

## Safety Glass Cinema: A Film Festival's Drive-In Response to COVID-19

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### Abstract

In March 2020, the Windsor International Film Festival (WIFF), an independent volunteer-run festival based in Windsor, Ontario, Canada faced its greatest challenge in 20 years of operation. The festival would have to find a way to stay profitable without an in-theatre audience. Rather than go into direct competition with film festivals such as Tribeca and the Toronto International Film Festival through an online streaming festival, WIFF created a commercially successful and safe public event using the drive-in theatre model. WIFF ran a two-week drive-in film festival for the local community from August 29 to September 12, 2020, and sold tickets for 2,000 vehicles across the Windsor-Essex area. This case study uses a PESTLE analysis to explore the challenges and responses that contributed to the success of WIFF's foray into drive-in cinema and the long-term implications for the organization. We also discuss the resurgence of drive-ins as a form of collective film viewing in the past few years and the implications for the future of film festivals.

**Keywords:** film festivals, drive-in theatres, COVID-19, outdoor screenings, programming, community

## Introduction

As the global COVID-19 pandemic brought stay-at-home orders rippling across the globe in March 2020, film festivals had to figure out how to operate without in-theatre audiences. Many film festivals opted for short-term plans, for example, moving online to a streaming model for their 2020 festival runs.<sup>1</sup> While such methods proved to be effective at keeping festivals afloat and relevant throughout the pandemic, it is unclear how viable they are in a post-pandemic world. Once in-person gatherings are deemed safe, will there still be a desire for the online festivals? Certain film festivals conceived safe, in-person ways of reaching their audiences during the pandemic, adopting formats they could build upon in the future. One such festival is the Windsor International Film Festival (WIFF), an independent volunteer-run festival. WIFF is located in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, a mid-sized city of 233,000, located on the Canadian-U.S. border not far from Detroit. WIFF ran a two-week drive-in film festival for the local community from August 29 to September 12, 2020.

Traditionally, WIFF has been supported by ticket sales and corporate sponsorships. There are no ticket sales without a local audience. And, without ticket sales sponsorships are limited. The options for circumventing this sudden emergency were undeniably limited. WIFF sold tickets to 2,000 vehicles across the Windsor-Essex area using the drive-in model, creating a commercially successful public event that mitigated risk amid a worldwide pandemic.

Both co-authors of this article were working with WIFF during this chaotic period. Hagen Nelson served as a volunteer, while Vincent Georgie has been the executive director of WIFF since 2013, and he participated in every step of the festival's COVID-era transition to a drive-in. This case study will use a PESTLE analysis to assess the obstacles and opportunities that came with the festival's foray into drive-in cinema and its long-term implications for the organization. PESTLE is a business framework that analyzes the political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors that affect decision-making. This tool helps to contextualize the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped theatrical film festival exhibition in 2020.

Drive-ins have faltered in popularity since the 1950s, with the number of drive-ins in the United States falling from 3,500 in 1963 to 636 in 2008.<sup>2</sup> In Ontario, Canada, the number of drive-in theatres declined from twenty-four in 2002 to eighteen in 2019.<sup>3</sup> However, they were one of the most popular theatrical experiences throughout 2020.<sup>4</sup> As a result of COVID-19, film lovers rediscovered drive-ins as a novel, fun, and interactive way to watch

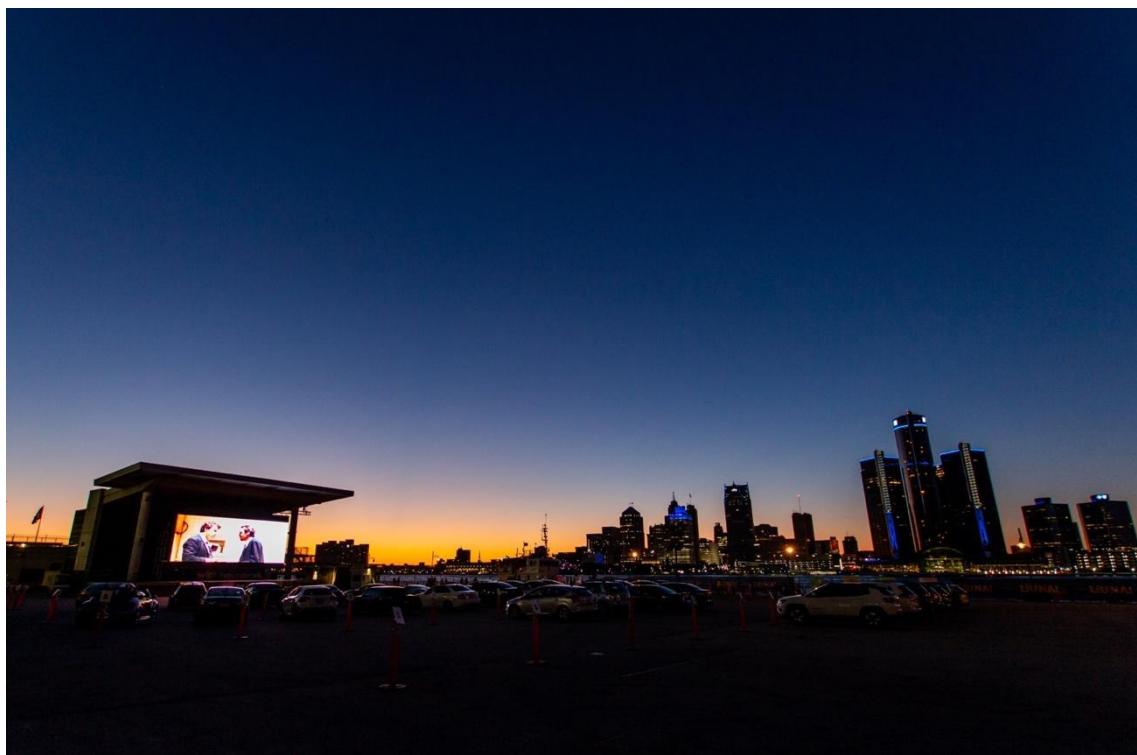
<sup>1</sup> Ben Kenigsberg, "Select Film Festivals and Indie Movies Figure Out Online Access," *New York Times*, March 30th, 2020. Accessible online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/movies/film-festivals-virus.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fox and Grant C. Black, "The Rise and Decline of Drive-In Cinemas in the United States," in *Handbook on the Economics of Leisure*, 271-298. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> "Drive-in Movie Theaters of Ontario, Canada." *DriveInMovie*, accessed June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, <https://www.driveinmovie.com/Canada/Ontario>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Coronavirus Emptied Movie Theaters. But It's Resurrecting the Drive-In."

films. Recent data on the expansion of drive-in theatres shows the number of drive-ins expanded from three to forty across the U.K. between July and September 2020.<sup>5</sup> The 2020 indie horror film *The Wretched* recorded a five-week stretch of being the highest-grossing film in America, entirely fueled by drive-in screenings.<sup>6</sup> Drive-ins could inject a sense of nostalgia into experiencing films with friends, neighbors, and family while socially distancing. WIFF does not see the resurgence of drive-ins as a passing fad, but instead sees drive-ins as a form of cinema that could be revived in a substantial and long-lasting way for years to come.



*Fig. 1 WIFF Under the Stars 2020 Photo Credit: Erika Sanborn*

<sup>5</sup> Naman Ramachandran, "U.K. Drive-Ins Boom in Pandemic Era With 40 New Cinemas (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, July 21st, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://variety.com/2020/film/news/uk-drive-in-cinemas-boom-40-venues-comscore-1234712174/>.

<sup>6</sup> Bryan Reesman, "The Coronavirus Emptied Movie Theaters. But It's Resurrecting the Drive-In," *NBC News*, June 5th, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-emptied-movie-theaters-it-s-resurrecting-drive-ncna1225121>.

