

The Wide World Of Shorts

Lessons from the Film

Festival Circuit

Twenty-five years ago, Francis Coppola was among the first to predict that when digital technology became easily accessible to anyone who wanted to make a movie, filmmaking would truly become like all the other arts—anyone could do it, not just show business insiders with deep pockets, connections and technical expertise.

Although making movies is still more cost prohibitive than many other art forms, digital technology has leveled the playing field a bit, brought down the costs of production and made the process more user-friendly. Nowadays everyone can make a film—and they do. Both features (80+ minutes) and shorts (1-40 minutes) are produced by the thousands—and their numbers are increasing. The problem is, most of them are never seen by anyone.

Features have many established markets, from theatrical release to television to video rentals. Shorts—which include fiction, documentary, animation and experimental—have a far murkier marketplace. Despite this, there are more of them being made than ever.

Many aspiring filmmakers make shorts as a way to practice their craft and/or create a “calling card” to show off their talent, hoping to use their film as a stepping stone to a career in features. Even some experienced filmmakers prefer the short format as an art form unto itself, like a writer who chooses to pen short stories rather than novels. Shorts require less financial risk, allow more experimentation, and are freer from market pressures than features. However, unlike a hit feature that can make big bucks, even the most successful short has very little chance of turning a profit.

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While it's rare that a young director will actually be "discovered" by making a great short, it can happen. Bryan Singer of *X-Men* fame, for example, started his career with an award-winning short in 1988. He and others like him who broke into the film business in this storied manner are forever held up as indie poster boys, feeding fantasies and dangling the fame-and-fortune carrot for fledgling filmmakers who, like irrepressible golfers, never stop hoping for a hole-in-one.

You can watch shorts on the small screen, packaged on a handful of public or cable television programs, or, you can find them on the very small screen, via online short-film websites. As for the silver screen, there was a time when shorts were shown in movie theaters prior to feature presentations, but those days are long gone (now they run commercials). Today, unless you have an adventurous programmer running short films at your local art-house theater, library or coffee house, one of the only places to see them is at film festivals.

FILM FESTIVALS

Film festivals come in all shapes and sizes; most of them program both features and shorts. Festivals range from long-standing ones like the Chicago International (33rd annual) to newbie fests like Boston International Film Festival (3rd annual). Worldwide, film festivals have multiplied rapidly in the past decade. According to the *New York Times*, there are 2,500 film fests now in existence and new ones popping up every year.

All film festivals, large and small, report a sharp increase in the number of shorts entered. Sundance receives more short film entries than any other festival in the world, and its numbers are staggering: 1,500 in 1998; 1,900 in 2000; 2,100 in 2002; 3,300 in 2003; 3,900 in 2004. Sundance broke a new record in 2005 with 4,311 short film submissions; 72 (less than 2%) were ultimately selected.

This spike in production is partly attributable to digital technology. Shooting on film and projecting from a film print is no longer required by film festivals. Less expensive digital formats are readily available to filmmakers on a low budget and all festivals now accept video submissions.

Film festivals have basically three tiers. The A-list "industry festivals" (e.g. Sundance and Cannes) receive

international press coverage and attract hordes of celebrities, industry bigwigs and filmmakers. But these high-profile fests are relatively few in number. Far more common are the “regional festivals” that receive local press coverage, and might lure a token celebrity to add a touch of pizzazz. Third are “niche festivals” which cater to single genres like Sci-Fi or Horror, and usually get little or no press coverage or industry attendance, but have very enthusiastic audiences.

Film fests offer a variety of perks, beginning with getting your film selected and screened. The competition is so fierce, getting into any festival is a victory. Watching your film in a theater full of people is always a cherished moment (as long as the film is projected properly and the audience responds appropriately).

In addition to film screenings, many festivals also offer helpful seminars and panel discussions, free food and drinks, parties, networking and more. The opportunity to get some feedback from audiences and peers, to “talk shop,” and to make connections can be valuable.

Ultimately, these perks cost you. Entry fees range anywhere from \$15 to \$65 per festival, whether you are accepted or not. If your film is accepted, you have to decide whether you can afford to attend the festival, paying for travel expenses, accommodations, meals, etc.

