Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ted Hope: Why I Left NYC for the San Francisco Film Festival

Ted Hope · Thursday, September 27th, 2012

Ted Hope, one of the heroes of America's independent cinema movement, just signed on as Executive Director of the San Francisco Film Society. He has produced close to seventy feature films including The Ice Storm, American Splendor, 21 Grams, Adventureland, and In The Bedroom. As his regular posts on HopeForFilm (from which this article is re-posted with permission), and his just-launched iOS app Flicklist demonstrate, he is committed to building community around the movies and culture we love.

To effectively serve, preserve, embrace and enhance film and film culture, we must examine, participate, and evolve the broadest definition thereof. Film, as an art, culture, community, business, and science is consistently evolving – it may be a cliché, but it's a fact that film culture's only constant is change. Film's evolution needs to be embraced and experimented with – not feared.

Large well-financed interests are heavily committed to maintaining the status quo and as much as those corporate and business entities are the filmmakers' & film cultures' allies, those who love film first for the art and culture must act for the artists' interests over those of pure profit. It's a difficult balancing act that must be maintained, as alliances must be built so that business can enhance art. For the promotion of film culture, artists and their work — and their ability to sustain themselves — must remain the focus of all support and cultural organizations.

Film, and any program to support it, can never be only local, national, or international in scope. A film organization must embrace all three of these aspects as they influence and shape one another. Organizations need to serve locally, recruit, reach, and build nationally, and collaborate internationally. The health of film culture comes with the recognition of this interdependence.

The disruption of the film industry and culture, prompted by the digital revolution, requires a radical rethink of how our support organizations may best serve their constituencies. The cost of creation, execution, and marketing & distribution, within film culture & business has shrunk to such an extent that most barriers have been virtually removed, opening up opportunities for new explorations of form, content, engagement, and appreciation. Opportunity will never be the same as outcome though, and a pro-active force is required to move access towards execution.

Media literacy is thankfully on the rise and the dependence on a one-off feature film business model is on the decline – a double-headed transition that could usher in the end of the era of feature film form dominance and the birth of over-all content utility. Artists need encouragement & support to adapt their practices and work to extend into multi-form and cross-platform approaches, while simultaneously striving for real-world career sustainability.

As much as the technology, art, artists, and audiences have embraced some of these changes, the industry and market however have resisted them. This gulf offers a wealth of opportunity. However, a reception for change doesn't necessarily carry with it the ability to do so; artists and their supporters lag behind the development of technology and require new training and knowledge to utilize it. The world's economic crises and recessions – with their resultant industry & government based capital limitations — further limit new business models and art forms from developing, let alone taking hold — without some positive outside intervention. We must find ways to be more inclusive (and profitable!) for the private sector.

The divide between the haves and have-nots in the arts is reflected by the difference between Hollywood's focus on tent-poles and Indieland's reliance on micro-budgets, with the under-funded and artistically adventurous threatened with extinction unless brave new initiatives are undertaken. I exaggerate not — when I speak to my producing brethren, they are usually on the cliff's edge, ready to throw in the towel. The art of filmmaking should not be relegated to hobby status.

Film is no longer a viable career choice for new artists, or those who want to facilitate them; instead everyone must now seek out secondary support occupations to pursue their passions (or be blessed by birth or patrons). The strategically-wise among them have already embraced a shift from individualized creative expressions to more collaborative ventures. Long-range planning and infrastructure-building need as much, perhaps more, attention than the commitment to the individual visionary work. The shift from a product business model to that of a relationship with the people formerly known as the audience (to lift from Lance Weiler's phrasing) is a huge transition that won't be easy. I won't ask others to do what I myself am not willing to both do and exemplify.

Our entertainment economy, and the art it supports, was built upon the concepts of scarcity and control, but today's reality is one of super-abundance and access – the exact opposite. To survive and flourish, today's artist/entrepreneurs — and those who support them — must all embrace practices that extend beyond the core skills of development, production, and post-production of their art and work – and even reach beyond the attention and practice of marketing and distribution. To flourish in these complex times, our film community must commit to a comprehensive strategy that emphasizes the full definition of cinema. We must embrace a comprehensive program of discovery, engagement, participation, collaboration, appreciation, presentation, value-exchange, and community-transitioning. These aspects are equal necessities for all participants to master if we are to enjoy a sustainable, diverse, and ambitious film culture. We need to develop best practices for this, providing support and direction. We can do this, but someone has to lead, and will never be an individual or a single organization — but it's time is now.

Our art, culture, and support organizations must pivot to emphasize these needs, while also encouraging the experimentation that can lead to the best practices. Our emphasis on promoting success, while ignoring the "failures" that we could really learn from is simply wrong-headed. Despite my passion and commitment towards bringing new and ambitious work to the screen, I can not in good faith continue a project by project focus, as I feel that as personally satisfying as that has been, all of our ability to do so in the future will be severely limited without a widespread commitment to institute new changes and support. If all of us just continue to look out for our individual projects, we are fucked. We can't just keep making movies without giving equal attention to the overall infrastructure.

I trust that I am not alone in this new commitment and that I can count on the full and long term support of others in this mission. It is the reason that I wanted to come to San Francisco and lead the Film Society. I have always produced films in a manner that conserved costs but expanded ambition, and that is a view I will bring as I pivot my attention towards infrastructure,

programming, services, and education. We will build it better together. There has never been a better time to be a storyteller or an artist/entrepreneur — we can not squander this opportunity.
Good bye NYC. Hello Bay Area!
Photo: Ted Hope taking a goodbye ride on the IND line.

This entry was posted on Thursday, September 27th, 2012 at 12:42 am and is filed under Film, Discourse, Lifestyle
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