Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Election's Over. Can We Get Back to Indie Movies?

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, November 8th, 2012

Even as the presidential campaign was in its final month, while Obama and Romney were making their heated, closing arguments, one dedicated group was nearly oblivious to politics: filmmakers locked in their editing rooms, frantically trying to make the Sundance submission deadline.

This is the time of year when the indie filmmaking cycle turns round — new movies are being readied for next year's festivals, and awards season is starting for the current crop of movies. As you read this, panelists are vetting the final films so they can announce nominees for the Independent Spirit Awards on November 27; the awards will be presented at a ceremony one day before the Academy Awards.

The Independent Spirit Awards are put on by Film Independent, a non-profit service organization that also produces the Los Angeles Film Festival and provides educational and networking resources for its constituents.

I recently spoke with Sean McManus, Film Independent's co-president, about the indie film landscape and some of the essentials for indie filmmakers today.

Adam Leipzig: What distinguishes Film independent?

Sean McManus: People from all over the world move to Los Angeles to be part of the filmmaking community, and it's so difficult to break in. We're an open-access organization where anybody who's passionate about making films, or experiencing cinema, can become a member and active participant. We have just under 4,000 members.

AL: You do many education programs. What are people most hungry to learn about now?

SM: It's all about finding audiences. How do you get your films seen in nontraditional ways? How do you develop an audience and keep them? As an independent artist and filmmaker, how can you retain your audience from one project to the next? How should you use social media?

The answers: Facebook and Twitter. Build your following online. Use YouTube. When you're shooting your film, think about journal entries, photos from the set. Keep your audience engaged, so they are interested in the final product when it's done.

Don't think about the marketing and distribution at the end; think about it at the beginning.

AL: How were submissions for the LA Film Festival?

SM: There are so many films being made! We had over 5,000 submissions to the LA Film Festival this year. Those filmmakers are not just trying to get people to watch their films – they want to

sustain their careers in the industry. Getting people to see one film potentially allows you to get some kind of success behind you, so you can make the next one.

AL: That's true – maybe 5% of the films made actually get seen. Do you see a savior on the horizon?

SM: That's a question filmmakers have been facing for a long time. So much of it comes down to persistence, not taking no for an answer, and taking control of the marketing and distribution of your own film. When filmmakers have the control over their product, that's a shift. It gives them more power.

AL: At the same time, it gives them more work, because they have to do it all themselves. Every innovative, entrepreneurial filmmaker has to reinvent the wheel each time. Which, I suppose, gives an appreciation for what distributors do and why distributors charge distribution fees. It's really hard to do everything yourself without an infrastructure.

SM: You really have to want to do it. That's where support organizations like ours come into play, because we're not motivated by creating shareholder wealth. We're a non-profit arts organization, and our mission is to help independent filmmakers make their films and develop their audiences, to provide a community where their work can be appreciated and sustained.

AL: Have you ever thought about getting into distribution yourselves?

SM: The route we've taken is to give grants. We have the Jameson Find Your Audience Award, which is a $50,000 cash prize, for a project that is being distributed in nontraditional ways. We try to put resources directly in the hand of filmmakers.

Photo: Top, a scene from 'Arbitrage,' written and directed by Nicholas Jarecki, one of this year's most successful indie movies; below, Film Independent's Sean McManus at the LA Film Festival.

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