HITTING THE ROAD

I set out on the film festival circuit with a short that I directed called *Flickering Blue*. It’s the story of a lonely old man who one day decides to turn off his TV, leave his dingy apartment and take a walk through the city in an attempt to reconnect with people. The film was made in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with SAG actors working for deferred wages, a professional director of photography, and an all-student crew trained in the film program at Grand Valley State University.

At 22 minutes, *Flickering Blue* is a bit long for festivals. While programmers will consider shorts of all lengths, it seems for each minute longer than 15, your chances of being accepted go down.

In 2004, our short was entered into 30 film festivals nationwide and accepted at six. The film was not accepted at any top industry festivals but, in the end, we won three awards, received a total of \$1,550 in prize

money, found (and lost) a Canadian distributor, and attracted a private investor who wanted to help us make a feature-length version of the film.

What follows is a diary of my experiences and lessons learned on the festival circuit. I hope it will serve as a primer for students or any filmmakers who are trying to get their short films seen.

MARCH

East Lansing Film Festival

Location: Michigan

Years in existence: 7

Niche categories: Lake Michigan area filmmakers; students

Sample celebrity: Bruce Campbell (actor)

My first stop was the East Lansing Film Festival (ELFF), which takes place at Michigan State University in a single building on campus that houses a series of big lecture halls with movie screens in the front and projection booths in the back. Having attended ELFF the past five years, I've concluded that one of its best perks is that it's well-attended—nearly every screening is packed. There's nothing better than playing to a full house, even if the audience isn't loaded with celebrities and industry insiders.

The other nice part of this “world premiere” for *Flickering Blue* was the Q&A with audience members after the screening. It's not always easy to sit in the theater, hear the audience laugh or sigh during a screening and then try to glean from that whether your film made a connection. During a Q&A you get a much clearer picture of whether the audience was engaged, what stuck in their minds, what moved them. There are the usual questions about what the film cost, what camera was used, etc., but also more meaningful are comments like “The old man so reminded me of my father!” or “You realize that even at the end his life, he will never be the same.” This kind of direct feedback helps you understand if your film made any impact and where it might have succeeded or failed.

My fest quest started off with a bang. At the closing night awards ceremony, *Flickering Blue* won first place in the “Lake Michigan Competition,” a category open

only to films made in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana or Michigan, states that border the Big Lake. The first place award was \$300 plus a certificate. Of course, winning at ELFF is not like winning an industry festival; a win here won't create much of a "buzz" on the circuit. Yet a win is a win, and a cash award is always better than a statuette (unless it's named Oscar).

Lesson of the month: Make an effort to find the right festivals for the particular type of short you've made.

Not all festivals are alike in terms of the type of films they're looking for. Unfortunately, what they want isn't usually posted on their website. Ask around, chat with other filmmakers and organizers, or read the message boards on filmmaker websites (e.g. withoutabox.com) and you'll discover that one festival favors experimental, another prefers serious, socially-conscious work, and yet another likes the edgy and offbeat.

If you're eligible, always take advantage of niche categories. These categories won't eliminate your competition, but they will limit it. If you want your film to see the light of day, you'll need all the help you can get.

APRIL

Black Point Film Festival

Location: Lake Geneva, Wisconsin

Years in existence: 3

Sample celebrity: Michael Wilmington (Chicago Tribune film critic)

Flickering Blue was accepted by the very small but friendly Black Point Film Festival (BPFF). This new fest used as its venue the town's Horticulture Hall, a small, makeshift theater with folding chairs, a tiny movie screen and everything projected from a DVD player. These surroundings reminded me of those friendly "microcinema" nights in libraries, coffee houses or bars around the country where short films are shown for the enjoyment of the public and local filmmakers, but with no pretense of generating industry buzz or fostering career advancement.

At BPFF, our short was the opening film of a four-day schedule of shorts and features. Unfortunately, our screening was rather sparsely attended with 20-30

people in the audience. This was a little depressing after playing to a 200-plus packed house in East Lansing. However, the Q&A after the screening was gratifying—the small audience was receptive to our film and moved by it.

