

FOLLOW YOUR HEART FILM FESTIVAL HONORS INTERNATIONAL FILMMAKERS AT AMC EMPIRE 25 IN TIMES SQUARE

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NEW YORK, FL, UNITED STATES, June 12, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The [Follow Your Heart Film Festival](#) concluded its 2026 New York edition at AMC Empire 25 in Times Square, celebrating independent filmmaking, international collaboration, and emerging creative voices from around the world.



Festival Follow Your Heart, New York 2026

This year marked a milestone for the festival, which received 2,988 film submissions representing more than 90 countries and international co-productions across six continents. Following an extensive review process conducted by an international jury, only 70 projects advanced to the finalist round.

Now in its fifth year, the festival welcomed filmmakers, actors, producers, cinematographers, and film enthusiasts for an evening of screenings, industry discussions, networking, and awards recognizing excellence in independent cinema.

The awards evening opened with the official anthem of the Follow Your Heart Film Festival, performed by vocalist Veronika Znamenskaya and accompanied by pianist Ilya Ishchenko. Their performance set the tone for a celebration dedicated to creativity, artistic achievement, and the power of storytelling.

Festival Founder and Director Oxana Nechaeva welcomed guests alongside Festival Producer Ava Golban, thanking filmmakers, jury members, volunteers, partners, and supporters whose contributions made the event possible.

The festival recognized the dedication of its jury members, whose time, professionalism, and expertise were essential to reviewing and evaluating films from around the world.

The 2026 jury included Oxana Nechaeva, Ava Golban, Alexander Gorbaty, Vladimir Borisov, Henry Lipatov, Inna Bagryantseva, Ihor Shovkoplias, Natalia Nagornaya, Vitaliy Tovchucha, Elizaveta Kozlova, Victoria Unikel. It is important to note that some members of the international jury, in particular Ihor Shovkoplias and Elizaveta Kozlova, had previously participated in the work of the Follow Your Heart International Film Festival during its January 2026 season in Miami. Following a successful collaboration, they gladly joined the jury again for the festival's June season. For the festival organizers, this continuity is especially valuable, as it reflects a high level of trust from the professional community and confirms the strength of the expert relationships that have been established. Follow Your Heart International Film Festival is proud to bring together recognized professionals who continue to support the project with their experience, professional expertise, and contribution to the development of independent cinema.

One of the evening's highlights was the presentation of "Unknown Vysotsky: A Truthful Story" by filmmaker Anatoliy Balchev, who attended as a special guest of the festival. The documentary, dedicated to legendary Soviet poet, actor, and musician Vladimir Vysotsky, was presented shortly after its screening at the Cannes Film Festival and received a warm response from festival guests.

The festival also highlighted new opportunities for independent filmmakers through its partnership with VUGA Foundation and VUGA TV. Participants viewed a special message introducing filmmakers to international distribution opportunities and audience development initiatives designed to help independent projects reach global audiences beyond the festival



Ihor Shovkoplias and Oxana Nechaeva (New York 2026)



Oxana Nechaeva, Denis Rasporkin, Ava Golban

circuit.

A significant addition to this year's program was the introduction of the Best Feature Film category, reflecting the festival's continued growth and expanding international reach. Among the feature films represented was "Qazhymuqan" (Kazakhstan), directed by Kanagat Mustafin, demonstrating the increasingly global nature of the festival's program.

The 2026 awards recognized filmmakers from the United States, Colombia, Spain, Syria, and other countries represented throughout the festival.

Award recipients included:

- Special Guest of the Festival — Anatoliy Balchev, "Unknown Vysotsky: A Truthful Story"
- Best Feature Film — "Pome" (United States), directed by Horaine Harbin
- Best Director — Horaine Harbin
- Best Actress — Malena Sadaka
- Audience Choice Award — Malena Sadaka
- Best Cinematography — Colin Glascott for "The Lullaby" (United States)
- Best AI Film — "Hop(i)e" (United States)
- Best Comedy — "Ornithomancy" (United States)
- Best Color Grading — "Run the Show" (Colombia/Spain)
- Best Costume Design — "Run the Show" (Colombia/Spain)
- Best Story Concept — "Infinity" (Syrian Arab Republic)

Following the awards ceremony, festival guests participated in an industry panel featuring casting director Adrienne Stern, stunt coordinator Roberto Lopez, and filmmaker Albert Rudnitsky. The discussion explored the future of theatrical exhibition, independent filmmaking, audience engagement, and the evolving role of short films in today's entertainment landscape.

Throughout the conversation, panelists emphasized that while technology, distribution models, and audience habits continue to evolve, compelling storytelling remains the foundation of successful filmmaking. Drawing from their experience across casting, stunt coordination, directing, and editing, the speakers encouraged emerging filmmakers to focus on strong scripts, authentic creative vision, and stories they genuinely believe in rather than chasing trends or formulas.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of passion and authenticity in the creative process. Panelists encouraged filmmakers to trust the stories they feel compelled to tell and to pursue projects that come from a genuine place rather than attempting to follow industry trends. Their message echoed the mission of the festival itself: meaningful stories created with heart, purpose, and conviction continue to connect with audiences regardless of budget, format, or platform.

As the Follow Your Heart Film Festival continues to grow, its mission remains unchanged: to discover and support independent voices, celebrate artistic excellence, and create opportunities

for filmmakers from around the world to bring their stories to the screen.

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About Follow Your Heart Film Festival

The Follow Your Heart Film Festival is an international film festival dedicated to discovering and supporting independent filmmakers from around the world.

Oxana Nechaeva

Film Festival Follow YOUR Heart

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