

## A Film Festival Primer

**A COMPREHENSIVE MANUAL** to ease the strain and anxiety of the film festival submission process **by Bruno Coppola & Joseph Pierson**

You've long since maxed out the plastic, found an angel and spent your own hard-earned cash. But none of that matters now -- your film is finished! The next step is to submit to film festivals. But to which ones should you apply? And what should you do once you get in? Luckily, we have been through the process enough times to know the answers to many of your questions... even a few you didn't know you should ask.

### How do I choose which festival is the best for me (and my film)?

**A**T \$100 A POP (if you add up the entry fee, duplication costs, and postage) you can't apply to every single festival so do a little research. Think about themes in your film that may resonate with particular festivals or audiences and decide which ones represent a good match for your film.

Have a rational and individual approach to each festival. There's no point in sending your New Jersey-shot feature film about a Vietnam vet to a festival that's looking for lesbian-themed short films by west coast women moviemakers. If a festival only takes shorts under 15 minutes, don't send them your 42-minute featurette. Peruse festival Websites; to see the films they screened last year. When you feel you are in the right company, you probably are. Having said that, choose festivals you'd also like to attend. You never know who will say yes, so by all means apply to the Maui Film Festival (who wouldn't want to be in Hawaii in January?). When all is said and done, there is certainly no reason not to apply to the big ones: Sundance, Cannes, Toronto, Edinburgh, Berlin, Venice and Karlovy Vary.

### How does the selection process work?

**W**HILE FESTIVALS ARE ALL EAGER to showcase the newest crop of indie films, it's important to understand that they are by nature selective and subjective organizations. The average film festival receives thousands of applications for a handful of programming slots.

Typically the selection procedure goes something like this: The submitted video tapes and DVDs are divided up between a bunch of volunteers who watch, say, 40 films each and select two to three that

they like. The films that make this first cut are thrown together, and the head programmers go through them and pick the ones they like best. So, there are roughly 1000 chances for your film to get rejected by one festival and accepted by another - and none of them necessarily has to do with whether your film is any good.

As idealistic as the mission statement on the website may be, programming a film festival is a political process, too. If you know someone with a connection to a festival to which you've applied, don't hesitate to share information about your film - and your interest in their festival.

Festival programmers attend many festivals outside their own. Where else can they watch 75 indie films on the big screen in three days? Once you've screened at a few festivals, don't be surprised if you begin to get emails and phone calls from programmers of other festivals inviting you to submit or, better yet, participate in their festival. Often, the fee will be waived when you are invited to submit to a festival -- another advantage of your film's popularity. Success definitely breeds success.

On the other hand, most North American festivals derive the bulk of their budget from the application fees. It is in their interest to have as many applications as possible. If a little-known festival writes to you out of the blue and invites you to apply, but doesn't waive the entry fee, this invitation should be viewed with some skepticism. Try to find out more about the festival before handing over your money. Some will have a genuine interest in your film, while others are just in it for the bucks.

### What can I do to improve my film's chances of being accepted by a festival?

**A**S YOU BEGIN SUBMITTING your film to festivals, it is important to understand some of the mysteries of the selection process. First, let's examine the nature of the relationship between festivals and moviemakers.

Perhaps because of the numbing sameness and formulaic predictability of most films at the multiplex, there is an ever-growing thirst for alternative films: Experimental videos, shorts of all types, documentaries and narrative features. With no mainstream venues for most of these films and a distributor's need to vet the few that do have a glimmer of commercial potential, film festivals have sprung up in every corner of the globe. These festivals range from a half dozen folding chairs parked in front of a bed sheet to the buzz of Sundance and the frenzy of Cannes. But what all the festivals have in common is that they are organized and programmed by people who are passionate about film. As you soon learn, film festivals are a indie moviemaker's best friend.

## Does my film have to be 100 percent complete to submit it to a festival?

**T**HE ACADEMY'S CRITERIA for Oscar-worthy films are "originality, entertainment value, and technical excellence." You could fill a library with how-to books on filmmaking, so we'll leave all that to the experts. Our only note is on the technical side: finish your film to the best possible standard allowed by your budget. A lot of festivals claim to consider works-in-progress, but the truth is that you will be competing with hundreds of completed, polished films that will, by definition, look and sound loads better than yours. Better to miss a few deadlines and go in with a finished product.