As for awards, no two juries are alike. For example, at BPFF, I personally thought some films that won awards were inferior to other films that were better in nearly every respect: production values, script, acting, photography, editing. The BPFF jury seemed to look beyond what was on the screen and take into account what went into making it, honoring the no-budget, scrappy DIY (do-it-yourself) productions for their seat-of-the-pants indie spirit. They had spirit all right, but their films were not very good. Were I a juror, I would give the award to the best film, period. Someone with a bigger budget shouldn't be penalized and someone with no budget rewarded; after all, the filmmaker with the budget had to work hard to get that financing.

Lesson of the month: Only a handful of people ultimately determine whether your film (a) gets into a film festival and (b) wins any awards.

As movie reviews always show us, any two film critics can split on whether a film deserves a thumbs up or thumbs down; it's all a matter of taste. One festival screener told me that while being accepted at a festival should be taken as an acknowledgment of your talent, being turned down should not be interpreted as a personal rejection. She sees many good shorts that she's unable to pro-

gram due to time constraints, or the particular theme that the festival is trying to build its program around. Her two requests from filmmakers: better scripts and tighter editing.

MAY

Worldwide Short Film Festival

Location: Toronto, Ontario

Years in existence: 11

Niche category: Canadian filmmakers

Sample celebrity: Albert Maysles (director)

Since the screenwriter of *Flickering Blue* was a Canadian, Angelo Eidse, we entered the Worldwide Short Film Festival (WSFF) in Toronto, a top-notch “shorts only” fest. Shorts-only fests greatly increase your chances of being accepted. At film festivals where features are the main attraction, the number of shorts accepted are fewer in number and sometimes treated like second-class citizens.

Despite Angelo’s involvement we weren’t allowed to enter WSFF’s Canadian category (which received 600 entries) because I’m an American director. We instead entered the international category (which received 1,500 entries); *Flickering Blue* didn’t get in. Nonetheless, I trekked to Toronto to attend a series of panels at a well-organized “Short Film Symposium,” where one of the hot topics of discussion was short film distribution.

I learned that buyers and distributors of shorts are focused primarily on the small screen—via broadcast, cable, satellite, DVD, home video, broadband internet, even airplanes and mobile phones. A short film might make a couple thousand dollars in distribution; in very rare cases, as much as \$20K. You hope to recoup some production costs but never expect a profit.

Like film festivals, buyers generally prefer shorts under 15 minutes; under 10 is even better. This length is apparently easier to program and sell. They also like comedy—two quotes heard at the Toronto panels: “We want it short, fast and funny!” and “Funny is money!”

Getting into a film festival doesn’t necessarily help your chances of finding a distributor. Buyers are less

adventurous than film fests. Besides comedy, buyers prefer genre/niche films like sci-fi, horror, action-adventure, gay-lesbian, etc. Depressing dramas scare them: afraid their audience will change the channel. Docs worry them: afraid of liability given all the real people on screen. Experimental: not much interest.

After one seminar, I managed to slip a copy of *Flickering Blue* to a Canadian distributor, and another one to a rep from KQED-TV in San Francisco, one of a handful of PBS stations which buys short films.

A few weeks later I learned that KQED wasn't interested; I was told that the pacing of the film might work on the big screen, but was too slow for television.

However, the Canadian distributor contacted me with the thrilling news that they were interested in representing *Flickering Blue* for sale to Canadian television. (She said nothing about slow pacing . . . perhaps Canadians are more patient than Americans.) Unfortunately, in the end, the deal could not be completed. Read on.

Lesson of the month: You can't sell your short unless you own all the rights.

You must provide releases, contracts and agreements for all elements, including: actors, music, logos, trademarks shown in frame, and all clips from other sources.

Our problem: in *Flickering Blue*, the old man is watching TV, restlessly flipping channels. You don't see the TV but you hear it—Jay Leno, Roseanne, CNN, commercials, etc. Our Canadian distributor informed me that I would need clearance for all of those audio clips (at what cost I can't imagine) before they would handle it.

In addition, our short was made with a SAG Experimental Agreement which provides a filmmaker with professional actors for deferred salaries. This is great for film festivals; the actors are happy to participate in good work, and festival juries and audiences appreciate quality acting—so do directors! But if you sell your short, all those deferred SAG wages kick in. In light of that, most shorts made with SAG contracts can't afford to be sold—even in the best-case scenario they can't make enough profit to cover all of those SAG wages.

