

## **Access Report: Reel Asian Film Festival**

The Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival (Reel Asian) is an annual film festival presenting works of contemporary Asian cinema and work from the Asian diaspora. It is a non-profit community-based festival spanning 10-days of screenings, workshops, galas, forums and parties across venues throughout the city and online. Reel Asian supports Asian media artists and filmmakers by offering networking and industry opportunities (website: Industry) and year-round events. As a non-profit organization, they host the yearly Fire Horse Award fundraising banquet where they recognize an Asian-Canadian member of the film and media arts community with a \$25,000.00 award in anticipation of future contributions to the field. As a charitable organization, Reel Asian's educational initiatives for youth include an Asian Heritage Month School Tour, their *Unsung Voices* Summer Video Production Workshop, and *Wee Asian* for young children to attend the festival. Reel Asian consists of permanent year-round staff, seasonal staff, an advisory board and volunteers who work with them. Some volunteers assist with the film selection process. The organization makes space for those who work and volunteer for the festival to also submit work to the festival (Statement of Programming).

Reel Asian's current approach to access as articulated on their website and in their Accessibility Roadmap, includes the keywords, concepts and phrases:

- *Continued commitment*
- *Care*
- *Peer Support*
- *Happy to have you*

Reel Asian's current accessibility initiatives are listed on their website (Accessibility Initiatives), however, they do not have an access policy which describes their overall approach to access. Their approach appears to be consistent with a Human Rights approach. During the pandemic Reel Asian created an Accessibility Roadmap with both short and long-term goals to improve access knowledge for staff and expand accessibility throughout the festival. Importantly, it notes a desire to learn more about a disability justice approach to access. As a non-profit organization, budget is the most cited barrier to implementing expanded access consistently.

## Access Practices, Tensions and Gaps at Reel Asian

### **Venues and Ticketing: Access Practices**

- Barrier-free seating is available. It is booked via the website and through a Google intake form. There is a different form for each venue. A section of the intake form includes descriptive information about the venue's accessibility features.
- There is advance ticketing for barrier-free sections of the theatre.
- A “wraparound care” service is provided if a guest wishes to share their pick-up and drop-off transportation details. Staff or a volunteer will arrange to meet outside upon arrival, escort guests to their seats, and escort them back at the end of the screening. They will stay with guests if transportation is late or needs to be rearranged. This practice was suggested by Andrew Gurza.
- The Access 2 Cards Program (Easter Seals of Canada) is available so that attendants are admitted free of charge.
- Service animals are welcome at all festival venues, free of charge.

### **Venues and Ticketing: Access Tensions and Gaps**

- Some venues are less accessible than others. Venues do not always support wheelchair user access and therefore guests have had wheelchairs carried by staff/volunteers in the past.
- Accessibility is attended to primarily through the lens of physical access.

- Limited parking space.
- Lack of visible and clear signage for wayfinding.

### **Screenings and Events: Access Practices**

- Active listeners have been offered and accessed during screenings in the past.
- A peer support list was developed in lieu of active listeners inspired by Rendezvous with Madness, a film festival featuring mad filmmakers put on by Workman Arts, and a staff member's suggestion due to heavy topics and potentially triggering content.
- Content warnings are communicated via the website and on-screen before the film.
- Reel Asian has described a commitment to screening films with open captions during the festival in-theatre and online. However, this is not implemented in all cases. Filmmakers have chosen to screen without captioning, and some films only offer subtitles (which is noted in film detail pages on the website). Historical works or those with no dialogue are also presented without captions.
- Access features for films and screenings are communicated via the website.
- Some events offer the option of a “quiet space” for sensory disabilities. Guests are asked to note this via an intake form. Quiet spaces are then created. Not available for screenings.
- Reel Asian worked with Critical Distance Centre for Curation in 2021 on their durational project entitled Place Settings: Routes and Rituals. This program

included more access practices than usual, such as audio description and captioning. This was a one time event.

- There is free programming available and relative affordability in comparison to other film festivals.

### **Screenings and Events: Access Tensions and Gaps**

- Active listeners have been offered during screenings in the past but the practice has been discontinued due to budget constraints.
- Open captions are not always provided because filmmakers have chosen to screen work without captions. This compromises Reel Asian's commitment to the practice. Budget or time constraints have also been cited as a reason for not providing captions.
- Captioning can sometimes glitch during screenings.
- Intros and Q & As are not captioned.
- Artists/filmmakers may not have an in-depth understanding of captioning which can create tension in advocating for them.
- Deaf or hard of hearing audiences have encountered barriers with the low volume of discussions and Q & As.
- A "quiet space" for sensory disabilities is not available for all venues and at screenings.
- Inaccessible venues have been used in the past for events because accessibility was not checked prior to booking.

