Welcome to Salt Lake City, Utah!

In the surrounding areas you will find the festival homes of the legendary Sundance Film Festival, the Slamdance Film Festival and one of the newest kids on the block, FilmQuest Festival.

Now in its second year, FilmQuest (listed as one of the “Top 50 Film Festivals Worth the Entry Fee 2015”) and founder/director Jonathan Martin are bringing together Sci-Fi, Horror and Fantasy (always a bit of an itch for me – I can recall being irritated by this gauche genre co-mingling in my local video store growing up). That being said, they do actually work well together as they’re still part of a beloved fringe movement (getting more mainstream by the year), and in combining these niche genres, everyone gets a little something they love. Mixing all of these makes for a rich tapestry of films in line with such examples as *The Exorcist* (horror), *Labyrinth* (fantasy) and *Blade Runner* (sci-fi).

It’s a ten day event here in Sandy (per Jonathan, it only recently became “Sandy”. A few years ago it was still actually considered Salt Lake City – or South Salt Lake City to be more precise). Wherever it is we find ourselves, there’s a daunting and impressive line-up of features, shorts, music videos, web-series and red carpet events on the horizon. Not to mention a screenplay competition, a commercial competition and daily parties which go long into the night.

Tonight’s opening night party included the world premiere of the Utah-filmed *Mythica: The Darkspore* (the second in a planned franchise) starring Hercules himself – Kevin Sorbo.

Thursday night was the soft opening, with a screening of the nominated film *The House at the End of Time* (which screened at last year’s Screamfest in LA – where it took the top two awards for Best Picture and Best Director). Here at FilmQuest, the picture is nominated for Best Feature Film, Best Director (Alejandro Hidalgo), Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Screenplay, and Best Editing.

There are plenty of workshops to attend over the duration as well – put up by screenwriters, make-up artists, visual effects gurus, actors and direct from Hollywood – casting directors – as well as something I’m jonesin’ to see – basically a live commentary of Ridley Scott’s *Alien* by screenwriting professor Alex Nibley – scheduled for Thursday, June 25th at noon. It’s also a chance to see *Alien* on the big screen! It’s a no-brainer!

Several of the shorts we saw at Screamfest last year will be shown here. Favorites like *Dead Hearts*, *Downstairs*, *Nuit Americhen* and *3 Versos* are high on my list for repeat viewings.

The very sweet Christina Robinson (*Dexter*’s step-daughter Astor) is one of the celebrity judges in attendance at the festival. She’ll be taking on the categories of animated shorts, horror shorts and music videos. I asked her if she keeps in touch with her Dexter co-stars. She recently saw David Zayas (Angel) and Brando Eaton (season four’s Jonah Mitchell – the son of John Lithgow’s “Trinity Killer”) at Sundance. Per Christina, “I miss them. It was a giant family. I grew up on the show – started when I was seven.” When I asked what she was currently working on, she was mum. “I have a couple of things I’ve been offered, but I need to screen test. I don’t want to jinx it.” And her favorite film genre? Dystopian fantasy – like *The Hunger Games*. But her favorite movie of all time is *Forrest Gump*. And by the way, her outfit for the carpet was fantastic!

Cerina Vincent (best known to us horror geeks as the ill-fated “let’s shave our legs in the bathtub with contaminated water” Marcy of Eli Roth’s recent classic *Cabin Fever*) was an absolute delight to get to know. She’s recently completed a pilot called *Stuck in the Middle* for Disney (as with all new shows, its ultimate fate is up in the air at the moment). I asked about her signature role as Marcy and if she considers herself a horror actress, to which she replied, “I have a deep love for the horror community and horror genre. I’m genuinely grateful to be included in it. Every year I feel like I have to do something horror. I totally embrace it. We all loved working on *Cabin Fever*.”

Many of us have heard about the pending *Cabin Fever* remake. Cerina appeared to be somber when I mentioned it. But how could she not be? The original is only 13 years old, for Pete’s sake! Her only comment (you could almost see the frowny-face avatar in her perceived thought balloon) “I think they already shot it.” Well, as with so many other horror remakes of the past two decades, you can never negate the power of the original with a potentially sub-par reboot.

As one of the celeb judges, she was given the task to cover the sci-fi shorts and the student film shorts. “I was really impressed. Genuinely impressed. I went with my gut – my heart. I went with films which reminded me of iconic horror/sci-fi that I loved as a kid. They were all great!”

*Monika* is another recent DVD/VOD release for Cerina. It’s an action revenge thriller from the folks behind *I Spit on Your Grave*. The trailer, not the film will be playing here at FilmQuest. Cerina joyfully proclaimed, “I’m platinum blonde and get to shoot a lot of guns!”

In addition to Ms. Robinson and Ms. Vincent, the other celebrity judges for the competition include Doug Jones (one of Guillermo Del Toro’s go-to guys for such films as *Pan’s Labyrinth* and *Hellboy*), actor Dameon Clarke of *Graceland* and *Dragonball Z* (he’s also doing an acting workshop while here), Daniel Logan (*Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*) and Carlee Baker (Lucky McKee’s *The Woman*).

To paraphrase The Carpenters – “It’s only just begun” – which means you’ve got plenty of time to check out their line-up (www.filmquestfestival.com), head over to the venue and watch some fantastic moving pictures. I can tell you that the first block of shorts opening night was nothing to sneeze at – with some obvious stand-outs – among them was the afore-mentioned *3 Versos* by Antonio Yee, the creepy *The Smiling Man* from director AJ Briones, the hysterical *Total Awesome Viking Power* from Morten Forland and *The Black Forest* – a Spanish language short from director Paul Urkijo. But with the onslaught of short films still to come, we’ll see if these gems hold up against their competitors as the festival marches on.

I’ll have a full report of my faves and a full listing of all the winners (features *and* shorts) post-festival! Until then, stay tuned for several forthcoming reviews on a good chunk of the horror features you can find on the festival agenda.

For now, grab some popcorn, sit back with the folks here at FilmQuest and get lost – whether you want to pee your pants from fear, soar through the dark night sky in either a spaceship or on the wings of a dragon – there’s something here to intrigue you. Again, a little bit for everyone.