JUNE

Waterfront Film Festival

Location: Saugatuck, Michigan

Years in existence: 6

Niche category: students

Sample celebrity: James Karen (actor)

Forty miles south of Grand Rapids on the shore of Lake Michigan, the Waterfront Film Festival (WFF) in Saugatuck not only selected *Flickering Blue* but bestowed a nice honor on the leading man. Because I'm a Michigan filmmaker, WFF organizers kindly asked if our 80-year-old star, James Karen (easily recognizable character actor in films ranging from *Poltergeist* to *Wall Street*), would be one of the festival's honored guests, which would include kicking off the opening night gala, and participating in a panel discussion about acting. Mr. Karen—aka "Jimmy"—happily agreed.

This relatively new festival has grown quickly from one year to the next, partly because the organizers have connections with Sundance, which shares information about which films are generating buzz. In fact, smallish festivals like WFF often program films that they acquire and pay for, like Sundance award-winners or others poised for theatrical release. I asked a programmer why they don't program only features that were actually submitted, that paid entry fees, that don't cost anything to show. "Because the features that were submitted were so bad," he replied.

During the festival weekend, Jimmy and I walked around the picturesque harbor village and enjoyed many films and abundant complimentary food and beverages. We couldn't walk more than a block or two without being stopped by someone who recognized Jimmy and wanted to chat.

Unfortunately, our film was scheduled at 9:00 a.m. on a Friday morning. There were about 20 people at our screening, most of whom looked hung-over from the gala opening party the night before. Because of the sparse attendance, Jimmy later asked the festival organizers for a second showing of *Flickering Blue*, but their schedule was set in stone. So all weekend long as we roamed the quaint streets of Saugatuck, Jimmy's

fans kept asking us, “When is your film showing? I really want to see it!” We could only respond, “Already played.”

Ironically, though James Karen himself was the toast of the festival, he had come to promote a short film that very few people saw.

Lesson of the month: Do whatever it takes to fill seats.

True, the time slot when your film is shown impacts the size of your audience and you don’t have any control over that (so just hope you get lucky when programmers set the schedule). But don’t rely solely on the festival’s press coverage and advertising, if any. Playing to an empty theater is not worth your time and money.

Filmmakers can create a buzz by actively promoting their film with postcards, posters, and news clippings available to festival attendees. (Some will even try stunts like girls in bikinis with the film title printed on their bottoms or guys in gorilla suits handing out flyers.) Some filmmakers go as far as to hire professional publicists to plant stories in the local newspapers and gain exposure for a film that would otherwise be lost in the masses. But, of course, that’s another expense you probably can’t afford.

JULY

Galway Film Fleadh

Location: Ireland

Years in existence: 16

Niche category: Irish filmmakers

Sample celebrities: Maureen O’Hara (actress), Stanley Tucci (actor/director)

I traveled overseas to Ireland for the Galway Film Fleadh (pronounced FLAH, means “festival”). The short category at GFF only accepts films made in Ireland, so *Flickering Blue* wasn’t entered there, but I was curious to see what the Irish were up to in the world of short cinema.

As I sat through dozens of Irish shorts I questioned the wisdom of spending my first day in Ireland in a dark theater in Galway rather than exploring the splendid rolling green countryside, but it turned out

to be a very impressive collection. Three days later, I felt like I had taken a crash course in Irish culture, being thoroughly immersed through film in its language, history, humor, melancholy, brogue, landscape and people. (Most films were in English, but quite a few were in Gaelic with English subtitles.)

The shorts here were like a breath of fresh Irish air. I found them to be more believable and original than most of what I see in the States, much of which is derivative of other movies or television. The Irish films’ content seemed to be drawn from personal stories of the land and its people rather than media based on other media. Perhaps the Irish see fewer movies or watch less television—at least, less American television.

The GFF was a revelation in that it made clearer one big problem with this glut of new filmmakers on the overcrowded festival scene today: they substitute technique for meaning with films full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. They crave to be part of the sexy film world; they’re movie buffs and talented craftsmen who’ve learned the language of the medium, but they have nothing much to say.