## What about music clearances?

**T**HE FESTIVAL WILL ASK YOU to provide a formal written acceptance asserting that you have the right to represent the film for exhibition and that you further have secured the rights to use any copyrighted material that is embodied in the film (the screenplay, the score and incidental and source music). While it entails a not-entirely-truthful response on the acceptance form, we have, ahem, friends who have successfully screened films at festivals without securing the rights to some of the music. But, if your film garners interest from distributors this is an issue you will have to address eventually. Read this part carefully: The notion that a distributor will pay for your clever use of the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" is a fantasy of the highest order. Find some good, cheap local music and secure all the rights before the festivals and eliminate a huge downer from the upside of selling your film.

## I just got word that my film has been accepted into a festival. Now what?

**T**HAT FIRST PHONE CALL is exhilarating but can also stimulate much second-guessing such as should you say no and wait for that other, more prestigious festival to call? First, buy yourself a couple of hours by telling the nice programmer who just called that you are thrilled to be invited to their festival but

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must speak to your partner/producer before committing. Then, take a deep breath and think as rationally as you can about your film's prospects. If you are unsure of what to do or how to handle this situation, then you have provided your own answer: reply with a hearty "yes" to this first acceptance.

The festival world is a small one and the programmers from most major festivals all know each other. You definitely don't want to play games if you don't know the rules. Saying no and holding out for a bigger festival with no immediate prospects of being accepted by one is a huge gamble. Odds are, you will ultimately be rejected by your first choice festival and will consequently be left facing months of waiting for the next acceptance. Waiting costs you money.

Most independent films are seen by few, if any, people. Therefore, to be accepted by any festival is a big deal; their commitment to screen a film often represents a moviemaker's first and sometimes only opportunity to play to a live audience of strangers. A film festival is also the first chance that most films have to generate buzz, accumulate a portfolio of reviews and awards and, ideally, attract the interest of a distributor. If you're lucky enough to have your film accepted by a festival, be sure you make the most of the experience.

We've suggested a few ways that you can engage with the festivals to enhance your experience before you've even booked your first flight. But, don't think you're even close to done with your pre-festival preparations. In the fall issue of "Festival Beat", we will share some more great ideas on how you can promote your film and make it stand out in a crowded festival. Getting your film accepted to any festival is only the begging – the best is yet to come. **MIM**

The work of movie makers Bruno Coppola (Stuff That Bear!) and Joseph Pierson (EvenHand) has collectively played at more-than 100 festivals in 15 countries and won more than 20 awards.

# You're In: The First Steps to Film Fest Success

→ **ONCE YOU ACCEPT AN OFFER** from a festival to screen your film, a series of events occurs: A flurry of e-mails will begin to fill your in-box from guest services, print traffic, programmers and the press liaison. **Every one of these people can and will help you in a myriad of ways -- booking your hotel room, telling you where to send your print, assigning you screening times and venues and getting you press coverage and interviews. Always remember that you are likely one of more than 100 moviemakers with whom they are having variations on the same conversations. Respond promptly to their messages and be courteous, informative and brief.**

→ **IF YOU DON'T HAVE THEM ALREADY**, set up accounts with FedEx, UPS and DHL. If you are trav-

eling, you may find that you need to get stuff from one festival to another on short notice. Sometimes the festivals will do this for you; sometimes they won't. They are dealing with hundreds of films; you are dealing with one. Be prepared to be your own print manager. Ditto laptop, email, cellphone, etc – you need to be a one-person mobile office when you are on a festival tour.

→ **AS SOON AS THE FESTIVAL POSTS** the screening schedule on their website, check to see that your film is described accurately, and that the venues and times are correct. A mistake on a website is easy to fix; a mistake in the printed catalogue is permanent, and could cost you an audience. Mistakes do happen; we have both opened a catalog and seen our film listed at the

wrong time or place. Or just imagine having your email address misspelled -- a buyer could be fruitlessly attempting to contact you!

→ **ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TO RAISE** awareness for your film is a good idea and the earlier you start thinking, the more options you will have. You may want to organize a party at the festival. If you have a known actor or rock star that the festival is excited about, you are halfway there. With enough lead-time, you might even find a sponsor to pay all or part of the cost of the party, or at least donate booze or food. It's important to work with the festival on organizing such an event. If it winds up on the official festival program, you will have much better attendance and more attention for your film.

- Bruno Coppola & Joseph Pierson