

Fantasy to reality

The first-ever Fantasy Worldwide International Film Festival is arriving in Toronto and Carmen Cheung looks at the Ryerson grad responsible for managing warriors, dragons and robots.

**By: Carmen Cheung , The Eyeopener
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Johanna Kern on the set of her latest film "Shadowland". (Photo courtesy Johanna Kern)

Monsters, aliens and dragons are all familiar friends to Johanna Kern.

Or at least they will be, when her dream project, the first-ever Fantasy Worldwide International Film Festival, hits Toronto next month. Kern, a 1997 Ryerson film graduate, counts the hotly anticipated festival as only one of the few balls in her daily juggling act.

While preparing for the upcoming festival, Kern is also the president and producer of the film company After Rain Films, the founder of Kid Stage, an acting school for young performers, and an accomplished director, producer and writer of fantasy and genre films.

Kern, who began her career as a professional actress in Europe, relocated to Toronto in 1989 in the hopes of pursuing a career in film and television. While searching for work in the city, she decided to attend Ryerson, where she enrolled in the four-year bachelor of film studies program.

"I loved it at (Ryerson). It is an absolutely wonderful school, a wonderful balance of theory and hands-on experience," Kern said. "It's a great theory-based institution."

Kern was lucky enough to find a job as a producer at a film company right after graduation, but said the film industry is extremely competitive.

"Never give up, never give up, never give up!" Kern yelled repeatedly when asked for advice for aspiring filmmakers at Ryerson. "You might hear 'NO!' and you're going to hear it 100

times and it's going to be a very big and fat 'NO!' But then the hundred and first time you go in, you'll hear a very faint 'yes.'"

The Fantasy Worldwide International Film Festival is Kern's latest effort to make the city's film community aware of the burgeoning genre-film market.

"I have always been interested in the sci-fi fantasy genre, ever since I was a little child," said Kern, whose next feature film, *Shadowland, the Legend*, is part of her fantasy-based trilogy. "We all love the stories. All the legends and mythology."

The festival's website says the mission of the festival is allowing "the truths embodied in stories and legendary myths...to (help) find a deeper meaning in our everyday struggle. Inspired by our heroes, we find our own strengths."

Features in the international lineup include the U.S. production *Forbidden Warrior*, the documentary *Lord of the Brush* and Turkey's *G.O.R.A.* The festival will also premiere numerous short films and animated features, including several from Canada.

"(The festival) is aiming to inspire audiences with empowering stories and mythological roots. Unlike the other fantasy film festivals, we're not screening horror because it's not an empowering genre," said Kern, who notes that her organization, which is backing the festival, is strictly independent and non-profit.

Kern realized that there was nothing in Toronto specifically dedicated to screening fantasy films. After doing some research, Kern found that there are 16 fantasy film festivals in the world -- but all of them focus on horror and sci-fi, not fantasy.

While Kern hopes the Toronto community will come around to the much-maligned sci-fi and fantasy genre, her concentration is currently split between the festival and *Shadowland*. The inaugural festival consists of more than 20 hours of film from six continents.

"Big budget features as well as famous names are involved in the program; it's an amazing scope of the best in fantasy," said Kern, who counts her favourites among the submissions as *Moongirl* and *Invasion*.

"Everyone who's in film or image arts courses, journalism, fashion, animation, graphics...everyone should come," Kern said.

"They are films from around the world. We can learn a lot from these filmmakers."

The festival runs Nov. 4 to 6 at the Bloor Cinema in Toronto.