The 50th year—that's crazy,” says Michael Kutza, marveling that the Chicago International Film Festival, which he founded at the age of 22, this year celebrates its golden anniversary.

The 50th CIFF will honor the festival’s past, present, and future by bringing back film artists whose first movies screened here, and showing their latest works. Among the illustrious invitees are Michael Moore and Oliver Stone. Asked if they will show, Kutza shrugs. “Who knows?” The festival’s director says he never knows for sure if celebrities will come “until I see the whites of their eyes.” Unlike government-funded film fests in other parts of the world, he explains, CIFF does not pay its guests, so if they suddenly get a paying gig, they take it. Still, some notable figures have confirmed, among them Kathleen Turner, who will serve as film jury president; Norwegian actress/director Liv Ullmann; and celebrated French actress Isabelle Huppert.

CIFF has distinguished itself from other film festivals, Kutza says, by being both public-friendly and competitive. Last year it had about 950 feature submissions and screened only 100 of them; of about 2,000 shorts submitted, it showed 50. The festival also has a vital education arm that busses about 6,000 Chicago Public Schools students to screenings each year. While CIFF looks to its past and future, Kutza, 71, says of his own future at the festival, “I’m not going anywhere.”

As Kutza and his team prepare to raise the curtain on films from around the world, we look at some of the Chicago men who are making movies their livelihood. Dressed to the nines and photographed at Soho House—the city’s new ground zero for creative minds—these Windy City cinéastes are proving themselves maestros of the moving picture.
Before becoming an Academy Award–nominated film star, Michael Shannon honed his acting chops in Chicago theater. A native of Lexington, Kentucky, he now lives in New York with fellow actor (and Steppenwolf Theatre Company member) Kate Arrington and their two daughters. Shannon has brought his trademark intensity to roles ranging from the off-kilter John in Revolutionary Road to the villainous General Zod in Man of Steel to the tortured Bureau of Prohibition agent Nelson Van Alden on HBO's Boardwalk Empire, whose final season wraps this month. “Pretty numb,” says the actor, 40, of how he feels saying good-bye to Van Alden. “But I just go on to the next job.”

For Shannon, finding the next job clearly isn’t going to be a problem.

**The screen versus the stage:** I feel a great sense of wonder when I’m onstage. Theater is a miracle. Acting on camera is work. It’s very technical—it’s like modeling. I act because: It’s too late now to do anything else. There are days when I think I don’t ever want to act again. But I keep getting reinspired by new artists that I meet, like director Jeff Nichols.

**The Chicago influence:** LA and New York are very unforgiving. Chicago—it’s not easy, but people are willing to take chances.

**Favorite movie:** The King of Comedy. Cause I’m passionate about: The environment.

Underneath the comic-book aspect of Man of Steel is a story about a civilization that destroys its own planet and then tries to find another one. **Up next:** Ramin Bahrani's 99 Homes, about the foreclosure crisis, which plays this fall’s Venice, Toronto, and Telluride film fests.
The short work *Perfect Day* marks Derrick L. Sanders’s first foray into filmmaking. But he’s no newbie. In 1999, he cofounded Chicago’s Congo Square Theatre Company; six years later, he won the Jeff Award for his direction of *Seven Guitars*, by the late August Wilson, his mentor. For *Perfect Day*, which he wrote and directed, Sanders took inspiration from the 2009 murder of Chicago high school student Derrion Albert. The director’s stage experience has clearly translated to the screen: *Perfect Day* played at this year’s Black Harvest Film Festival. Sanders, 40, lives on the South Side with his wife and their two children.

**The inspiration for my first film:** Violence is almost accepted as a daily part of life on the South Side and West Side of Chicago—as long as it doesn’t come north or downtown. The film is more about lost opportunity than Derrion Albert.

**The screen versus the stage:** Theater gets to the passion and the bigness of our lives. Film captures the intricate nuances of human interaction. **Cause I’m passionate about:** I’m the executive director of the August Wilson Monologue Competition. Each year we work with 300 Chicago students, and three of them perform on Broadway. **Most memorable reaction to my film:** The first time I screened *Perfect Day* at a film festival, one lady said, “I hated your film. It just was too real. It was too close to home.” I said, “That’s the most beautiful thing ever said about something I’ve done.” **Up next:** A feature film about a soldier coming back home from the Iraq War.
In the past decade, Joe Swanberg has directed 17 feature films—including 2007’s *Hannah Takes the Stairs* and last year’s *Drinking Buddies*—and performed in many more. Early in his career, the 33-year-old indie director became a poster boy for the mumblecore movement, which he describes as “a focus on character over traditional storytelling.” As his reputation has grown, so has the star wattage of his low-budget indie films. His most recent movie, the August release *Happy Christmas*, starred Anna Kendrick and Lena Dunham. Swanberg lives in Lincoln Square with his filmmaker wife, Kris, and their 3-year-old son, Jude.

