the French Film Festival, are there francophone films screenings ?**

That's a good question. I don't know if there's anything that's dedicated like a festival, but I do know that especially in Lafayette and the Acadiana center they do French language programming. We've shown French language films outside of the festival. For sure, you know, at the New Orleans film festival we usually have a number of French language films, not specifically from France, but from francophone communities all over. And, outside of that, I think it kind of just depends on, you know, the year, the time, what's been celebrated, you know what's been released, and so, yeah, I don't know outside of what we program specifically and kind of what I've been aware of. But, it exists, for sure.

#### **Question 07**

**Is French cinema popular within the Cajun community?**

Oh, for sure, the two films that I just mentioned that have been recently restored by a national outfit called Indie Collect were both made by someone who identifies as Cajun himself, Glen Pitre and he has continued to be involved in the film industry. He continues to make films. He produced a film that we showed about ten years ago called *Cigarettes and Nylons*. That was also French language. I think he's continuing to develop new work. He's also a film teacher. He teaches in Baton Rouge.

But, you know we've been working with him, and Indie Collect who restored the films around this, and you know the release of these films that haven't really received much attention since they were released and I think one was in nineteen seventy-seven and the other in nineteen seventy-nine. They're historical pieces. But a lot of people who were part of the productions or just who were all Cajun and French speaking are just really excited to see these films come back and we've been in conversation with them about being involved in some way and you know them having that pride of their own culture and heritage and being able to share that with their children, who haven't seen some of the films, and also their communities. I think there's just a lot of pride in that culture, specifically and, you know, the cinema that's come out of South Louisiana, and this very unique Cajun French speaking culture.

#### **Question 08**

**Does cinema in Louisiana reflect the state's multiculturalism ?**

Yes. You know, the film I mentioned earlier that's going to be world premiering is a short film. It's actually made by two sisters, Charliese and Chasah West and they're two black women. Their cast is all black and it's focusing on kind of a young black woman kind of discovering her own, like, French speaking heritage.

And there's another filmmaker we've supported, Corey Santuar, who is now studying film at Columbia University in New York, in their MFA (Master of Fine Arts) program. But is from Lafayette, went through our "Emerging Voices" program, a black man who is working on a short film called *Evangeline*, which is about the *Evangeline* fable and is very much a South Louisiana story that so many people know and is entirely in French as well.

And there is yet another French language short documentary that's currently being developed about black Cajun cowboys and that very specific culture and that just received support from an institution called Create Louisiana that's in part funded by TV5 MONDE which you may be aware of; they do a lot of programming in the Louisiana area to promote French language and that grant is designed to support a French language project and I think that program in Louisiana has really helped develop and nurture more diverse voices who are interested in telling more of a complete story of what the French speaking community in Louisiana looks like.

**I think their question was not only about the French speaking community but also in general, like multiculturalism herein Louisiana. I dunno if there are also Spanish speaking directors. Is it showing, like, the diversity here ?**

Oh, the cinema in general... I would say so, more and more, for sure. We have a program in place, the "Emerging Voices" program I mentioned several times that is specifically designed to support BIPOC, so Black, Indigenous and People Of Color and directors who are developing projects. We're in the ninth year of that program now and every year provide grants and support to artists to help develop a project and so certainly that program has helped to develop and provide resources to more marginalized artists who typically have not kind of received that support or attention in the past. And outside of that I know, for example, the NOVAC (New Orleans Video Access Center) has placed a real emphasis on the support of diverse artists and trying to be more of an inclusive space for a more multicultural approach to cinema making, and access to cinema making. So, I think you know at the independent space that's happening for sure. I can't say I necessarily see that in some of the large productions that are coming to Louisiana, but little by little I hope to see that change as well. We just have much less control over that piece of it.

#### **Question 09**

##### **How can cinema help Louisiana?**

Yeah, in lots of different ways. I think bigger budget cinema provides career sustainability for a lot of people and I married my husband as a costume designer and you know works within film, works in big budget projects and that's, you know, his primary source of income and then this work within film exhibition and independent cinema support provides my primary income. So, our entire family is supported by cinema in some capacity. So, I think there's the job piece of it.