## Background

WIFF started in 2005 with twenty films screened over the course of two days to an audience of about 1000 people in the Capitol Theatre in downtown Windsor.<sup>7</sup> Heading into Spring 2020, WIFF was preparing for their annual festival in November after their most successful festival to date, held from November 1 to 10, 2019. A record-setting 42,000 tickets were sold for their fifteenth-anniversary festival that year. Shortly after, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) formally announced that WIFF had become Canada's largest volunteer-run film festival. 2019 also saw the festival unveil enhancements and infrastructure in downtown Windsor, including WIFF Alley, an initiative for a beautified urban space between venues that the festival hired local artists to design. Following the success of the 2019 festival, WIFF began ramping up its year-round offerings heading into winter, holding monthly screenings under the banner WIFF 365. WIFF also partnered with Netflix to offer pre-release cinema screenings of *Marriage Story* (2019) and *The Irishman* (2019) as a part of the program.

## The Pandemic Hits

At WIFF's monthly board meeting in March 2020, there were rumblings about the COVID-19 virus, which was threatening to shut down film releases and events scheduled for late March and early April. At a meeting the following week, the board unanimously agreed to suspend their WIFF 365 offerings until July as a safety precaution, at which point they would reevaluate. As it takes a year to plan for the annual festival, and as the anticipated state of the world in November of 2020 was still quite uncertain at the time, the board opted to continue working toward the goal of putting on a festival for the community that fall.

Other film festivals in Canada were facing crises of their own. The Kingston Canadian Film Festival opened on March 11, 2020 and was forced to shut down two days later.<sup>8</sup> Hot Docs had planned to run their festival from April 29 to May 9, 2020, and quickly had to

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Xing, "Windsor International Film Festival Opens, Features 65 Films," *CBC News*, November 6th, 2013. Accessible online at:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/windsor-international-film-festival-opens-features-65-films-1.2416536>.

For context about regional Canadian film festivals, see: Brendan Kredell, "The Business of Audience Festivals: Calgary International Film Festival 2012," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 588–93, <https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2013.2.KRED>.

For an exploration of Windsor's entertainment and culture in relation to the border city of Detroit, see: Michael Darroch, "Border Scenes," *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2014): 298–325, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271941067\\_Border\\_Scenes](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271941067_Border_Scenes).

<sup>8</sup> "CANCELLED - Kingston Canadian Film Festival," *Kingston Canadian Film Festival*, accessed July 24th, 2021, <http://www.kingstongrand.ca/events/kingston-canadian-film-festival>.

navigate to an online model, which they ran from May 28 to June 6.<sup>9</sup> Major film distributors were halting new releases as lockdowns closed theatres.<sup>10</sup> In April, it became clear that even if running WIFF were a legally viable option in the fall, attendance and proceedings would be severely limited: no opening night, no opening party, no guests, and limited seating capacity for screenings. This scaled-down version of the festival did not appeal to staff and organizers. In early April, the decision was made to cancel the 2020 festival for that year.

WIFF continued their meetings online, strategizing around a different product that could be delivered to the Windsor community in 2020. WIFF considered operating an online festival as this model was beginning to be adopted by film festivals across the globe.<sup>11</sup> When WIFF reached out to their audience, reactions from community members on the prospect of an online WIFF were mixed. There were new economic factors to consider as well. If WIFF were to go forward with a virtual and streaming-based model, it would put them in direct competition with the world's biggest film festivals, such as TIFF and Tribeca, also shifting to online in 2020.<sup>12</sup> If larger film festivals with more film screenings, name recognition and featured guests were just as accessible to the local community in 2020, how could a smaller, volunteer-run festival compete? To encourage the local community to support their local film festival rather than a more famous competitor, WIFF would have to provide an experience for Windsor film fans that festivals held halfway across the globe could not.

## Planning a Safety Pod Alternative

WIFF opted not to go forward with an online festival and turned to the idea of a drive-in at the suggestion of the board's vice-chair Pat Papadeas. The screening model was beginning to gain traction among other film festivals in Canada at the time. The Italian Contemporary Film Festival in Toronto, Ontario, was planning to present its 2020 festival through a drive-in from July 20 to 31,<sup>13</sup> and the Calgary Underground Film Festival announced a hybrid

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Hertz, "Toronto's Hot Docs Going Online-Only for 2020 Festival," *The Globe and Mail*, May 5th, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/article-torontos-hot-docs-going-online-only-for-2020-festival/>.

<sup>10</sup> Kyle Buchanan, "The Future That Hollywood Feared Is Happening Now," *The New York Times*, April 15th, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/movies/hollywood-new-films-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Kenigsberg, "Select Film Festivals and Indie Movies Figure Out Online Access," *New York Times*.

<sup>12</sup> Sierra Bein, "TIFF 2020: Your Guide to Making the Most of TIFF at Home," *The Globe and Mail*, September 16th, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/tiff/article-tiff-2020-your-guide-to-making-the-most-of-tiff-at-home/>.

See also, Ramin Setoodeh, "Tribeca Film Festival Moves Online After Coronavirus Postponement," *Variety*, April 3rd, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://variety.com/2020/film/news/tribeca-film-festival-online-programming-coronavirus-1234569755/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Lavazza Drive-In Nights Set to Launch in Vaughan and Markham," *Italian Contemporary Film Festival*, August 18th, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://icff.ca/lavazza-drive-in-nights-set-to-launch-in-vaughan-and-markham/>.

online/drive-in festival for their screenings on June 26 and 27, 2020.<sup>14</sup> As the drive-in would be a brand-new event for WIFF, it entailed asking basic questions about how it would run. Who was the event for? What would the price point be? When should it be held? How many films should be screened per day? How should the films be programmed? What were the revenue opportunities? In the early stages, WIFF agreed on a two-week event to run in June of 2020.

When it came to programming, WIFF would have to take a different approach than it had in the past. With theatres shut down and distributors holding off on new content, the decision was made to reach out to its distributors for “library titles,” which encompass films more than a year old. The programming plan for the summer drive-in was to focus on high-quality and beloved films dubbed as “classics” and “favorites.” WIFF had screened library titles at its annual festival before, with the French film *Les Intouchables* being a particular audience favorite screened at the festival every year since 2014. In the past, gaining access to library titles was a straightforward affair, and films could be added to the festival’s roster by emailing a few key distributors.

When WIFF reached out to distributors for the drive-in, they discovered that the competitive environment around film exhibition had completely changed. Cineplex, the main theatre chain in Ontario, had put a blanket hold on the entire catalogues of major distributors including Paramount, Warner Bros., Fox, Disney and Universal. Cineplex did not want to face any competition for their own planned launch of a drive-in model in the summer—a plan that did not come to fruition. Not only were new films for the drive-in inaccessible due to the halt on new releases, but most older films were also unattainable. When the festival asked distributors for a list of films not affected by the embargo, they returned with an alarmingly limited number of titles. Over several months, WIFF negotiated with distributors to find workarounds for films included on the no-screenings list. Each film had its own specifically defined list of criteria for their embargos, so cases could be made for certain films if screened late at night after scheduled theatre closings or far enough from Cineplex locations. Each film meant a long and arduous case-by-case fight for screening access rights.

The community politics surrounding a possible drive-in were complicated as well. The social and community response to a public event during a health pandemic could cut both ways. If marketed correctly, the drive-in could deliver a message that demonstrates WIFF’s commitment to offering a safe and positive event that is socially generative for the community during a tough time. However, if safety measures were miscalibrated, the festival’s social reputation would be damaged. This would give the impression that WIFF is

<sup>14</sup> Eric Volmers, “Calgary Underground Film Festival to Hold Pop-up Drive-in Screenings,” *Calgary Herald*, May 21st, 2020. Accessible online at: <https://calgaryherald.com/news/calgary-underground-film-festival-to-offer-pop-up-drive-in-screenings-online-content-in-june>.

