

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Doc Fest helped Bluefin make an international splash

Filmmaker credits Lunenburg festival with his success

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As Doc Fest gears up for its fourth season September 21 to 24, John Hopkins, winner of last year's Best Atlantic Filmmaker Award, is riding high on a wave of international success with his film *Bluefin*, and he says he owes it all to the Lunenburg festival.

The PEI filmmaker's acclaimed NFB documentary about Atlantic tuna will have its European premiere in London later this month at Raindance, the U.K.'s largest independent festival running from September 20 to October 1.

The film was nominated for Raindance's best feature documentary award.

The European debut follows on from other red-carpet showings earlier this year, including a U.S. premiere at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, the International Ocean Film Festival in San Francisco, and an Asian premiere at the Sea and See Festival in Busan, South Korea.

Hopkins has also secured a contract with the major U.S.-based distributor, Gravitas Ventures, and the NFB announced it will be distributing the film to 150 libraries throughout Canada.

"None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for the Lunenburg Doc Fest," Hopkins told LighthouseNOW in a telephone interview.

"Winning an award there sent a signal, right off the top, for people to pay attention to my film."

The film's showing at Doc Fest last year came hot on the heels of *Bluefin's* world premiere at the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax, which was sold out.

The significance of his film being selected to show in Lunenburg is not lost on him. He commented that the fes-

wide in picking out really outstanding documentaries.

"It's a very curated festival. She's not trying to pad it with tons of films. She's really making an active effort to bring in the very best documentaries."

Hopkins noted there was "quite a buzz around Lunenburg."

"The fact that we even got selected for the festival, it was a really great signal that there's something happening with your film that is catching people's attention."

Hopkins had never been to Lunenburg and says he was immediately struck by the beauty of the setting and the level of interest from the community.

"The audience was super-engaged. We had a really wonderful Q and A session. With that kind of audience, I mean that's every filmmaker's dream," he said.

He notes as well that Doc Fest is more than just watching films, but provides an opportunity for filmmakers and novices to develop their skills and contacts through a variety of workshops and networking sessions.

Since *Bluefin* had already had its world premiere, it was not eligible for a showing at the prestigious Hot Docs festival in Toronto. Nonetheless, according to Hopkins, Segger convinced him to attend the festival as part of an Atlantic delegation to the Toronto festival that she had organized.

He hasn't looked back since.

While there, he attended a series of short, one-on-one meetings with potential distributors, including a representative with Gravitas.

"I didn't even think they would be interested in my film. I talked to him and told them how the film was doing, and it won an award at the Lunenburg Doc Fest, and I told him the theme of the film.

"And [the representative] just reached right over the table, and looked me straight in the eye, and said, 'That's exactly the film we want.'"

Hopkins sent him a link to the film, and he received a contract to sign "the very next day."

He describes Gravitas as a "huge" distributor.

"For example, on iTunes right now, of the top 20 documentaries, they're actually representing 14 of them. And they have a subscriber reach of over 1 billion subscribers."

According to Hopkins, the company will be releasing *Bluefin* to 100 of the top digital platforms, world-wide.

From there, things "just kind of kept rolling."

He was invited to the Santa Barbara International Festival.

"The next thing I know, I'm rubbing elbows with Emma Stone, seeing the crowds, the paparazzi, Ryan Gosling. And meeting the huge producers."

While he was there, he was invited to the San Francisco International Ocean Festival, where he won the Wildlife Award, and made connections with U.S. education distributors.

He also met a programmer with the Sea and See Festival.

"And the next thing I know, I'm on a plane showing my film as the opening night film in South Korea."

He regrets not being able to attend this year's Doc Fest, but notes it's because he'll be in London at Raindance.

"Our film's playing at the Downtown Los Angeles Film Festival at the same time," he adds.

Moreover, Hopkins says he had just received an invitation for a screening in New York.

"And then we're going back to San Francisco, because Lucas Films is going to be sponsoring Ocean Fest, and we want my film to sort of be their centerpiece film in terms of raising money for Ocean Fest."

"And it goes on and on and on," Hopkins says excitedly, adding, "That's because of Lunenburg Doc Fest, you know. That's what can happen to a filmmaker."



BEATRICE SCHULER PHOTO

Organizers sold approximately 2,200 seats at last year's DocFest and expect to surpass that at the fourth annual event, which will be held at the Lunenburg Opera House September 21 to 24.

Launched by a small local group of film enthusiasts at an informal meeting in February, 2013, Lunenburg's Doc Fest is gaining traction in the film festival circuit.

Pamela Segger, the festival's executive director, agrees the event is going from strength to strength.

Last year there were approximately 2,200 seats sold, with many showings sold out, and organizers are expecting to surpass that this year.

"We've grown considerably. We're offering more films, more programs and more community events," she told LighthouseNOW.

The event will be held at the Lunenburg Opera House for the second year in a row.

This year, an expanded program will feature eight film premieres, which will target a number of themes.

Hidden Impact: Lives of Accomplishment

Five different films will examine the impact of people living passionate lives. *Rumble: The Indians who Rocked the World*, *Bombshell*, *Last Men of Aleppo*, *Modified and Lives Well Lived*

Here and There: Films that define community

Three films that take audiences from India to the far North to Tuscany include, *Jugaad*, *This Cold Life and Spettacolo*.

Closer to home, a series of four films look at Lunenburg through diverse lenses.

The Canada Council has recognized the work of the Lunenburg Doc Festival and provided funding for commissioning original work, the *Sea of Change*, for which professional filmmakers and poets collaborated to create docupoems.

Other local films commissioned for the festival include *Second Impressions: Lunenburg Micro-Docs on 35mm Film* and *Wave Upon Wave: A Lunenburg Hodge Podge*.

The festival will also feature the World Premiere of Lunenburg: Where the Land Meets the Sea.

Two films will be showcased under the theme **Epic Voyages: Land and Sea** — the cycling feature *Le Ride*, and sailing adventure *Coyote*.

In addition to films, the festival will showcase an International Documentary Filmmakers Panel, a "Still Moving" Artist Talk with Sky Bergman, and virtual reality and other immersive attractions in the **Step Into the Story: Interactive Arcade**.

The festival will feature workshops, round tables, and networking events for filmmakers. Delegates from the Atlantic region and film fans will mix with representatives from Hot Docs International Documentary Festival and other screen industry partners and companies including CBC, National Film Board, Films We Like, and Zeitgeist Films.

It all kicks off with a celebratory opening night Gala on September 21.



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As well as film screening, Doc Fest holds a number of workshops for aspiring filmmakers.

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