**I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker when:** I first saw *Raising Arizona*. **Most influential film directors:** John Sayles’s movies were some of the first I saw that I felt were really observational and about people. And John Waters’s movies gave me permission to just go make movies with my friends. **Favorite indie film:** *Punch-Drunk Love*. **If I weren’t a filmmaker, I’d be:** Trying to open a bowling alley or a karaoke place—some sort of professional host. The only thing I like more than filmmaking is throwing parties. **Cause I’m passionate about:** My wife taught high school for a few years in the Chicago Public Schools system, and we’re both big believers in public education. **Why I stay in Chicago:** It’s a city that doesn’t revolve around movies. It’s really important to not have every conversation and thought in my life be related to movies. **Up next:** *Digging for Fire*, about a married couple who spend a weekend apart, will play at film festivals next year.
With this year’s Life Itself, director Steve James has come full circle. The documentary explores the life of Chicago film critic Roger Ebert, who helped catapult James’s career two decades earlier by advocating for his Oscar-nominated film Hoop Dreams. Without Ebert, the 59-year-old Oak Park resident says, that seminal documentary “might very well have disappeared on public television.” Life Itself is already getting buzz for the best documentary Oscar.

Edgar Barens got an Oscar nod this year for his latest film, Prison Terminal, nominated for best documentary short. Like much of Barens’s work, Prison Terminal takes a sober look at the US prison system—an interest he traces to his immigrant parents. In the 1970s, during Spain’s fascist dictatorship, members of his family became political prisoners. Barens, 53, lives with his partner in Montgomery, Illinois, and works at UIC.

I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker when: SJ: I took an undergraduate class where we watched the films of great auteurs like Ernst Lubitsch and Jean Renoir. I make documentary films because: EB: I’m giving a voice to people behind bars, a voice that most people don’t hear.

Most memorable reaction to a film of mine: SJ: My neighbor said that after he saw Hoop Dreams, whenever he watched basketball, he thought differently about those players and all that they went through to get there. EB: I showed my mom and dad some footage from Prison Terminal, and they were both in tears. Up next: SJ: Generation Food, a quest to understand the economic system that controls what we eat and don’t eat. EB: A film about the plight of the American long-haul trucker.
I didn’t think I needed to go to film school,” declares Carlos Jiménez Flores, a 46-year-old director and poet, who lives in Albany Park. Instead, as an undergrad at Northeastern Illinois University, he studied what he felt would help him as a storyteller: sociology to learn about groups and human resource development to learn about individuals. His coming-of-age film Mi Princesa, which he wrote and directed, follows a young man who leaves Chicago to find his roots in Puerto Rico. It could serve as the filmmaker’s launching pad: Shot in Chicago and Puerto Rico, Mi Princesa was screened at this year’s Chicago Latino Film Festival and will air on WTTW in 2015.

I knew I wanted to be a film director when: I was 11 years old. I was a student in Chicago Public Schools, and our teacher would show us a film every Friday. I was the kid who operated the projector, and I knew I was gonna get into movies. I make films because: I want to impact the future. In movies and television, Puerto Ricans are lazy or thieves or gangbangers or drug dealers. Mi Princesa gives people a window to see how rich this culture is.

Favorite Chicago bar: Suite 25 in Logan Square. The Chicago influence: I embody what Chicago and the Midwest are all about: blue-collar, hard-working, grinding. Most influential film director: Alfred Hitchcock. Up next: Motel 666 and The Thin Place, both horror films, will be released next year.
“It feels like returning home,” says Jack C. Newell, 32, of heading the newly launched TV, Film & Digital program at Second City, where he once studied. “I’ve been trying to bring improvisation and film together in my own work for a long time, so it feels like a really good fit.” The Old Town resident’s comic connections have come in handy. His movies, such as the shorts Typing and Stages of Emily and the feature film Close Quarters, have employed some of the city’s top comedic talents, like T.J. Jagodowski, David Pasquesi, Susan Messing, and current SNL performer Vanessa Bayer.

I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker when: My parents bought me a camera in high school. I was a nerd—I was in yearbook, theater, choir—and film just really connected with me. When I wanted to go to film school, my parents were like, “Sure.” Teaching philosophy: The best teacher is experience, especially in film.

Comedic screenwriters’ most common pitfall: Creating movies that are funny scripts but not pieces of cinema. Also, not trusting that the joke is apparent. Overwriting happens a ton.

Favorite Second City alum: Harold Ramis. He made really good, cinematic, funny films that actually meant something. Funniest movie: Ghostbusters. Most influential film director: Charlie Chaplin or Woody Allen. Up next: Open Tables, a romantic comedy, will come out next year. And since 2011, I’ve been working on a documentary called How to Build a School in Haiti.
Jason Knade has a space in Pilsen where he works and, on occasion, lives—not surprising, given his relentless pace. At just 28, the director/writer and Palos Hills resident has had more than 50 film festival screenings globally and won a dozen film festival awards. Last year he directed Steve Grand’s viral hit, the gay-themed music video “All-American Boy.” “I have a very hard time getting behind most causes because I can always see the other side,” says the onetime philosophy major, who is straight and married. LGBT rights, however, “is the only cause where there really is no other side.” Audiences, meanwhile, are getting behind his cause. Chicagoans voted Knade best local filmmaker in the Chicago Reader poll in 2011 and again this year.

I make films because: It’s my way of creating meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. I knew I wanted to be a film director when: The credits rolled for Before Sunset. Favorite movie: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. On paying the bills by making films: Film is very difficult to succeed in, so I realized the hard work it takes to make a living. Most of the people I know do it on the side or they can’t fully commit to it. This is how I support myself. Most memorable reaction to a film of mine: A friend told me that if Woody Allen and Terrence Malick had a kid, that would be me. Up next: Searching for Venice, my first feature film as a director, is slated to come out this winter.