For further insight into public film events hosted during the COVID-19 pandemic, see: Uy Hoang, et al., “Reflections on Running an International Public Health Film Competition during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications for Future Film Festivals,” *Journal of Communication in Healthcare* 14, no. 1 (2021): 8-11.

negligent or ill-equipped to manage public health. The social and political implications of COVID-19 had to be navigated carefully. A further complication was the fact that the politics of mask-wearing and social distancing were hotly contested at the time. It was impossible for the organization to take a stance on these issues without alienating some customers. The decision was made to take all rules and regulations directly from provincial and municipal health guidelines. WIFF drafted a security plan for the event which was consulted by the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit (WECHU). The guidelines were communicated to the public via a FAQ page on the festival's website. (See Figure 2 below.)

**I don't have a car, can I walk in?**

No. You must be in a vehicle to enter. Please make sure all of your party is inside the vehicle before entering. Due to COVID-19, we are prohibited from having areas for people without vehicles to sit.

**How many people are allowed in a vehicle?**

You must follow your required vehicle capacity. For every seat in your vehicle, one person can occupy it.

**Can we sit on our tailgate, sit/stand outside our vehicle or outside my sunroof?**

No. You are required by the Government of Ontario to remain in your vehicle at all times.

**Can I exit the film and leave the plaza at any time?**

Yes, you are allowed to exit the film at any time. Please exit to the left of your assigned parking spot, and follow the exit signs. The exit gate will be via the same gate you entered. WIFF volunteers will help guide you safely to the exit.

**Where do we go if there is an emergency?**

If there is an emergency, please exit to the left of your assigned parking spot. The exit gate will be via the same gate you entered. WIFF volunteers will help guide you safely to the exit.

**Can I leave my car running during the event?**

No, car idling is not permitted. A healthy car battery should last up to 10 hours. We will allow cars to start up for a 10-minute maximum interval during the intermission.

**Do I have to run my car for the radio to be on?**

Check your owner's manual. Most cars have an auxiliary power position in the ignition that allows the vehicle's electronics to operate without the engine running. This is, of course, operating from the car's battery power. If your car does not have an auxiliary power position and you can't access your radio without your car running, or you prefer not to use your radio, you can use the WIFF portable sound device that you will be given upon arrival.

**What if my car battery dies during the event?**

Portable battery boosters are available on-site. Please find the closest WIFF volunteer or staff member and they will help assist you with restarting your vehicle.

**Are we allowed to leave our vehicles?**

You are only allowed to leave your vehicle to go to the washroom or in the event of an emergency.

**Where can we go to the washroom?**

Washrooms are located to the right of the stage/screen. WIFF staff will be located at the washrooms to ensure they are sanitized after each use and that patrons follow public health measures.

**Are we required to wear face coverings outside of our vehicles?**

Yes. Masks are required when exiting your vehicle. When you are inside your vehicle, it is up to you.

*Fig. 2 Screen Capture of the FAQs Listed on the Windsor International Film Festival website on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020*

Moving into May, legal issues emerged that affected the strategy and planning of the event. COVID-19 rates were going up and down in the area and restrictions for outdoor and public

events were changing constantly.<sup>15</sup> There were only six weeks left before the planned opening night, and the situation was highly volatile. With the federal and provincial governments enacting new laws and regulations on public gatherings, many practical questions remained unanswered. Could customers buy snacks? If not, it meant no revenue from concessions. Could customers get out of their cars to use the bathrooms? If not, that made hosting in-person events highly problematic. The festival opted to push back the planned dates for the drive-in to late August and early September. These dates worked especially well, as they bypassed Windsor's excessively humid June and July.

Next came the search for the location and venue. WIFF scouted several locations in the Windsor-Essex area, most of which were eliminated after the first visit. Few venues had a suitable footprint to fit the stage, screen and vehicles. WIFF eventually decided on the Festival Plaza, an outdoor concert space located in Downtown Windsor that overlooks the Detroit River on the Canada-U.S. border. The location met all the board's demands, providing customers with a beautiful waterfront view and staying consistent with WIFF's mission to support downtown Windsor. A major goal of the drive-in project was to bring much needed economic activity to the city's downtown. If successful, the drive-in could create significant flow-through traffic to downtown businesses during trying times. An addition made to the event late in the planning process was a series of family matinee daytime screenings that would run during the summer festival. WIFF saw a social and economic opportunity to offer local families a safe day out amidst the anxiety of lockdowns.

WIFF reached out to the city of Windsor to ask for support for the event in June. By supporting WIFF's drive-in, the mayor's office could send a political message to Windsor-Essex that they were committed to helping the community and the public sector. As the Festival Plaza is municipally owned, WIFF was allowed to book it free of charge for the planned two-week schedule. When asked months later by the city's newspaper, the Windsor Star, about his decision to support the drive-in, Mayor Drew Dilkens explained that there was "a pent-up energy, a demand from people in the community who want to get out and enjoy the summertime, and do it in a safe way."<sup>16</sup> At the provincial level, WIFF had won a grant in 2019 from the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture for the annual festival that they were allowed to adapt to support the summer drive-in.

The economic decision to host the drive-in downtown posed environmental difficulties for the organization. The high level of ambient light coming from Windsor's Caesars casino and the Detroit skyline would impact the darkness needed for an outdoor screen to be clear and visible to customers. WIFF's tech director Lana Oppen warned of numerous technological difficulties that could come with a downtown drive-in event. Drive-in theatres need to be located far away from "city lights due to the light pollution" and

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor Campbell, "Timeline of a Global Pandemic — a Year after COVID Hits Windsor-Essex," *Windsor Star*, March 19th, 2021. Accessible online at: <https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/timeline-of-a-global-pandemic-one-year-after-covid-hits-windsor-essex>.

<sup>16</sup> "Windsor Riverfront Drive-in Movie Schedule Offers Variety, Escape | Windsor Star."

interference with cinema projection.<sup>17</sup> There is a reason why drive-ins are typically done in the complete darkness of county farmers' fields. WIFF would need an entirely new screening model that would be unaffected by environmental factors such as rain, wind and luminosity. The digital projectors previously used in WIFF's three theatrical locations would not work for the drive-in. WIFF's existing equipment was strictly for indoor use, and even if the festival were to build a hut or tent around the projectors, there was a high risk of outside elements damaging them.

The next technological setback in sourcing screens was supply shortages. In summer 2020, equipment and resources needed to set up socially distanced methods of entertainment were severely limited due to high demand. As outdoor screenings increased in May and June beyond typical summer rates, companies and festivals around the country were buying up outdoor screening equipment in a panic. WIFF could not wait for items to turn up; once a piece of equipment went out of stock, it would remain that way until factories opened back up after the lockdown and resumed production. WIFF resolved to buy up every piece of equipment needed to run the drive-in in advance. They knew that waiting too long would jeopardize the entire event.

Oppen recommended presenting films on an LED video wall linked to a computer. The \$300,000 piece of technology could withstand outdoor weather effects and would be clearly visible in a bright venue. The previous year, a video wall had been set up outdoors in Downtown Windsor to show a Toronto Raptors NBA Finals game, proving the screen's viability. WIFF arranged to rent a video wall from a local distributor, but getting the screen to work would prove to be another enormous health and safety challenge. A 6.7-ton LED wall would have to be hung over the concrete lip of a stage facing a giant slab of concrete filled with vehicles. WIFF quickly contacted a structural engineer, who helped construct a weight support stage under the screen to ensure that there was no danger of the screen falling or tipping over.