In a recent interview with author Chris Gore, Sundance director Geoff Gilmore commented on this trend in indie filmmaking: “For many years, we have attacked the industry as making formulaic work and pushed the independent film as the realm in which creative vision flourished. Yet, we have now moved into an era in which the independent world has become a derivative mess: the capital ‘Q’ quirky comedy that reflects only a series of quirky comedies that have

come before; the generic ‘Tarantino-wanna-be’ work; the coming-of-age angst story that really isn’t fresh or doesn’t have the depth to make it profound, but is simply another version of the same tale.”

Lesson of the month: If you are an American filmmaker, make an effort to attend a European film festival. It will do you a world of good.

General side note: shorts-only programs can cause sensory overload. Watching two hours of shorts is not like watching a two-hour feature. After a feature film, the lights come up in the theater and you can digest what you just saw. Shorts just keep running one after another and by the end you can barely remember any of them.

AUGUST

Crested Butte Reel Fest

Location: Colorado

Years in existence: 7

Niche categories: Colorado filmmakers; students

Sample celebrity: Hal Needham (director)

Returning from Ireland I learned that *Flickering Blue* had won second place at the Crested Butte Reel Fest. CBRF, another shorts-only fest, doesn’t get hordes of entries, so we won from a small field, but we weren’t complaining. Angelo (in Vancouver) and I (in Grand Rapids) decided to rendezvous in Crested Butte (pop. 1500, altitude 8800 ft.), a stunning Rocky Mountain resort near Aspen and Vail.

The CBRF venue was a small arts center with a cozy theater used for films and live performance. CBRF programmed all films twice, so audiences had more than one chance to catch them. (I’m a big fan of this practice since it allows word-of-mouth to build between screenings.)

Since *Flickering Blue* was an award-winner, it was actually screened three times. Our individual screenings were well attended if not packed, and cumulatively, we played to over 100 people. The audiences were very enthusiastic and asked thoughtful, probing questions at extended Q&As after the screenings.

Each day, as Angelo and I walked around the small, lovely mountain village, we were frequently greeted on

the street by “Hey, guys, loved your film!” It was almost funny how many times this occurred. Angelo and I were drunk on adulation and thin air; we had found our audience.

Two surprises made this festival the high point of our fest quest. The first came at the jam-packed awards ceremony hosted by Hal Needham (director of *Smokey & the Bandit*), a resident of nearby Gunnison. After presenting us with our Second Place Jury Award (\$250 plus certificate), he announced the First Place Audience Award: *Flickering Blue*. To the roar of the crowd—after all, this was their award—Angelo and I took the stage and learned that the official festival rules say the \$500 Audience Award is doubled if the filmmaker is present. All totaled, we left Crested Butte with \$1,250 which, in one fell swoop, defrayed all the costs of my 30 festival entry fees.

The second surprise came when we met someone interested in investing seed money to develop a feature-length version of *Flickering Blue*. Turns out showing your film to wealthy people living in trophy homes has its benefits.

Lesson of the month: Do not ignore the small film festivals on your quest.

Sure, every filmmaker hopes to get into Sundance, but small fests can make you a big fish in a small pond, and that can be a good thing.

SEPTEMBER

Last stop: Southern California.

The Academy Awards’ Live Action Short Film Oscar is the biggest award a short filmmaker could receive. The Academy is perhaps the only jury in the world that favors longer shorts, 30-40 minutes long, whereas festivals prefer shorter shorts. In order for a short to be nominated for an Oscar you must have won an award at one of about 60 film festivals officially “recognized” by the Academy (they publish a list on their website). The Palm Springs International Festival of Short Films (PSIFSF) and the Los Angeles International Short Film Festival (LA Shorts) are two of this select group. What follows is a tale of two shorts-only fests: one very good, one very bad.

Palm Springs International Festival of Short Films

Location: California

Years in existence: 10

Niche categories: women, gay-lesbian, student

Sample celebrities: Andrew McCarthy, Vincent Spano (actors turned directors)

Summer in the desert is not exactly resort season with daily temperatures exceeding 100 degrees, but it's not a bad time to schedule a film festival where you spend most of your time in cool confines of air-conditioned movie theaters.

