

Blackbird Film Festival embraces change ahead of 2025 weekend

By: Leah Masi



As the Blackbird Film Festival prepares for its April 25-27 opening weekend in Cortland, Executive and Artistic Director Samuel Avery and his team of student coordinators are reshaping the event with new ideas and a renewed sense of purpose.



“In years past, we used to screen 120+ films which is just too much,” Avery said. “There was no time for anything else.”

This year, the festival is shifting in a different direction, keeping the film selection under 50, which should allow more time for activities and additional projects.

One of those new projects could fundamentally reshape the festival experience.

“We received fewer submissions this year, but smaller festivals are a bit more intimate,” Avery said.



This led Avery to consider a unique and innovative idea for this year's festival.

“I really want to attempt a 96-hour film challenge whereby a handful of filmmakers arrive on Monday and work collaboratively to produce a film over the course of a week to screen at the festival,” Avery said. “I see this as the future of Blackbird, and I'd really like to give it a shot.”

On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, SUNY Cortland students gather in Van Hoosen Hall to plan, brainstorm and build what has become one of the university's most distinctive creative events.

At this Tuesday's meeting, Avery said to his event coordinators, “At the end of the day, you're all students.”

Blackbird offers Cortland students the ability to explore different ‘rooms’ tailored to their interests, including PR, Marketing, Media Production, and Event Planning.

“As a filmmaker, I hope to submit many of my future films to festivals, and I think that seeing the backend of how a festival works will be great for me,” senior Jake Baglio said. “I found out about Blackbird through talk about it on campus last semester, then I attended and loved it.”

Senior Media Production major, David Garcia, has participated in Blackbird for the past three semesters, as both a film judge and event coordinator for the festival.

“I actually applied to Cortland because I saw they offered a film festival,” Garcia said. “I thought it would be an interesting and valuable experience.”

From September through December, interns judge film submissions. The spring semester shifts to programming, marketing and outreach before the festival culminates in April.

During the festival weekend, event coordinators are assigned to a group of filmmakers, serving as liaisons as they attend various festival activities. This allows them to network and develop relationships with professionals in the film industry.



“Finally, in May, we debrief, and from June to August I don't speak the word ‘Blackbird’ to give my brain a rest,” Avery said.

Since the festival came to Cortland in 2016, there was never a road map to follow, and Avery was open to any and all ideas.

“Blackbird has always been based around student input,” Avery said. “Not only that but my ideas are kind of old now... I need fresh minds.”

“This year I want to implement having a better social media presence,” junior Mickey Corey said. “I want to make sure that we have a consistent posting schedule on sites like Instagram and TikTok to attract new people, especially fellow students who aren't in the Communication and Media Studies.”

“It would be great to expand the student involvement. We have an unofficial student section/block during the festival weekend, and if we got the student body more involved it would really bring together the campus community and expose everyone to some great films,” senior Cecile Lessard said.

“As fun as the film blocks are, I think some of the best parts of a festival are the workshops, and for example, last year's screenwriting workshop with Chelsea Gonzalez was super informational and one of my favorite parts of Blackbird 2024. I'd love to see more of that,” Baglio said.

With a smaller slate of films and a potential 96-hour challenge on the horizon, Blackbird 2025 may signal the beginning of a more intimate, student-driven era for the festival — one shaped as much by fresh ideas, as by tradition.