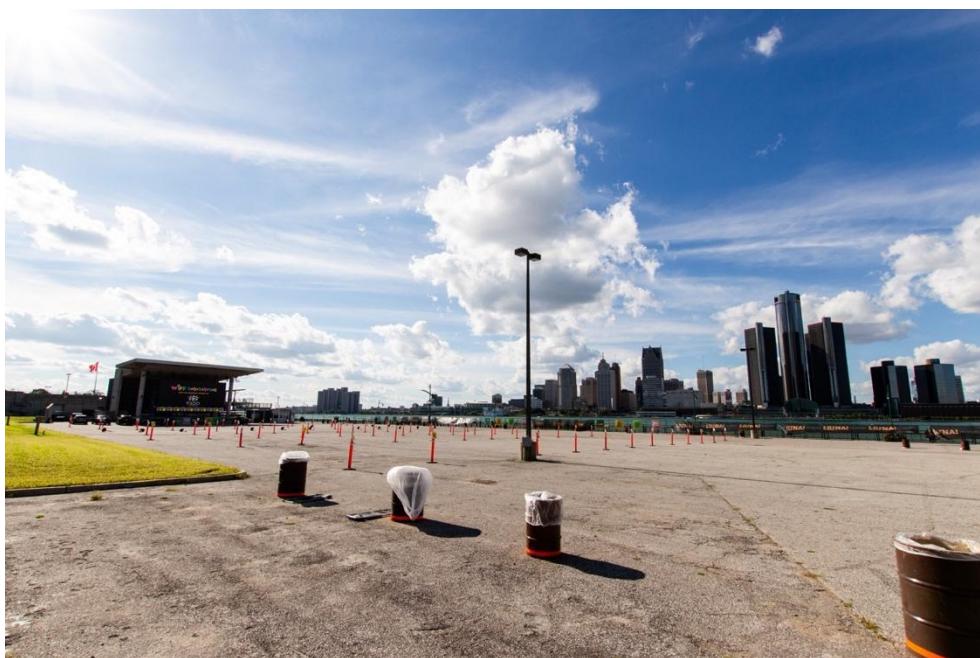
An additional technological workaround would have to be made for ticket sales. For health reasons, the entire drive-in event had to be planned with minimum points of contact between customers and volunteers. A new website was created for the drive-in, through which all tickets for screenings could be bought and sold. The website included a FAQ section that answered health and safety questions customers might have. The only tickets that would be sold in-person to customers would be at the front gate of the actual event.

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, WIFF announced that the festival would be cancelled in the fall but that the Windsor community should stay tuned for a positive announcement, which would be coming in the next few weeks. In the meantime, they tackled the biggest challenge for the organizers of the summer drive-in, figuring out how to park everyone. They would have to calculate how many vehicles would fit onto the plaza, how far apart vehicles would have to be, how to allocate larger vehicles amongst the smaller ones, and how vehicles would back in and pull out of their spots without bumping into each other. Ensuring proper sightlines for all vehicles was time-consuming work. WIFF needed to be certain that a child sitting in the

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Lana Oppen, Technical Director of WIFF, August 30, 2022.

backseat of a car in the back row of the drive-in would have a clear view of the screen. The event organizers spent numerous nights using their own vehicles and the cars of family and friends to play around with different vehicle sizes and get a first-hand sense of what could work best. Over the coming months, five sets of architectural drawings via drone were used to figure out proper vehicle placement for the event.

Initially, the plan was to fit twelve rows, or 140 vehicles, into the plaza for each night's screening. By August, logistics and sightlines had cut this forecasted number down to seven rows, with eighty-seven vehicles. Sightlines were also dependent on whether the films screened were scope or flat. Flat films feature a narrower aspect ratio than scope films and could only be seen by up to five rows of customers, or sixty-three vehicles. These changes had profound economic implications. The capacity for sales for the event was dropping throughout planning rather than increasing. As technological expenditures continued to mount to combat environmental obstacles, the revenue model for the event began to look risky and potentially unfeasible. As the organization began to consider pricing, they realized that being able to break even with their budget from a sales standpoint would be impossible.



*Fig. 3 Festival Plaza Setup for WIFF Under the Stars Photo Credit: Erika Sanborn*

In response to the current socio-economic conditions in the region and how economically tough the last few months had been for the community, WIFF landed on the price of \$40 per vehicle for a double feature and a \$20 charge per vehicle for a single feature family matinee. They would not be able to fund the event with such low prices and adjusted audience size. If they were to completely sell out each night and family matinee of the two-week drive-in, WIFF would generate roughly \$62,000 in ticket sales. These revenue numbers would not come close to covering the \$200,000 budget needed to run the event.

The revenue model for the traditional festival consistently achieved an approximate 50/50 revenue split between ticket sales and sponsors. The drive-in would need sponsors to cover the majority of costs. WIFF knew that it would be difficult to sell the drive-in to sponsors, as it would not be able to garner the same audience numbers and profile that the traditional festival does. The festival's smaller and mid-level sponsors were likely facing difficult economic times and would not be attracted to such a risky profit forecast. WIFF reached out to its closest circle of major sponsors for bigger donations than they had asked for in the past. Each sponsor that the festival reached out to returned quickly with a resounding yes. The organizations expressed eagerness to help as they had not been spending on other events in the preceding months—since almost everything else had been cancelled—and were aware that the drive-in might be the only major event in the Windsor-Essex area that summer. The final revenue model for the event came out much more lopsided than with previous WIFF offerings. Ticket sales would encompass only about 12% of the drive-in's revenue, while sponsors would make up the remaining 88%.

Reshaping the revenue model meant taking all external and macro-environmental factors into account. Socially, like many other arts and cultural institutions, WIFF's core audience consists of an older demographic, precisely the same group most likely to stay away from in-person events out of fear for their safety. The event would have to sell tickets without help from its core audience. The board anticipated that there were ways that the drive-in could be marketed towards younger demographics in the area. For Millennials and Gen-Z, a drive-in movie night could be sold as a novel and exciting experience. If programmed and positioned in the right way, WIFF could also use the powerful emotion of nostalgia to sell the event to older audiences. Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers who had been to drive-ins in their younger days would be easy to appeal to, as Windsor's only drive-in location, the beloved Twin Drive-In (renamed Famous 4 Drive-In in 1981), had closed in 1990.<sup>18</sup>

The economic environment and lockdown measures in place did create opportunities for the organization. Many locals were stuck at home with their summer travel plans scuttled, meaning that the Windsor-Essex market would disproportionately be in-town for the drive-in. The lack of competition from other social and public events taking place in Windsor that summer gave WIFF a competitive advantage. WIFF's greatest competitor in the past, the Cineplex Odeon movie theatre at the nearby Devonshire Mall, was closed to the public.

As the announcement date for the drive-in approached, it was brought to the board's attention that they could not legally call the drive-in a drive-in. On the booking side, referring to the event as a drive-in would put the brand in theatrical standing and place WIFF in direct competition with Cineplex, making it more difficult to book films. As WIFF is run as a festival rather than a theatrical business, and in the hopes of making programming for the

<sup>18</sup> "Twin Drive-In in Windsor, CA - Cinema Treasures." Accessible online at: <http://cinematreatures.org/theaters/49283/photos/263261>.

For the true aficionados, willing to drive an hour down the 401, The Boonies Drive-In in Tilbury, Ontario, has been open since 2014, or, more grandly, the largest Drive In in the world, the Ford Drive In, opened in 1950 just outside Detroit in Dearborn, Michigan, and still operates today.

event as straightforward as possible, a workaround had to be found. The marketing team invented the sub-brand “WIFF Under the Stars” with the intention that the series’ name could be used for any outdoor events put on by WIFF in the future and was not solely linked to the drive-in model.