Flickering Blue did not make the cut at PSIFSF, but since it did get accepted at LA Shorts, I decided to visit the Palm Springs fest on my way to Hollywood. The two festivals were scheduled during the first and second week of September, respectively. For filmmakers who entered but didn't get in, the PSIFSF made the classy move of offering them an all-access pass at a discount if they still wanted to attend.

The festival took over the town's Camelot Theaters, which had three big screens running shorts all day, every day. Around 300 films were shown during the week. The festival was well-organized and filmmakers were treated to a host of great films and good panel discussions by day and parties by night, where food and drinks were top quality, abundant and free. Other networking hangouts included the filmmakers' hospitality suite, which had free coffee and muffins, or the cash bar at the top of the theater complex.

The vibe was great. PSIFSF had plenty of big sponsors, including Kodak which offered a hands-on Super-16mm camera workshop. Representatives from film festivals nationwide were around to share tips with filmmakers.

PSIFSF also includes a marketplace for all the shorts that are entered (not just the ones that are shown). Like a film library, in a handful of video booths you can read through a master book of titles, access a copy of any film entered, and take a look. The place was crawling with distributors and buyers who obviously appreci-

ated the service PSIFSF was providing to them and the filmmakers.

Lesson from PSIFSF: Short-shorts sell better than long-shorts.

I chatted with a big distributor whom I had met in Toronto in May. He was in the marketplace checking out films. I asked him which film programs he'd seen so far. He told me he hadn't attended any screenings, that the market was a much better use of his time. If he didn't like a film in the first few minutes, he could eject it and move on to another, and not waste his time watching the whole thing. I mentioned that *Flickering Blue* was in the market if he wanted to take a look at it. He told me, honestly, he was only looking for films 5-10 minutes in length.

Los Angeles International Short Film Festival

Location: California

Years in existence: 8

Niche category: women directors

Sample celebrity: Bryan Singer (director)

Initially, I was excited that *Flickering Blue* was accepted at the Academy-accredited LA Shorts, which was held at the renowned Arc Light Theaters on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood next to the legendary "Cineramadome." Yet at Palm Springs, the mere mention of LA Shorts to anyone triggered rolling eyes and hushed grumbling. Soon I would find out why.

LA Shorts shows 500 films, more than any other short film festival. Having sat through many of them, I can say with confidence, they're not all good. Most festivals that receive 1,200 short entries will program fewer than 100 of them; LA Shorts programs 500. This makes many more filmmakers happy, to be sure, but with 500 shorts, yours can get lost in a sea of mediocrity.

Every film fest I've ever attended offers filmmakers who are accepted an all-access pass which allows entry to any of the films showing at the festival. It also helps attendance and creates opportunities for filmmakers to network. But LA Shorts didn't offer an all-access pass to filmmakers—you got in free to your own film (gee, thanks) but you paid to see any others. You paid for parking, which was free to the general public. There

was no hospitality suite. If you wanted to attend the awards ceremony on the last day, you were charged a \$25 admission fee.

LA Shorts had only one perk: your film is being shown at the Arc Light, a far cry from the college auditoriums and Horticulture Halls of the Midwest. The Arc Light has some of the best picture and sound projection in the world. But the hapless LA Shorts organizers committed a fatal gaffe: they ordered the wrong video projector for the theaters. The projected images were dark and murky with the top and bottom of the frame cut off. The festival staff called around town in a panic and finally corrected the problem on the last day. In the meantime, hour after hour, day after day, aghast filmmakers sank in their seats and covered their eyes.

Besides the projection errors, LA Shorts organizers were hostile and treated filmmakers like pesky annoyances. We needn't be treated like royalty, but some respect and gratitude should be given to the people who provide, free of charge, all of their programming. LA Shorts also had zero press coverage, and when festivals don't advertise or generate any interest, the seats will be empty if the filmmaker doesn't find a way fill them. Many, if not all, of the screenings were grossly under-attended, the small audiences consisting largely of cast and crew members from the films being screened. (Note: 30 people in a 100-seat auditorium isn't terrible, but 30 people in a 300-seat movie theater feels like a graveyard.)

