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## 56th Annual Chicago International Film Festival: Enjoy An Extravaganza Of Virtual At-Home Entertainment



**Laura Manske** Contributor 

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Rev up your at-home entertainment fun by logging into the virtual 56th Annual Chicago International Film Festival (October 14 to 25). This groundbreaking assemblage of 58 new feature films and nine short film programs, as well as celeb events, excels — an especially welcome diversion during this year of staying at home due to the novel Coronavirus. Via the comfort of your couch, join acclaimed directors, such as Werner Herzog, Chloé Zhao, Spike Lee and Tsai Ming-liang, as they unveil insight, innovation and inspiration. Cinema buffs will particularly appreciate early viewing of highly anticipated films: *Ammonite*, *Bad Hair*, *Nomadland* and *One Night in Miami*.

Opening night raises the curtain on the world premiere of the documentary *Belushi* — a tribute to and eye-opening exploration of native son and The Second City alumnus John Belushi. By age 30, he was a mega-talent as one of the original seven cast members of NBC-TV's *Saturday Night Live* and the star of *The Blues Brothers*. This comic icon went on to win roles in other memorably colorful films, such as *National Lampoon's Animal House*. A bold biopic directed by R.J. Cutler, *Belushi* incorporates never-before-publicly-heard audiotapes of his colleagues, friends and family members. Pointing a clear lens at his career trajectory, it also tackles the struggles with substance abuse that derailed Belushi's life, leading to his untimely death at age 33 from a drug overdose.



"Belushi" eyes the American actor, comedian and singer. © MICHAEL GOLD / COURTESY OF SHOWTIME



Kate Winslet and Saoirse Ronan in "Ammonite," a romantic drama set in 1800s England. © SPENCER COLLANTES / NEON

In addition to streaming its film repertoire across the USA, the Chicago International Film Festival will arrange eight screenings of [in-person drive-in viewings](#) for the first time ever. For those who live in or near Chicago and have a car, this cinematic brainstorm deserves extra applause.

The outdoor space, at [ChiTown Movies](#), will spotlight high-profile premieres — such as the beautiful *Ammonite* (directed by Francis Lee), nightmare-horror *The Dark and the Wicked* (directed by Bryan Bertino) and music-theatrical David Byrne's *American Utopia* (directed by Spike Lee) — against a Chicago skyline backdrop.



Seven-time Academy Award nominee Kate Winslet, winner of Best Actress for 2008's *The Reader*, will be fêted with a Career Achievement Award. Says festival artistic director Mimi Plauché: "Over her brilliant career, Kate Winslet has proven herself to be a formidable talent and creative force...a magnetic presence and a masterful chameleon, and we are honored to pay tribute to her singular talent and extraordinary body of work." In *Ammonite*, Winslet plays fossil hunter Mary Anning, who forms an emotional bond with an unlikely soulmate, Charlotte Murchison (Saoirse Ronan), the wife of a wealthy aristocrat.

Choose among multiple viewing options and pricing, including increased access for fest members. Opt for one film or binge a bounty. Perhaps most intriguing for behind-the-scenes gazers are the virtual Q&A events with filmmakers. Rachel Brosnahan — a native of Highland Park (suburb about 25 miles north of downtown Chicago) and star of Amazon Prime's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* — will join a live-streamed virtual gathering during An Evening with Rachel Brosnahan, coupled with the Chicago premiere of her film *I'm Your Woman*. For movie aficionados who desire an even more detailed industry purview, register for virtual master classes, workshops (production, financing and distribution) and networking sessions.

The festival is organized around several competitions: International, New Directors, Out-look (the Hugo Award that delves into sexuality and identity) and the Chicago Award (that cheers the finest stories and storytellers from the city itself). Film categories include: Masters (from award-winning filmmakers), Documentaries, Comedy, After Dark (thrillers and mysteries), Cinemas of the Americas, Women in Cinema and Black Perspectives.



"I Am Greta" — a captivating documentary about child climate activist Greta Thunberg; directed by ... [+]  
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A popular, much-talked-about film will undoubtedly be *One Night in Miami*, adapted from the same-name prize-winning play.



"One Night in Miami" — a thought-provoking, fictional account about four legendary Black men. © CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Directed by Regina King, this imaginative scenario focuses on underdog boxer Cassius Clay (Eli Goree), who, in 1964 at the Miami Convention Center, defeated heavyweight champion Sonny Liston. Clay, later known as Muhammad Ali, celebrates with three pals: civil rights leader Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben-Adir),

record-breaking football dynamo Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge) and Grammy winner Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom Jr.). Their energizing, enlightening heart-to-heart convo grapples with racial privilege and protest, as well as how to use their fame for good. This pay-attention movie aptly applies to our current tumultuous year.



David Byrne's "American Utopia" — a rousing HBO Special Event. © CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Oscar- and Emmy-winning director Spike Lee brings to the screen the Broadway-stage sensation, David Byrne's *American Utopia*. Filmed during its New York City run, the notable production trumpets Talking Heads' frontman Byrne and a tight ensemble of 11 musicians, singers and dancers from around the world, aiming to promote human connection, self-evolution and social justice. Songs, such as "Once in a Lifetime" and "Burning Down the House" (from Byrne's 2018 solo album), rock. Brief monologues steer sociopolitical subjects — climate change, immigration, police brutality and the upcoming presidential election. This is a choice opportunity to savor one of the Big Apple's best recent theater productions from the ease of your home.

Winner of the Golden Lion award at the 2020 Venice Film Festival, the poignant and elegiac drama *Nomadland* takes off when a company town in rural Nevada is hit by economic collapse. Unemployed Fern (Frances McDormand) packs her possessions into a van and launches an unconventional journey, navigating American West landscapes, weaving among intimate lives of salt-of-the-earth mentors, friends and strangers along the way. "I'm not homeless, I'm just...*houseless*. Not the same thing," explains Fern. This is the third feature film from horizon-stretching director Chloé Zhao.



"Nomadland" — starring Frances McDormand. © CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL



"Sylvie's Love" — a kiss to yesteryear. © COURTESY OF AMAZON STUDIOS

Directed by Eugene Ashe, charming *Sylvie's Love* glows during New York City's sultry summer of 1957, when Sylvie (Tessa Thompson), a record store-owner's daughter with goals to become a TV producer, meets Robert (Nnamdi Asomugha), a saxophonist.



"Summer of '85" races with a rescue, seduction, then sinister revelation by French film director ... [+]  
CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

With sumptuous old-school cinematography and a graceful rhythm, *Sylvie's Love* is evocative. Jazz is in the air; passion floats on its high notes.

For more culture and arts information citywide, go to [Choose Chicago](#). Here is the tourism office's updates about

[Coronavirus and COVID-19](#). Virtual and in-person access to museums, parks, gardens, trails, and other attractions and venues is also available.

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