## The Reveal

The official launch and announcement of WIFF Under the Stars took place on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020. A select few members of the WIFF team and Mayor Dilkens congregated at the Festival Plaza on the riverfront, accompanied by an assortment of vintage cars. The marketing material used for WIFF Under the Stars recalled 1950s imagery and the nostalgia factor of drive-ins. As the films scheduled for the event were announced, tickets were live on sale on the festival’s website. The team announced that WIFF Under the Stars would be the only drive-in in the world located on an international border, even if the pandemic meant that that border was closed. The formal announcement was met with a surge in media inquiries and social media reactions. Over 200 tickets, representing 10% of what would be the final box office, were sold within the first twenty-four hours of the announcement.



Fig. 4 Original Poster for WIFF Under the Stars 2020

Working their way through a daunting internal and external risk assessment, organizers had successfully made this “non-official” drive-in a reality. While there was early enthusiasm for the move, there were enormous concerns around the consequences if this great financial risk did not work out. There were major economic, legal, technological, and social dangers for the organization. WIFF had never had any debt, and the organization worried about the possible outcomes of this precarious and unchartered move. While running the event from late August to early September fell in line with predictions for more relaxed lockdown measures, there was no guarantee that rules and restrictions would not change while the event ran. Hanging a 6.7-ton screen off a ledge outdoors for two and a half weeks was another major risk and was an almost constant topic of discussion in meetings leading up to the launch. Would it put volunteers at risk? Could WIFF recuperate the losses if the \$300,000 screen were to break? Would the entirety of the screenings have to be cancelled if something happened to the LED wall, adding to losses for the organization in a year where the fall festival could not help to recuperate any damages? What if the Windsor population rejected the prospect of a public event during a health pandemic? While WIFF opted to run the event despite these concerns, protecting themselves and their community from potential risks was a top priority. WIFF maneuvered through the political environment carefully during planning stages by adhering to strict health and safety measures, while a support structure was built around the video wall. WIFF hired a local industrial cleaning and maintenance company to provide COVID-level cleaning on-site throughout the event. Heavy expenditures on industrial cleaning were meant not only to ensure the safety of the event but as a social salve to promote the feeling of safety to patrons, who could see sanitizing measures being taken seriously as they watched the films.

WIFF had finalized a strong roster of films from the 1960s to 2019 and had spent thousands on renting a quality video wall. However, when it came to sound, there were further technological and political roadblocks, as customers would have to listen to the films from their car radios to comply with local noise bylaws. The festival was prohibited from projecting loud film audio late at night as there are apartment buildings a block away from the Festival Plaza. WIFF realized that if customers did not have a good sound system in their cars, they would blame the poor sound quality of their cars on the event. Uncomfortable with this core line of business being out of their hands, the festival purchased a radio station frequency for the two-week event and eighty-seven construction-grade radios, which would be handed out to each vehicle as they entered the plaza. As supplies were scarce in the midst of a pandemic, WIFF’s tech director drove across the province to purchase FM radios from “Home Depot stores all the way from Windsor to Toronto.”<sup>19</sup> Customers would turn on the radios and immediately connect to the event’s radio station to hear crisp audio from films being shown. Having found an answer for each of the basic needs of the event, WIFF could begin to set up the venue.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Lana Oppen, Technical Director of WIFF, August 30, 2022.

## Opening the Event

While ticket sales slowed down after the launch day, numbers were still exceeding early expectations. The first two nights of the drive-in were completely sold out when organizers and volunteers arrived on site on Wednesday, August 26, to begin setting the event up two days before opening night. It was then that the reality of working in a non-theatrical environment truly hit them. In hindsight, WIFF admits that they vastly underestimated the time it would take to set up the event. With only 48 hours to get the Festival Plaza ready for opening night, organizers found themselves more behind schedule than they had ever been in fifteen years of operation. It became clear that rather than two days of preparation, they needed five at the very least. The call for volunteers, which was met with enormous interest from the community, had been made only a few days prior. Volunteer training began only twenty-four hours before opening night. As the site of the event was physically very large, organizers would often cover distances on golf carts, and getting in contact with another team member could involve a ten-minute walk if they were located at opposite ends of the venue.

More environmental difficulties appeared during setup. WIFF had to ensure that cars driving down Riverside Drive, right along the plaza, would not see the content shown on the video wall, given that screenings included films with various content ratings. WIFF placed fencing and scrim along the Festival Plaza facing Riverside Drive that blocked most of the LED screen to passersby. Once the event started, drivers along Riverside would only have visual access to the very top portion of the LED screen, which would not feature clear images of any content that might be violent or sexual.

The festival had planned for a “friends and family night” to be hosted the day before opening night to test out equipment and personnel. Along with the rest of the scheduled events in the drive-in, gates opened at 6:00 PM, and the films started at 7:45 PM. At 5:55 PM on August 27, just as cars began to pull into the site for the friends and family night, many of the pylons were not yet set up, half of the signage had yet to show up, the main box office was still being assembled, the pre-roll that would be shown before films was still being edited, and walkie-talkies had yet to be handed out to all volunteers. WIFF had planned to use tags on customers’ windshields to keep track of where vehicles were located throughout the event to avoid confusion, with simple lettering on them such as “A5” and “B6.” As the friends and family night began, WIFF was still waiting on the tags to finish printing nearby. There had historically been a sense of controlled chaos involved in the grand operation of the festival year in and year out, as it is a live event, and in a way, that is part of the adventure of mounting a film festival. There was nothing “controlled,” however, about this. Never before had the WIFF staff had the feeling of not being ready as they watched spectators arrive.

After the friends and family screening, WIFF solicited audience members by email for feedback on the event. Attendees wrote back with actionable feedback about possible tweaks and elements of the event that were unclear or poorly communicated. Mayor Dilkens suggested that vehicles could be angled more to help improve sightlines, which was immediately implemented by the staff.

After the site was shut down for the night, the news came of the potentially disastrous impact of the remnants of Hurricane Laura, which would be rippling through the Midwest of the United States over the next several hours. Windsor is the southernmost tip of Canada, which meant the city was not far from the hurricane's projected path. A few members of the board agreed to congregate at the Festival Plaza early the following day to assess the possible damage of the hurricane to the equipment on site. At that point, they could brainstorm how to properly prepare for the sold-out opening night showing of Dirty Dancing and Air Force One scheduled for 7:45 PM that very evening. As the board slept, the periphery of Hurricane Laura hit, flooding the stage built on top of the plaza with water.

The technological implications of hosting a film screening in an outdoor environment were made clear to the board the following morning. There was a foot of water sitting on stage. While a roof partly protected the screen, the front and sides of the stage were open, and water had seeped into the flat-screen TV panels and wiring behind the stage. Organizers pulled the soundboard out of the wreckage, only to see a torrent of water pouring out of it. Soon after, they found that the transmitter for their construction-grade radios was completely soaked.

Oppen explained to her colleagues that if she were to turn on the LED wall at that moment, she might fry the system and ruin it along with the rest of the equipment. In this case, the board would have to deal with the insurance of the \$300,000 video wall and have no working screen for the fast-selling two-week event. When board members asked where they could get access to another radio transmitter, Oppen informed them that the nearest available transmitter was in Nova Scotia. The drive-in was still scheduled to open that night.

The board collectively made the decision to cancel the opening night, along with the family matinee scheduled for the following morning. All tickets were refunded, and WIFF had successfully bought themselves an extra 36 hours to work on getting the event up and running for the new opening night of the festival on Saturday, August 29<sup>th</sup>. WIFF quickly contacted a construction team to build a stage on top of the stage where equipment could be stored to avoid any further damages from environmental causes over the course of the event. That night, after being given sufficient time to dry, the soundboard, transmitter, and LED wall were all turned on successfully and without significant signs of damage.



