

30th Spada Conference

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27TH SPADA INDUSTRY AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED

**30th Spada Conference: Key Screen Industry Awards Presented
November 20-21, The Pullman Hotel, Auckland**

Winners of three prestigious Spada Screen Industry Awards were announced at the 30th Spada Conference in Auckland on Thursday 20 November.

The **Spada/Data Book Industry Champion 2025** was awarded to Taualeo'o Stephen Stehlin by Leauanae Laulu Mac Leauanae, Chief Executive, and Secretary for Culture and Heritage.

Stephen Stehlin has been a driving force in New Zealand's screen industry for over three decades, dedicated to amplifying Pacific voices and stories on our nation's screens. His body of work demonstrates a rare combination of creative excellence, industry leadership, and enduring impact.

Stephen's career stands as a testament to vision, persistence, and cultural leadership. He started out in 1987 as a trainee producer's assistant for TVNZ and joined *Tagata Pasifika* in 1991.

As a former producer of *Tagata Pasifika*, Stephen created and nurtured the country's only mainstream television programme devoted entirely to Pacific peoples. Under his leadership the show became a trusted platform for news, current affairs, arts, and culture, connecting Pacific communities in Aotearoa and across the region. He built a team of Pacific journalists, producers, and presenters, ensuring that the next generation of storytellers had the training, opportunities, and belief to succeed in an industry where Pacific representation was scarce.

In 2014, Stephen co-founded SunPix with *Tagata Pasifika* veterans Ngaire Fuata and John Utanga, a production company dedicated to telling diverse stories with Pacific content at its heart. SunPix produces the Pacific Music Awards broadcast, documentaries, digital content, and continues to grow *Tagata Pasifika* through innovative online platforms such as *TP+*.

Beyond production, Stephen has championed industry change by mentoring countless Pacific creatives, opening doors for journalists, producers, and directors who are now leaders. His commitment has not only influenced broadcasting but has also enriched the

broader New Zealand screen sector with authentic, diverse voices.

Stephen's legacy is not just in the programmes he has produced but in the pathways he has built. Without his vision and tenacity, Pacific peoples would not hold the prominent space they do today in New Zealand's media landscape.

Taualeo'o Stephen Stehlin has set the benchmark for what it means to create content that is by, for, and about Pacific communities—while resonating with the wider nation. Stephen's contribution has been nothing short of pioneering.

Spada Independent Producer of the Year was awarded to Dan Higgins.

This year's Spada Independent Producer of the Year, sponsored by Gallagher Insurance, demonstrated exceptional vision, leadership, and belief in the power of Aotearoa's stories.

Dan's work on the record-breaking New Zealand feature *Tinā* not only delivered one of the greatest successes in our cinematic history - earning over \$6.5 million at the box office and becoming the fifth highest-grossing local film of all time - but also reignited optimism for what's possible in New Zealand filmmaking.

Higgins led the production through every challenge - from financing to release - and ensured the film reached an unprecedented 130 screens nationwide, before going on to international distribution.

Higgins' generosity and unwavering commitment to story and culture was exemplified in *Tinā* – a film that blended grief, spirituality, and community. For some producers, these elements might have been seen as obstacles to commercial success, but Higgins recognised from the beginning that these were the very qualities that made the film powerful.

Higgins supported the cultural authenticity of the project and provided opportunities for Pacific talent to take on significant roles, encouraging new voices, and integrating cultural respect throughout every aspect of the production.

The founder of Wabi Sabi Media Group, Higgins has 20 years' experience in the screen industry specializing in film, TV, live events, advertising and new media. Higgins was Line Producer of *Born to Dance* feature film, and Producer of award-winning short films *The Brother* directed by Summer Agnew - Winner of Best Director at 2018 Show Me Shorts Festival; and *Wait* directed by Yamin Tun - Winner of Best Film, Best Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actor, Special Jury Prize at the 2016 Show Me Shorts Film Festival.

Spada Emerging Producer of the Year was awarded to Jazz Dos Santos.

This year's Emerging Producer of the Year, proudly sponsored by the New Zealand Film Commission, takes home a cash prize of \$4,000, a one-year Spada membership and a complimentary registration to the 2026 Spada Conference.

A producer and production all-rounder with an incredible knack for spotting fresh, diverse voices and building collaborations that push creative boundaries, Jazz is hugely respected

by her peers - with eight separate nominations for this award - all recognising her ability to balance financial realities with artistic ambition, and to always keep the kaupapa of the project at its heart.

Jazz's producing credits include two award-winning short films, both made with creative integrity and strong production values, showcasing her commitment to bold, culturally significant storytelling. *Lǎo Lao Lǎo Le* which received Best NZ Film, Best Director (Julie Zhu) and Best Actor (Kuaka and Mary Wu) at the 2023 Show Me Shorts Festival, and Best Short Film at the 2025 Melbourne Women in Film Festival; and the recently released *I Am Not Your Dusky Maiden* Winner of Best Performance Award for Nora Aati at the 2025 New Zealand International Film Festival.

Jazz also produced music videos for acclaimed artists JUJULIPPS, PONZ and Skilaa, with micro-budget music video *Night Shift* for JUJULIPPS (directed by Jaya Beach-Robertson) nominated for Best Content at the 2025 Aotearoa Music Awards. dos Santos co-produced the youth documentary series *Sight Unseen*, where she championed innovative production practices such as open audio description and the use of an access coordinator – a first for a New Zealand social-first series.

Beyond her producing work, Jazz is a tireless advocate for the community - volunteering her time and experience to uplift other emerging artists, both informally and through Black Creatives Aotearoa.

Thank you once again to all our 27th Spada Screen Industry Award Sponsors. The New Zealand Film Commission, The Data Book, and Gallagher Insurance.

For more information on the 2025 Spada Conference visit: www.spada.co.nz.

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