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—SPEAKEASY—

NewFest: Gay Film Event Kicks Off With ‘Undertow’

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Director Javier Fuentes-Leon at NewFest during the Q&A after the New York premiere of his film, “The Undertow (Contracorriente)”

Like many business deals, Kathy Wolfe’s acquisition of “The Undertow (Contracorriente)” began on a cocktail napkin. Exactly two days before it won the Sundance Film Festival’s World Cinema Audience Award in the dramatic category, Wolfe decided to add the Peruvian/Colombian picture to the 125 titles that comprise Wolfe Video, the largest and most successful distributor of gay and lesbian films in the world.

As the opening event on the opening night of NewFest, an 11-day, 100-hour film festival focused on gay and lesbian as well as independent films, Wolfe stepped onstage to receive her award. This year marks Wolfe Video’s 25th anniversary, and in tribute to her and her company, Lesli Klainberg, executive director of NewFest, presented Wolfe with a rainbow-like shaped award.

“There’s a real need,” Wolfe said, removing her thin black wire-framed glasses, “for people to see images of themselves, some who are still in the closet, in the media. It makes them feel less isolated. My primary goal is to make those images available.”

Wolfe’s remarks were brief but thankful. The salt-and-pepper haired distributor had just flown into New York, and she wanted to watch the New York debut of the film.

As the lights dimmed, roughly 100 people settled into the crimson seats at the SVA Theater in Chelsea, an extension of the School of Visual Arts, to watch the 102-minute seaside drama about a young Peruvian fisherman with a pregnant wife and a gay artist lover who reside in the same small town.

“This powerful, beautiful film took the whole thing up a notch,” said Klainberg, explaining her choice for opening night. “We wanted to start the festival with the best film, and this year we did.”

Escaping to picturesque, deserted sandy beaches to engage in their clandestine relationship, the gay artist Santiago (Manolo Cardona) challenges Miguel (Cristian Mercado) to own up to his love and prove himself as a man in a series of tough decisions. Through a supernatural set of occurrences, Miguel is seemingly forced to make a choice between his wife Mariela (Tatiana Astengo) and his lover.

“This is a story about a fisherman nobody likes,” said Javier Fuentes-Leon, the director of the film, “shot in a town in Peru [Cabo Blanco, Peru] where the biggest marlin ever caught was caught.”

The director was on hand immediately after the film for a 15-minute Q&A. Fuentes-Leon described the history of the film, how it began as a single scene that he wrote at the rickety kitchen table of Miguel and Mariela.

Immediately after the screening, a caravan of filmmakers, industry folk and moviegoers trekked to the Chelsea Art Museum for the after party. Another 100 people joined the celebration of Wolfe, NewFest’s 22nd year, and “Undertow.”

The festival runs until June 13, with films and shorts every night except Tuesday, June 8. Tickets to most events are general admission \$14.

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