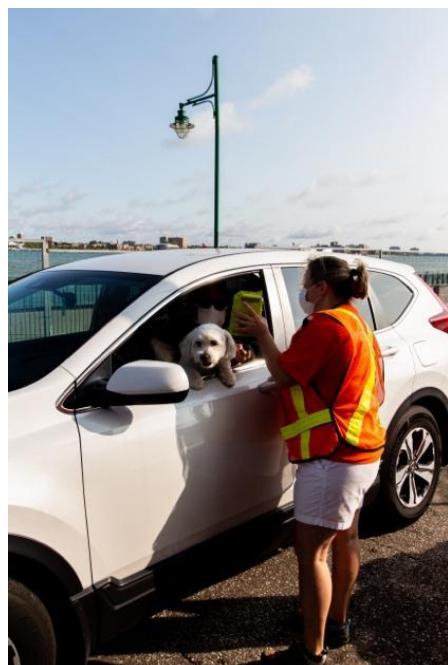
*Fig. 5 WIFF Technical crew members: Lana Oppen, Maria Cusumano and Cherry Theresanathan. Photo Credit: Kim Nelson*

## WIFF Under the Stars 2020

On August 29<sup>th</sup> at 6:00 PM sharp, cars began pulling off the main drive and into the first gate of the festival plaza for the sold-out, rescheduled opening night. A board member scanned customers' tickets via QR codes on phones, handed them a program book and a radio, and assigned parking spots. Volunteers at the front gate were tasked with assessing the size and height of each vehicle and assigning their row to ensure that sight lines were not blocked. Through walkie-talkie communication, another volunteer was notified to guide customers to their assigned spots. Other volunteers would greet customers from a safe distance at their parking spaces to explain the basic rules and regulations of the event and inform patrons about access to hand sanitizer or masks that were provided on-site.

COVID-19 guidelines for patrons were listed on the LED screen before the films would begin, and they were printed on brochures handed out to all customers. The guidelines communicated were taken directly from the local health unit, with rules specifically mandating social distancing and the use of masks when outside of vehicles. Because the political and legal implications of hosting an event during such a health pandemic were significant, patrons could only share vehicles with members of their own “bubble.” Customers were allowed to exit their vehicles to visit the concessions stand or restrooms. An attendant sanitized restroom stalls after each person left. Radios were also professionally and industrially sanitized on a nightly basis. Cars were spaced out enough to ensure that after exiting one's vehicle, customers would still maintain a safe six feet distance from other individuals exiting their own vehicles. Drivers of pickup trucks were not allowed to sit in the bed of their trucks. According to local rules and regulations, this would be considered an act of congregating outdoors, which was forbidden under the current lockdown rules in the area. Conversely, customers could sit in the back of their SUVs with the trunk open, as technically, their roofs were enclosed and were therefore considered to be indoors within the confines of their vehicles.

Customers were monitored by staff and volunteers at all times. If their actions proved unsafe or in violation of COVID-19 guidelines, they would be asked to leave the event. However, the team never had to resort to these measures. While WIFF wanted to capitalize on the social and economic possibility of allowing members of the community without access to a vehicle to have the opportunity to walk or bike to the event, legal health guidelines prohibited this. No lawn chairs or form of outdoor seating were allowed under provincial rules and regulations at that time. The COVID-19 restrictions implemented during WIFF Under the Stars were stricter than most drive-in events in the United States at the time. 50% of American drive-ins in 2020 limited the number of patrons in restrooms, and only 33% of drive-ins mandated that patrons remain in their vehicles while watching films.<sup>20</sup>



*Fig. 6 WIFF Volunteer Handing a Radio to a Customer* Photo Credit: Erika Sanborn

Dr. No was the first film screened at the drive-in, the first half of a James Bond double feature. A 20-minute intermission followed the ending of the first screening, followed by the second feature, From Russia with Love. The sun faded behind the GM tower across the Detroit River as the films played. It was already past midnight as the credits rolled on the second feature. One by one, cars pulled out and came around to the main drive, where they would return their radios to volunteers who asked them about their experience and wished them a safe drive home.

The following morning, gates opened at 9:00 AM for the first family matinee screening. With volunteers already aware of their roles and responsibilities, things were beginning to run smoothly. Cars full of excited children and grateful parents rolled in to watch Aladdin, scheduled to start at 10:00 AM. For most of the kids in attendance, it was

<sup>20</sup> Mark Fox, "Drive-in Theatres and Audience Rules of Conduct: Before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 80, 82.

their first drive-in experience. At this point, things were running so effortlessly that it became clear that WIFF had overestimated the number of volunteers needed to run the event, with twenty-five volunteers scheduled for each screening. The eighty-seven-vehicle drive-in could be safely and responsibly run with no more than ten volunteers. During the first few nights of the drive-in, volunteers had to do some jockeying in response to customers complaining about larger vehicles blocking their sightlines. Fortunately, drivers were willing to move their cars to accommodate.

Each night, staff and volunteers grew more accustomed to running the event. Films were shown on time, and customers were guided to their spots without complaint. It became clear that the basic footprint of the drive-in event was intuitive and well designed. Customers understood the rules and regulations of the event, and the aura of the drive-in was positive and even celebratory. As the festival's executive director would greet audiences from the stage every night, the audience would react with applause, honking, and flashing lights. Organizers received direct feedback from the audience when the radios were returned each night. Customers would ask for reassurance that the drive-in was not strictly a COVID-19 event, requesting that WIFF Under the Stars not remain a one-off experience.

By the fourth day of the event, ticket sales jumped dramatically. Audience members reported being motivated by positive word-of-mouth. Repeat business was another significant factor in the sales spike that came after the event began. Customers would frequently report to organizers that it was their third or fourth time coming out. Some said they would come even when they were not sure what was playing because it was a cool event and there was nothing else to do. Repeat business was especially significant with the family matinees, as some families would show up for every single screening.

Programming double features proved to be successful as well. The double feature is a unique trait of the classic drive-in, as double features often generate more revenue than single bills by appealing to two distinct sections of the market.<sup>21</sup> Most evenings, more than 60% of vehicles would stay to watch the second screening. Customers would sometimes ask volunteers if they could move up closer to the screen if spots opened for the second feature, which they were allowed to do as long as they would not obstruct other people's view of the screen. Gates for the event remained open throughout the screenings, and customers were allowed into the venue if they arrived late but had already purchased tickets. However, the number of vehicles that showed up after the first screening had started was extremely low. On weeknights, programmers made sure to schedule shorter films to ensure that everyone could be home before midnight. On weekends, longer films were screened, such as the Kill Bill double feature, which remained packed until final credits rolled at 1:00 AM.

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Fox, "Double Features and Exhibition Programming Choices by Drive-In Movie Theatres," *Economics, Management, and Financial Markets* 12, no. 3 (2017): 11-24



*Fig. 7 Scanning Tickets at the Front Gate Photo Credit: Erika Sanborn*

Customers were free to bring their own snacks and food onto the site. The only food and beverage restriction was a ban on alcoholic beverages to prevent drinking and driving. This was an important legal and political decision as the Festival Plaza is municipally owned. Concession sales of popcorn and candy on offer were highest during the family matinee screenings. Organizers noticed that five to ten cars would usually show up when gates opened at 6:00 PM on the dot each night to secure good parking spots. Once they had gotten to their places, with an hour and forty-five minutes to spare, patrons would go for a run or a stroll and often have a bite to eat at downtown restaurant patios. As WIFF is a longtime partner of the Downtown Windsor Business Improvement Association, they noticed they had missed out on a clear opportunity. The festival could have partnered with local restaurants, cafés, and food vendors to offer dinner or appetizer specials with WIFF Under the Stars. WIFF could have taken advantage of business opportunities before they even began screening films. While these options are still viable for the future, WIFF has also considered creating a downtown food delivery service for possible future incarnations of the drive-in. Regardless, WIFF was happy to see that their event was helping downtown businesses.