- There is a lack of engagement with audio description and audio describers for screenings. Consider learning more about creating screenings that are audio described.

### **Film Section Process: Access Practices**

- Due to the potentially triggering nature of films, a group chat was created to open communication among volunteers and staff members to connect and to discuss film content during the selection process. This is a practice based on community care.
- Staff encourage volunteers to practice self care when screening films.

### **Film Section Process: Access Tensions and Gaps**

- Despite a commitment to captions some films are submitted and screened without captioning.
- There is no audio description.
- Volunteer screeners are required to view a certain number of films in a tight timeframe and therefore the committee is not accessible to all disabled people.
- Submission fees for multiply-marginalized filmmakers, such as those whose identities intersect with madness, neurodivergence and disability create a barrier to access.

### **Community Feedback: Access Practices**

- The barrier-free seating booking form was developed from feedback received over the years from visitors.
- The barrier-free seating booking form was audited by Andrew Gurza for language use, structure, and disability led access insights. Gurza suggested including a question about intersectional disabilities if the visitor chooses to disclose.
- “Wraparound care” was developed through ongoing interactions and feedback from visitors.

### **Community Feedback: Access Tensions and Gaps**

- Feedback on inaccessible event venues has been expressed. A point person for accessibility could be available during events to support visitors in real time.
- Lack of representation and community-building with mad, neurodivergent and disabled community members.

### **HR: Access Tensions and Gaps**

- Disability and access is considered primarily when providing services to audience members and guests. There is a lack of written access measures for staff, artists, or volunteers.
- The volunteer committee lacks disability representation.

**Budgeting: Access Practices**

- A budget is allocated for captioning films but still may not cover the cost to caption *all* films.

**Budgeting: Access Tensions and Gaps**

- Each department is responsible for its own access practices managed within separate budgets (i.e. marketing, box office, etc).

**Website: Access Practices**

- The website is compatible with screenreader technology.
- Image description for most images.
- The website features enlarged-type and high-contrast modes for those with low-vision or visual impairment.

**Website: Access Practices**

- Image descriptions not available for all images.
- Consider reading the Alt-Text as Poetry Workbook by Bojana Coklyat & Finnegan Shannon for more on alt-text practices.

## **General Recommendations**

- Write a comprehensive access policy that includes an overall approach to access as well as sections for Screenings, Venues, Events and and Film Selection.
- Create an internal access policy and clarify accommodations available for staff members.
- Build and strengthen relationships with Deaf and disabled artists and the Deaf and disability community through call outs for disabled artists/filmmakers and volunteers.
- Create an Access Coordinator role.
- Build a consolidated access budget for Reel Asian led by the Access Coordinator.
- Innovate ways to gather community feedback on a regular basis. Implement ongoing access meetings to discuss feedback.
- Consider including volunteers who are not required to view *all* films in order to create more disability representation on the committee.
- Onboard filmmakers to mandatory access practices, such as captioning, with a document that teaches and explains why they are important to Reel Asian.
- Hire an access activator or disability arts consultant to provide a workshop for staff to learn about different accessibility models, terms and language, and accessibility measures as a creative act.
- It was noted by the focus group that mental health in Asian Canadian communities can be considered taboo, hidden or silenced. There is a desire by community members to see mad and neurodivergent representation on screen.

- Consider waiving submission fees for multiply-marginalized filmmakers, such as those whose identities intersect with madness, neurodivergence and disability as a way to make the festival more accessible, inclusive and diverse.
- Choose venue spaces that have accessible all gender washrooms, ramps, elevators, and automatic doors.
- Use visible and legible signage.
- Consider rest areas with chairs at events.
- Consider ASL interpreters downloadable transcripts for all events and screenings.
- Consider implementing sliding scale & PWYC tickets and discounts for low income community members and seniors.
- Create opportunities for economically marginalized filmmakers by offering scholarships and bursaries for marginalized filmmakers to participate in industry forums and workshops; generate opportunities for funding, training and mentorship.

### **Recommended Areas of focus for Access Activations**

- Write a comprehensive access policy for Reel Asian that includes an overall approach to access as well as sections for Screenings, Venues, Events and and Film Selection.
- Create onboarding materials to share Reel Asian's access commitments with filmmakers with a focus on captioning and its critical importance.

- Create a call to invite disabled filmmakers and media artists to collaborate with Reel Asian.