LA Shorts is a good example of the kind of festival (and there are quite a few out there) that preys on

filmmakers and gives film festivals a bad name, which is unfair to others, like Palm Springs, that genuinely support filmmakers. (How and why LA Shorts received Academy accreditation is anybody's guess.)

Of course, if you visit the LA Shorts website you'll find glowing testimonials from filmmakers touting the festival. Maybe some of them actually enjoyed it or were just happy to have their film shown in Hollywood, but the filmmakers I met there were disgruntled, and the comments I have read on message boards since then support my observations and experience.

Lesson from LA Shorts: All that glitters isn't gold. Holding an event in Hollywood doesn't automatically make it good.

The movie industry appeared to have no interest whatsoever in this short fest despite its Academy accreditation and being held in the heart of Hollywood. I suppose in an industry that feasts on feature films, shorts are a side dish of something it didn't order.

PLANNING A FESTIVAL STRATEGY

When you have a short ready to hit the circuit, which festival do you enter first? Do you start big and work your way to smaller fests or vice versa? Does it matter which festival presents your "world premiere"?

That question was posed to Varkey James, Festival Coordinator for the Los Angeles Film Festival (not to be confused with LA Shorts) on an internet message board. Here is his insightful response:

To varying degrees, film festivals serve two audiences: the film industry—including acquisitions/development professionals, agents/managers, independent filmmakers, the trade and entertainment press—and the general public. To the extent that a festival is focused on the industry, premiere status becomes more important, and if a film has played at other festivals and gotten a lot of attention, that film will be of less interest to the industry, and in turn of less interest to industry festivals.

However, most festivals primarily serve the general public in their respective locales. For those festivals, the fact that a film played at a major festival can be a plus. Just as posters and DVD cases often tout 'Official Selection of the _____ Film Festival,'

regional festivals can use that fact to attract an audience to their festival screenings.

When festivals are looking for the best quality films to satisfy their audiences, they sometimes find them by attending other festivals and/or seeking out films that have made the cut at the larger festivals. As a result, some films have a robust life on the festival circuit that starts with getting accepted to a major festival. Even when there is no conscious effort to program films from other festivals, the cream of the crop usually rises to the top, and programmers will often independently select the same films for their festivals.

The challenge is, of course, making the cut at the big festivals. If you don't get in (like 90 percent of filmmakers), you'll need to research and target small-to-medium festivals where you'll have a better chance.

THE COLD, HARD NUMBERS

Number of SHORTS submitted/accepted at festivals (a sampling of the odds):

LA Shorts	1,200/500 (42%)
Ann Arbor	505/110 (22%)
CineVegas	190/40 (20%)
Cinematexas	800/130 (16%)
Palm Springs Shorts	2,000/300 (15%)
NY Underground	1,400/140 (10%)
Resfest NY	1,300/100 (8%)
Worldwide Shorts Toronto	
inside Canada	600/45 (7%)
outside Canada	1,500/75 (5%)
Clermont-Ferrand France	3,590/185 (5%)
Aspen Shortsfest	1,400/60 (4%)
Los Angeles Film Festival	1,400/50 (4%)
Sundance	4,311/72 (1.7%)

Statistics from Filmmaker Magazine, Winter 2004

Filmmakers today are faced with the age-old question that has afflicted other artists like painters, musicians and writers for years. Is completion of your work the ultimate goal? Or is putting your work in front of an audience an essential part of the process?

If one of your goals is to get exposure for your short, remember the power of mass communication. One packed film festival screening might seat 300, whereas one television showing has the potential to reach 3,000 or 30,000 or 300,000. There are various national/international television outlets for short films, like cable's Sundance Channel and Independent Film Channel or public television's The Short List. In time, hopefully more markets will develop like Canada's "Moviola—The Short Film Channel." Launched in September 2001, their cable channel programs shorts 24/7.

On the bright side, I'll leave you with something my *Flickering Blue* actor and friend James Karen told me while reflecting on more than fifty years in show business: "In the end, what fuels you, what stays with you, is not the awards or the money or the fame. It's the experience of the work."