While organizers recognized many familiar faces from the annual festival, they noticed that the drive-in had tapped into a completely new audience. As sightlines made it impossible for organizers to program films with subtitles, most of the films screened were American productions. As the annual festival often featured many foreign films in its programming, this focus on mainstream Hollywood films had drawn out a new audience, which was another net benefit of the drive-in.

While the biggest day in sales was still the day of the initial announcement, followed by a dip in the weeks pre-opening, most tickets were sold during the event's two-week run. Organizers noticed that from an economic and social perspective, customer purchasing habits had changed. WIFF's consumer base bought tickets much more ahead of time for the drive-in than the regular festival. Immediately following the announcement of the drive-in in

early August, patrons were already buying up tickets for closing night, which at the time was still more than a month away. Due to the social, environmental, and economic implications of the lockdown, patrons likely had fewer social obligations that could interfere with their movie-going schedule. The drive-in nights that sold the best were screenings supported by strong brands around a specific Hollywood star, such as Keanu Reeves with John Wick and John Wick: Chapter 2, a specific filmmaker, such as Quentin Tarantino with Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs, or a specific genre, with the comedy double feature of Spaceballs and Groundhog Day. By the time that the final six days of the event had rolled around, the remaining nights had completely sold out. A highlight for WIFF's executive director came when an immunocompromised university student reached out to tell him that she and her family had been stuck indoors since March. WIFF Under the Stars had been their first outdoor event since the lockdowns began five months previously.

WIFF ended up adding an extra night of films after the scheduled closing night due to popular demand. For the sold-out closing night screening of *The Doors* and *Love & Mercy* on September 13<sup>th</sup>, WIFF booked an aerial artist to perform acrobatics from a hanging piece of cloth as a memorable way to bookend the two-week run.



*Fig. 8 A Full House at WIFF Under the Stars 2020 Photo Credit: Erika Sanborn*

## Aftermath

Following the end of the drive-in festival, organizers and volunteers got together to tear the event down over a two-day period in mid-September. On September 18<sup>th</sup>, the board met online to debrief the entire event. WIFF agreed that what had been the most effective in the event's planning were core decisions made early on. First, choosing the Festival Plaza as the venue for the drive-in was a strong choice. It was a scenic location on the waterfront, with direct access to the downtown and excellent food choices nearby. The location proved to be

a significant draw for the event as patrons had missed spending time on the Detroit River waterfront while being stuck inside during lockdown. Second, renting the LED wall opened many opportunities. Because of the LED wall, the committee did not have to wait until dark to run events and were able to introduce the family matinee drive-in option, which received a substantial level of praise from patrons. Finally, investing in personal radios was an extremely practical early decision. Thanks to the construction-grade radios, there were no complaints about sound or audio throughout the entire event. WIFF further agreed that having consistent start times for the matinee and nightly screenings was very effective from a marketing perspective. Making it simpler for customers and more efficient for organizers to run.

The first glaring mistake they acknowledged was a complete miscalculation on how long it would take to set up the event. Organizers needed at least twice the time allotted to properly set up. Thankfully, the friends and family test screening in advance of the opening night gave WIFF a clear picture of the most glaring issues and how exactly to prioritize and plan in the time that remained. In the end, Hurricane Laura proved to be an odd blessing for the WIFF team, as it forced them to push back opening night. Without the hurricane, they would have been unprepared for the first public screening. A disorganized opening night could have significantly hindered the positive word-of-mouth that WIFF Under the Stars ended up garnering.

WIFF also felt that they missed an opportunity to promote WIFF Under the Stars in the neighborhood around the plaza and along the boardwalk between the venue and river, which was packed with families and couples every night of the week. In the future, marketing aimed at these pedestrians could significantly heighten ticket sales.

Social media reactions to the drive-in were overwhelmingly positive. WIFF made several posts on Facebook in August and September 2020, which received comments from their audience. The community thanked the team for their work, with comments such as “[w]e thank all of you for making this possible, we had a wonderful time, it reminded us of going to the drive-in theatre when Windsor had them.”<sup>22</sup> “Great time at the John Wick double feature. Great job WIFF, so well run and very organized.”<sup>23</sup> and “Beautiful! This is a great event and just what we needed to finish off a very strange summer.”<sup>24</sup> WIFF received

<sup>22</sup> Judy Woodrich-Hillman. “We thank all of you for making this possible, we had a wonderful time, it reminded us of going to the drive-in theatre when Windsor had them.” *Facebook*, 16 Sep. 2020, 16 Sep. 2020, 4:41 p.m., <https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/posts/pfbid0NmUQFusEgDswZWzEMtFvFrUP39ixuswP2b7RN9TAfZGLdGkv241fKvbDiWyig2XI>

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Leyte. “Great time at the John Wick double feature. Great job WIFF, so well run and very organized. Thank you!!” *Facebook*, 10 Sep. 2020, 9:46 a.m., [https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/posts/pfbid032KLggHtggnvVW7jNKSjpLvTd3y9u9nQcDomCJhyqYvRtmpbexkfj59GNTt8LEH8ohl?comment\\_id=3748574651838635](https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/posts/pfbid032KLggHtggnvVW7jNKSjpLvTd3y9u9nQcDomCJhyqYvRtmpbexkfj59GNTt8LEH8ohl?comment_id=3748574651838635)

<sup>24</sup> Nicole Fauteux. “Beautiful! This is a great event and just what we needed to finish off a very strange summer.” *Facebook*, 3 Sep. 2020, 6:44 p.m., <https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/posts/pfbid06i28KMjScWJJ3Y53KP3rv1PUjkJEEb5DmsG5dnFrTNM9dhnWFk77RxZVrYJzXdB1>

little negative feedback on their Facebook page. Some potential customers were upset that patrons needed a vehicle to attend the event. Two comments addressed this: “[wh]at [a]bout people that don’t have a car??”<sup>25</sup> and “I’m only a couple blocks away but I can’t watch cuz I don’t have a car!!!!”<sup>26</sup> WIFF had originally hoped to accommodate people without cars during the drive-in, but could not, due to legal and safety protocols that were out of their control. They did, however, take action in response to these concerns the following summer by offering a free weekend of open-air film screenings at Charles Park Square from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2021. The festival hosted nineteen screenings for audience members who were invited to watch from lawn chairs or blankets rather than vehicles.

A survey developed by WIFF and the University of Windsor with funding from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research of Canada grant offered more insights into Windsor’s social and community response to the summer drive-in. The project collected 200 responses from members of the local WIFF audience from September 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. According to the survey:

- 66% of respondents reported attending WIFF Under the Stars, trailing the 77% of respondents who had attended the past year’s festival but vastly surpassing the 34% of respondents who attended WIFF’s other year-round offerings.<sup>27</sup>
- 97% of respondents who attended WIFF Under the Stars reported enjoying their experience.
- 90% of all participants recommended that WIFF provide more COVID-safe offerings during the time of physical distancing and public health measures.
- When specifically asked about their reactions to WIFF Under the Stars, 21% of participants were most pleased with the drive-in event’s audio and visual setup quality, proving that WIFF’s added expenditures on high-quality radios and screens were well worth the cost. Another 21% were most fond of the views and location, with direct sightlines to the Detroit skyline and access to the Windsor downtown. And another 21% of respondents reported they most appreciated the event’s organization, proving that despite worries, staff and volunteers were able to run the event professionally and safely.

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<sup>25</sup> Collin Dishman. “Wat bout people that don’t have a car??” Facebook, 5 Aug. 2020, 10:13 a.m., [https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/videos/1781552501986231?comment\\_id=1781568875317927](https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/videos/1781552501986231?comment_id=1781568875317927)

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Garant. “I’m only a couple blocks away but I can’t watch cuz I don’t have a car!!!!” Facebook, 3 Sep. 2020, 2:41 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/WindsorInternationalFilmFestival/posts/pfbid032fsax6hcqwYPohCMbxuQL9b3M2b3SXQhEqZUNWxiaoTk6vzwP1y8yjoxNAyiFXMeI>

<sup>27</sup> Kim Nelson, “Screen Arts, Culture and Community Building in the Motor City: Developing the Windsor International Film Festival’s Year-Round Impact,” Survey, Windsor, Ontario: University of Windsor, January 14th, 2021.

