

# “Bodies in

The annual Native Crossroads Film Festival creates connections between cultures via indigenous storytelling on the big screen.

“*W*e all live here together.”

By Katherine Parker

“Native people and non-Native people literally cross roads every day, especially in our state, and this festival is a place for people who don’t normally talk to each other to learn about each other and take away a new perspective,” says Joshua Nelson, associate professor and director of Film and Media Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

Nelson’s words struck deep. Oklahomans do live together, but often pass each other by without a glance. Crossing streets, walking to class, even going to movies, bodies are unified in movement, yet separated by a lack of understanding, empathy or simply acknowledgement.

The 2017 Native Crossroads Film Festival and Symposium, “Bodies in Motion,” took on the challenge of creating connections between strangers by melding ideas, backgrounds and dreams through visual storytelling. Now in its fifth year, the annual two-day event is hosted by the OU Film and Media Studies Program and the OU Department of Native American Studies with support from the OU College of Arts and Sciences, the Norman Arts Council, the Chickasaw Nation, the Sam Noble Museum, the OU College of Law and the Office of the Vice President and Provost.

The films allowed attendees to travel with a young Chickasaw woman on her journey through love, isolation and discovery as she became one of the greatest Native American performers of all time in *Ti Ata. The Sun at Midnight* immersed viewers in the beauty of Canada’s Northwest Territories, as it subtly morphed into the antagonist of a young, urban princess lost in the wilderness. And an audience

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Kiowa-Choctaw artist Steven Paul Judd’s interpretation of TV Western star Jay Silverheels, known for his role in *The Lone Ranger*, served as the logo for the 2017 Native Crossroads Film Festival and Symposium.



# *Motion*”





The life and career of Oklahoma's beloved Native American actress and storyteller is told in *Te Ata*, a feature film by director Nathan Frankowski.

clung to a self-taught artist's dreams and passion for pop culture and Native American art in the documentary *Dig It If You Can* about renaissance man Steven Paul Judd.

The purpose of the festival is twofold, says Nelson: to encourage Native viewers to celebrate their identity and non-Native viewers to move beyond their limited scope of indigenous culture.

"Film is one of the best mediums to introduce new experiences," Nelson says. "We try to find a balance in the programming, while also creating a space for films that are trying to push the boundaries of art."

On screen, shorts and full-length films took center stage, each playing a significant role in capturing a diverse Native landscape. In addition to *Te Ata* by Nathan Frankowski, *Dig It If You Can* by Kyle Bell and *The Sun at Midnight* by Kristen Carthew, features included *Maliglutit* by Zacharias Kunuk and *El Sueño del Mara'akame* by Federico Cecchetti.

"Most people are going to sit at home and watch movies anyway. But it's a great experience to be able to come here and watch various films in such a short amount of time and get a feel for different styles. It may all be Native film, but there are so many styles of film featured here – drama, horror, experimental — the variation makes it appealing to everyone and shows people how many different Native stories and life experiences there are," says OU student Taylor Sanchez, of Chicano and Mexican descent.



Photo provided

As coordinator of OU's Native Crossroads Film Festival and Symposium, Joshua Nelson hopes the five-year-old event will continue to build connections through visual storytelling and allow Native viewers to celebrate their identity.

For another OU student, Thompson Dickerson-Cox, of Choctaw and Creek descent, the festival's inclusiveness was encouraging.

"It's really inspiring to see the festival open to a community, not just OU students, but to other indigenous people, so that we can come together and experience different works," Dickerson-Cox says. "There is so much to offer. And it's really amazing to come to something where you can see different types of people, from different places like Mexico, Australia, Canada, who want to share indigenous art."

During his panel discussion, independent filmmaker Kyle Bell shared how his art has allowed him to make connections and go after his dreams while encouraging others to do the same.

"Film the stories around you. I wanted to make a fun, quick, inspiring doc that other people could watch and get inspired by," Bell says. "All I wanted to do is basically say, 'If you have a dream — art, film or whatever — you can do it.'"


Eliza Robertson, a student visiting from Yale University, says that Bell's documentary about Steven Paul Judd energized her as an artist.

"This one [*Dig It If You Can*] has had the biggest impact on me. It's inspiring to see the wide variety of things one person

can do. He's doing film and visual art, graffiti and writing. It's encouraging to think that you don't have to pigeonhole yourself into one specific thing. There are so many different ways to tell so many different, amazing stories," Robertson says.

"It's important to bring a local dimension and distinguish us from other festivals," Nelson says. "I always want desperately for students to be involved because it is such a valuable experience to meet our participating directors. Over the years, a lot of connections have opened up and opportunities, such as internships, have become possible. This festival shows students there are real jobs and scholarly opportunities in this field."

Even more, Native Crossroads Film Festival and Symposium has given Oklahomans, film buffs, artists and indigenous people across the globe the opportunity to delve into the screen and their imaginations, to laugh together, to cry together, to think and create community — to live here together.

Says Nelson, "We've had fantastic support all over campus, which really speaks to the existing need for a forum like this and how various programs intersect and benefit from celebrating Native film, art and culture." 

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*Katherine Parker is a freelance writer living in Oklahoma City.*



The work and influence of "21st-century renaissance man" and celebrated Native American pop artist Steven Paul Judd is explored in the documentary, *Dig It If You Can*, by Tulsa independent filmmaker Kyle Bell.