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Horror films showcased at Female Eye Film Festival

For the first time the festival of female directors has a program featuring horror films, as more women take on the genre.

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Director Karen Lam, in scarf, on the set of her horror film *Evangeline*, which screens at the Female Eye Film Festival.

By: [Linda Barnard](#) Staff Reporter, Published on Fri Jun 13 2014

As the [Female Eye Film Festival](#) prepared to mark its 12th edition, founder and executive director [Leslie Ann Coles](#) noticed an interesting trend emerging among

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submissions: more women are directing horror films.

"It's an interesting genre, and women tend to work differently in terms of story, style and lead characters," said Coles. "These are hard films to make; this is a tough genre and women have the chops."

It's a watershed year in more ways than one for Female Eye, including a record 350 submissions in categories including documentary, drama and comedy — an increase of 45-50 percent over past years. Coles chalks it up to the "democratization of content, the accessibility to the tools with which to produce" as cameras get smaller and cheaper, along with less-expensive editing software.

For the first time, the festival, which runs June 17 to June 22, is including a late-night horror program on June 21. It features four shorts, three of them Canadian, before screening Vancouver writer-director Karen Lam's [feature-length revenge-horror](#) *Evangeline*.

"I met Karen Lam and she was talking with such great enthusiasm about her genre of choice and being a woman working in (horror)," said Coles. "We had (also) received a number of shorts, really great horror films that were absolutely brilliant in execution."

"It's a huge honour," said Lam of being included on the Female Eye bill.

She jokes she's "a niche within a niche — not that many female Asian directors are doing horror."

Evangeline, which was nominated for three Leo Awards, the prizes handed out by The Motion Picture Arts & Sciences Foundation of British Columbia, had its world premiere in September 2013 at Stockholm's [Monsters of Film Festival](#).

Lam said this style of filmmaking has been dubbed "feminist response horror" for "using the tropes of horror . . . to express very specific perspectives." She's had "good support" from the horror community, which seems to have a strong base in Vancouver, where female filmmakers there are using their unique style to elicit screams and scares. She hopes *Evangeline* will find a larger audience thanks to Female Eye, ahead of a theatrical release this fall.

Lam's inspiration for her script came partly from B.C. serial killer Robert Picton but also from the powerlessness she said many women feel today. "I don't like feeling helpless," she said.

The story centres on a murdered university student who, with the encouragement of an otherworldly helper, seeks revenge against the young men who brutalized her and left her for dead.

Evangeline, said Lam, is a film for young women. "I'd love them to claim *Evangeline* as their own."

Winnipeg director [Danishka Esterhazy](#) also references Picton in her thriller *H and G*, a retelling of the fairytale Hansel and Gretel, about a pair of neglected urban children abandoned in the woods. It screens as the feature film on June 22 in a Canadian

program.

“The character in my film is not meant to be Picton, but elements of his crime are in the public imagination and it connects immediately with the audience,” explains Esterhazy, who has made two feature films (her drama *Black Field* was also at Female Eye) and a dozen shorts.

Her next film, the teen-focused dystopian drama *Level 16*, will break into another area that’s relatively new to female filmmakers: science fiction.

“I have come up against these situations; women don’t do science fiction,” she chuckled. It will also take her career to the next level, from micro-budget films (*H and G* cost \$5,000) to something around \$2.5 million.

Horror and thrillers make up a handful of the 64 international films on the Female Eye bill, which opens with quirky comedy *Cathy Coppola*. It’s written and directed by New Yorker Stefanie Sparks, who also stars as a struggling filmmaker who finds a highly unethical way to promote herself.

“We are showing more feature films, which is really exciting for us,” said Cole, pointing to comedy *Lucille’s Ball* by Yukon filmmaker Lulu Keating and Jenni Townsend’s UK-U.S.-Australian co-production *The Pull*, a romantic drama set in Glasgow.

The fest is recognizing screenwriter, producer and educator [Gabrielle Kelly](#) as its Honorary Maverick of 2014. [Her latest project](#) was as co-editor on *Celluloid Ceiling: Women Film Directors Breaking Through*, which comes out this month. It’s a collection of essays about the women working in film in various countries, including Canada.

The Canadian chapter, by British journalist and academic Karen Oughton, explores identity and feminism in the work of Canadian directors in three films: Mary Harron’s *American Psycho*, Sarah Polley’s *Away From Her* and twins [Jen and Sylvia Soska’s horror](#) *American Mary*.

“Women have been shunted into certain genres: romantic comedy, drama, romances, documentary,” explained Kelly, who was vice-president of development for director Sidney Lumet’s and producer Jay Presson Allen’s production company, where she worked on *Prince of the City* and *The Verdict*, among others.

“You hardly ever see a woman do what [Kathryn Bigelow](#) did,” she said of the Oscar-winning director of *The Hurt Locker*. “Women have been kept out of the most profitable genres where the most money is at stake, the big action movies.”

“It’s been used as an excuse to keep our budgets low,” observed Lam. “(Some say) Women don’t do commercial films like horror and action thrillers and that’s false. I belong to a community of genre directors that are all women and it has a Facebook group with more than 400 (international) members.”

She continued, “It’s not that there aren’t women who want to do these films. There is a systemic bias.”

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But good news came for Lam this week that shows the tide may be turning. She was invited to a networking dinner for a group of local male directors and guest Oliver Stone (Oscar winner for *Midnight Express*, *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*).

“I think I got an invite to the boys’ club!” said Lam.

Kelly sees a cultural shift, with movies featuring strong female protagonists like Angelina Jolie’s *Maleficent*, Emily Blunt in *Edge of Tomorrow* or heroic figures like Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games* becoming more commonplace. And that could lead to putting women at the helm of big-budget movies that tell their stories.

Certainly that worked with *Frozen*, the sixth highest-grossing movie of all time, co-directed by Jennifer Lee, who also wrote the screenplay.

The Disney animation, about two strong sisters, seems to have universal appeal, even among women who make horror movies. “I absolutely love *Frozen*,” Lam said.

All films screen at the Royal Cinema, 608 College St. Tickets at the door: \$10 adults; \$8 students/seniors: \$50 for all access pass.



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