- In response to a question about what could have been improved in the WIFF Under the Stars experience, 25% recommended expanding food and drink options, which WIFF intends to deliver on in future incarnations of the drive-in.
- In addition, 25% of participants recommended that the WIFF should form partnerships and collaborations with local businesses to offer food and drink combos at future events. These suggestions fall in line with WIFF's own assessment.

The political reaction to WIFF Under the Stars was positive as well. Irek Kusmierczyk, a Canadian member of Parliament, acknowledged the success of the event during a meeting with the House of Commons in October of 2020.<sup>28</sup> Economic returns for the 2020 WIFF Under the Stars came in after closing night, with 2000 vehicles sold and a little over 97% capacity filled throughout the two-week run. WIFF Under the Stars 2020 ended up being the best-selling event put on by WIFF outside of the main festival in its fifteen years of operation. And one more excellent piece of news for staff and organizers came two weeks after closing night when it was confirmed through contact tracing that there were no COVID-19 cases associated with the location throughout the event.

As November 2020 passed without an annual festival, WIFF stayed busy planning a new drive-in event for summer 2021. The event successfully ran from August 20<sup>th</sup> to September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 and held many of the fundamentals of the 2020 WIFF Under the Stars. The drive-in was once again held at the Festival Plaza, with the same LED wall and radios. The 2021 WIFF Under the Stars ran for three weeks rather than two. The plaza was booked a few extra days on the tail end of the event to buffer for rain days or other weather hazards.

Since March 2020, the drive-in model has proven to be a profitable and popular way of screening films. During a virtual conference at Cannes 2020, a top executive at Neon said that he believes that based on the success of the model in 2020, drive-ins will soon become a part of the palette of theatrical offerings.<sup>29</sup> Ideally, once COVID-19 restrictions are relaxed, patrons will still be motivated by the opportunity to socialize with others within the comfort and privacy of their own vehicles through drive-ins.<sup>30</sup> The drive-in model used by WIFF is quite scalable and replicable for other film communities around the world. Once access to venues, weather, and audience interest has been taken into consideration, film festivals and film screening companies should strongly consider implementing this model into their scheduled offerings. Still, the many uncontrollable external factors that come with hosting a multi-night event outdoors must be considered.

<sup>28</sup> @Irek\_K. "The WIFF is the premier film festival of the great lakes region. Congratulations WIFF and thank you to the 300 volunteers that [made] it a huge success." *Twitter*, 9 Oct. 2020, 11:35 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Irek\\_K/status/1314590216930447360](https://twitter.com/Irek_K/status/1314590216930447360)

<sup>29</sup> Michael Rosser. "Drive-in Cinemas Here to Stay, Suggests Neon Executive," *Screen Daily*, June 23rd, 2020. Accessible online at:

<https://www.screendaily.com/news/drive-in-cinemas-here-to-stay-suggests-neon-executive/5150943.article>.

<sup>30</sup> Fox, "Drive-in Theatres and Audience Rules of Conduct: Before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 87.

Unlike most drive-in theatres, the organizers staged WIFF Under the Stars in an urban environment. According to 2007 Census Data, only 20% of U.S. drive-ins were located in municipalities with populations over 30,000.<sup>31</sup> In comparison, of the eighteen drive-ins currently operating in Ontario, only four of them are based in towns or cities with more than 30,000 residents.<sup>32</sup> For example, the Docks Drive-In, the last remaining drive-in in Toronto, the largest city in Ontario, closed in 2018.<sup>33</sup> Drive-ins have historically been located in rural areas, on the outskirts of smaller towns.<sup>34</sup> Such locations provide cheaper land costs and less competition from indoor cinemas typically found in urban areas.<sup>35</sup> As discussed earlier, the light and sound pollution of urban environments provide further incentives to locate drive-ins outside metropoles.

WIFF Under the Stars was able to bypass certain restrictions of urban settings, as the municipal government provided the downtown lot for free, and there was no competition from other cinemas at the time due to COVID-19 lockdowns. In fact, there were further market opportunities that WIFF was able to capitalize on by hosting an inner-city drive-in. Frequent moviegoers are more likely to live in urban or suburban settings, while non-moviegoers are more likely to live in the countryside.<sup>36</sup> In recent years, theatrical audiences have decreased most in rural areas with the rise of streaming platforms.<sup>37</sup> Despite the success of WIFF's downtown drive-in, financial and environmental barriers continue to make it difficult for drive-ins to succeed in larger municipalities beyond pop-ups or limited-time event models like WIFF Under the Stars.

The PESTLE analysis showcases how each aspect of WIFF's macroenvironment was reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The success of WIFF's venture into drive-in screenings depended on its ability to capitalize on new social, economic, and environmental opportunities, such as a lack of competition, and increased consumer interest. But new technical, social, and legal problems added months of work for the staff. The logistics of calculating vehicle sightlines, working around local bylaws and restrictions, and appealing to new demographics was complicated and time-consuming. The remnants of a devastating hurricane nearly put an end to WIFF Under the Stars before it even began. Every single film screened at WIFF Under the Stars required a fight against the embargos placed by Cineplex. Programming the thirty-nine classic films screened at the drive-in took the same level of

<sup>31</sup> Fox & Black, "The Rise and Decline of Drive-In Cinemas in the United States," 288.

<sup>32</sup> "Drive-in Movie Theaters of Ontario, Canada." *DriveInMovie*, <https://www.driveinmovie.com/Canada/Ontario>.

<sup>33</sup> "Drive-in Movie Theaters of Ontario, Canada." *DriveInMovie*, <https://www.driveinmovie.com/Canada/Ontario>.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Fox, "The Economics of Drive-in Theatres: From Mainstream Entertainment to Nostalgia on the Margins," in *Economics, Management, and Financial Markets* 10, no. 3 (2015): 43-56.

<sup>35</sup> Fox, "The Economics of Drive-in Theatres: From Mainstream Entertainment to Nostalgia on the Margins," 46-47.

<sup>36</sup> Glen Homan, Robert Cecil and William Wells, "An Analysis of Moviegoers By Life Style Segments," in *Advances in Consumer Research* 2, no. 1 (1975): 217-230.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Amos, "Will The Curtain Close On Small-Town Movie Theaters?" *Forbes*, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Accessible online at:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamos/2018/07/24/will-the-curtain-close-on-small-town-movie-theaters/?sh=5addc5c34716>.

effort and time that is normally spent organizing 165 international first-run films for the annual festival in Windsor each November. To the uninitiated, drive-ins appear to be straightforward events to organize, and WIFF admits that they were fooled by those expectations. And yet, according to the WIFF team, once everything launched, the drive-in was quite easy to run, less complicated than the festival and almost turnkey at points.

In retrospect, WIFF believes that opting to create a drive-in rather than an online festival was the best decision they could have made in April of 2020. While die-hard fans of WIFF might have appreciated an online festival, it would not have given a chance for the community to get together and spend time with each other in the way that WIFF Under the Stars did. Without the pandemic, a WIFF drive-in never would have happened. The drive-in was a last-ditch attempt to save the festival's financials and popular momentum in 2020. It ended up bolstering WIFF's position as the top volunteer-run festival in the country, strengthening the bond between the festival and a community anxious for a respite from restrictive health measures. WIFF Under the Stars proved to be a unique program that was not only valuable to the city, but thanks to a robust response from local audiences and sponsors, it was a financial success that produced a viable screening model that WIFF intends to add to their year-round offerings for years to come.

## Biographical notes

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