I think there's also a real importance in having one story be told authentically and represented on screen, and that's a really important reason why we do what we do as an institution and why we support who we support: to ensure that the stories are being told authentically and that individuals are given the kind of support they need to tell more personal stories that are more reflective of all different lives that are, you know, inhabiting this state. So, I think that's a that's a real benefit of what cinema can do : providing that validation of seeing your story on screen and seeing a story that's reflective of your life be celebrated, whether it's on a festival or on being supported by a program like the "Emerging Voices" program. In other ways too, I think that, you know, the communal experience that a festival provides is really special and can provide everything from career advancing connections that you make at a festival or at a screening, can provide just the kind of challenge and reflection that all good art can provide. So, I think there are multiple benefits of cinema. That are some, some of which are very specific to Louisiana and the film culture here, and some that are more universal, but for sure I think that Louisiana is aided by cinema presence. The government and the state of Louisiana is certainly impacted by, you know, the economic impact of bringing on outside productions to the state and that's why there's a tax incentive in place to entice productions to come here and shoot, and certainly that, you know, touches other aspects of life here and you know, we hear from diverse industries, like even paint providers, who often see an uptake when a production is in town because they'll need paint to paint the sets, or, you know, craftsmen who are hired to help build sets or local actors and actresses, all kinds of like ways that that larger funding from big productions can touch people who are tangentially related to a project but for whom it might not be their main source of income.

#### **Question 10**

##### **Why is it important to promote cinema today ?**

I don't think that cinema has lost its impact on audiences. You know that it's had for, you know, decades and decades. I still think that it's one of the most powerful mediums in which stories are told, and it's also one of the most accessible and one of the most consumed.

So, I think that with that comes a lot of pressure to ensure that, you know, as an entity that's involved with exhibition and connecting audiences to film and cinema. I think we take on that pressure of ensuring that who were supporting, whether that's at the artist level through grant programs, or the films that were exhibiting and that we're choosing to put in front of an audience in a cinema are films that we feel like our films and artist and work that we feel like are advancing the kinds of conversations or pushing the needle in a way that will ultimately bring about the kinds of changes that we want to see in the world. I think that's an important aspect of what we do, that social justice work and I don't, you know, that doesn't have to come in the form of an advocacy documentary, I think that's often in, you know, popular narrative films that you know are either doing work that I think is really important in shifting people's mindsets and understandings of life outside their own.

#### **Question 11**

##### **Why does Louisiana often inspire films with mystery ?**

It's interesting because, I think, you know in large part films have been responsible for that. You know, like you see so many representations of this and film and media, and then that becomes the accepted perception of what the state in this region is like. I'm not saying it's all incorrect. I don't know what your experience has been. It's certainly not like walking onto the set of *True Detective*, but, you know, the region does have a history that's very unique, both in terms of whether you call it "mysticism" or you know religions or practices or cultures that people find different or unique or scary or-and I think that is often attractive to people who are trying to tell stories and get people's interest. So that ends up just perpetuating itself and then creating this intrigue that I then feel like the city has to perform. So often you see the more touristy parts of the city performing this culture that might not feel authentic, but is what people have come to expect, and so that ends up becoming perpetuated itself, because many tourists just come and get to experience that more performative side that's only, you know, continuing to advance some of these tropes and in some of these perceptions that might not be entirely accurate but might be rooted in something that they saw in a tv show or a film thirty years ago. So, I don't know. It's like an odd cycle, but I think much of it did originally start in, you know, film and media that was years and years before we're at right now.

But it's a unique city in the United States that doesn't look like many other cities. It doesn't have the same kind of unique history that many other cities have. I think I understand why people are drawn to it and I understand why. It stands out as a setting for a tv show or a movie or another setting you're trying to tell a story in, just giving how, you know, beautiful and mysterious, and, and special it really is. So, it makes sense to me, but I would encourage people to look a little deeper and try to find and more independent projects that are trying to speak to more of an everyday look at the state, as opposed to just, you know, some of the series that are recycling Louisiana tropes.

#### **Question 12**

##### **Do you have a particular message for the globe reporters ?**

I actually was a working journalist before I moved into film. After I finished college, I worked in newspapers for six years at both a small weekly newspaper and then at a much larger daily newspaper. These were print publications, so I'm sure it's a very different landscape for journalism now.

But I loved every second of journalism and reporting, but that has translated so well in too their career paths that my life has taken, and I often used to think in headlines and trying to reduce a story or an idea into, you know, a single sentence or kind of what is the essence of what this is trying to say or communicate. I don't know, this is an advice that is just reflecting on my own journalistic experience, but I also think that it's important for individuals to kind of chart their own path and find what interests them the most and pursue it even if there's not an obvious job necessarily for them to see. I think that people often create their own opportunities and there's space for us all to be our true, authentic selves and just to pursue that, even outside of what traditional career paths might want to take us on.