

SF IndieFest a showcase for digital filmmakers

G. Allen Johnson

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The 14th San Francisco Independent Film Festival features time machines, postapocalyptic visions and characters searching for a bright future.

IndieFest has always been forward-looking, but who could have foreseen the festival's function for struggling filmmakers in this digital age? When the festival began in 1999, most of the films actually were made on film (it's nearly all digital now), streaming video was not yet a practical reality and the Internet was mostly dial-up and not yet the center of filmmakers' marketing campaigns.

So last-millennium.

Today's indie directors are reinventing distribution models, becoming their own marketing executives and navigating an increasingly cluttered and volatile indie film market. Most of them have to juggle their passion projects around their day jobs. For them, festivals such as IndieFest are crucial to the success of their films.

The Chronicle talked to the directors of four films - two features and two documentaries - about their strategies for success.

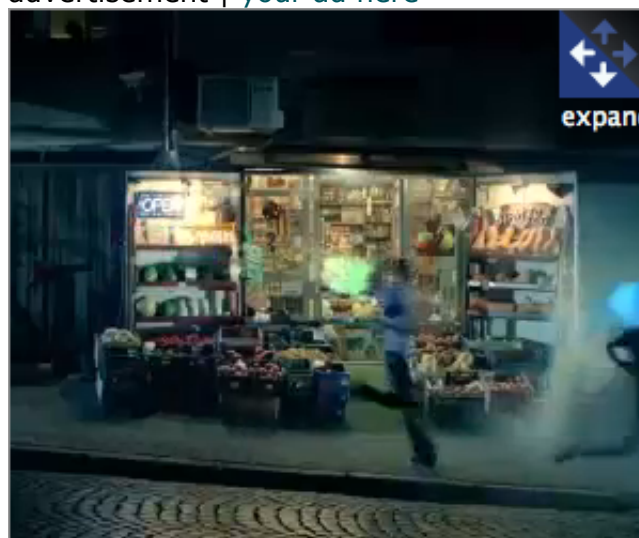
Maria Breaux,

"Mother Country"

Breaux, a San Francisco tech writer and Stanford graduate, shot her film - a drama about a young gang member on a road trip of self-discovery after he accidentally shoots an innocent girl - in 21 days across four states. The film debuted in July at the American Black Film Festival in Miami Beach.

"We've been making heavy use of social media - Twitter, Facebook, (e-mail) blasts," said Breaux, who drew on his troubled lower-middle-class childhood in Los Angeles for inspiration in writing and directing the film. "Festivals are for meeting people and networking. There's no better opportunity for meeting other filmmakers, distributors or anyone who happens to be passionate about film."

Breaux's lead actor, Slamdance award winner Thomas Galasso, led Breaux to a sales agent through a



connection, and that agent, in Vancouver, British Columbia, is helping place the film "in as many different markets and (international) territories as possible."

IndieFest serves as the Bay Area premiere of "Mother Country," naturally something that Breaux is looking forward to; she's bringing much of her cast up for the screening.

"We'll all go to a bar afterward and celebrate," she laughed.

The Trost Brothers, "The FP"

Jason and Brandon Trost don't have the usual profile of indie filmmakers. They are part of a Hollywood family - dad Ron is a special-effects artist ("MacGruber"), sister Sarah is a costume designer ("Nacho Libre") and Brandon is a cinematographer ("Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance"). Jason works on crews and acts. But when Jason and Brandon wanted to realize their dream of making a postapocalyptic gang comedy around the game Dance Dance Revolution, they had to go indie.

"It's been a long road. Basically, we shot this movie almost 3 1/2 years ago," said Jason, who is the eye-patch-wearing star of the film. "It took forever. ... It's such a weird, oddball movie, not the most financially appealing (for a potential investor). So it was tough to finish."

But when they got it to the world premiere last year - at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas - things happened quickly. Draft-house films (the distributor of the Academy Award-nominated Belgian film "Bullhead," also at IndieFest) snapped up the distribution rights. IndieFest is one of the last festivals it will play at before a small national theatrical release in March (the Feb. 17 screening, which the Trosts will attend, will be followed by a live "Dance Dance Revolution" competition).

These days, many indie filmmakers also serve as distributors, allowing them to keep the lion's share of profits. In making a deal with a distributor, the Trosts are giving up a chunk of future revenue in exchange for Drafthouse's marketing savvy.

"Do you take a little more money or do you take more exposure?" Trost said. "We definitely took the more-exposure route, because, who knows? Maybe it has legs. We hope so."

Melissa Johnson, "no look pass"

Johnson, who works as Web producer and digital consultant, found her subject - Harvard basketball player Emily Tay, a Burmese immigrant and lesbian who dreams of playing professionally in Europe - close to home. Johnson, who is 6 feet 4, played at Harvard and discovered Tay and her fascinating story while visiting her old coach, Kathy Delaney-Smith.

"Our strategy is a marriage between festivals, broadcast - we have an offer on the table now we're considering, for cable television - educational (screenings), and of course, consumer DVD and the Internet,"

Johnson said. "I'm just getting my hands on this for the first time, and it feels like there's no one way to do it. You have to think about what audience your film best serves, and then get into the trenches."

Johnson worked on the film for about four years, paying for the project herself and initially paying her cinematographer with "food and beer." The film debuted at Outfest in Los Angeles in July, where it won a Special Programming Award for Freedom.

Like all cost-conscious filmmakers, Johnson weighs the cost of plane tickets (she lives in New York) and tries to arrange time off from her regular jobs. Her trip to the Bay Area will be doubly productive - she'll also have a screening of her film at Facebook's headquarters.

Kip Pastor,

"In Organic We Trust"

Pastor spent time in Washington with aspirations of a political career, but became disillusioned with the process ("too corrupt"), deciding he can crusade for social issues he believes in by making documentaries. "In Organic We Trust" calls into question corporate influence in the organic food industry, and makes a good case for buying from local farmers. He filmed much of the documentary in Northern and Central California, and is delighted that IndieFest serves as its world premiere - and the launch of an accompanying awareness campaign.

"It's ideal place for a launch or a film like this," said Pastor, who lives in Los Angeles and produces commercials. "As far as Michael Pollan and Alice Waters and slow food, nonprofits like that, they're really pioneering community solutions in San Francisco. For me, it's sort of rallying the troops. ...

"A theatrical release - that's not even in our distribution plan. We're going to have a short festival tour, then we'll do an eight-city, three-week launch, with community screenings. We'll have panels and incorporate some of the subjects of the films and some of the ideas of the film."

Pastor is in the minority of IndieFest filmmakers who have already paid for their films. He got the film sponsored as a nonprofit by the International Documentary Association.

"We have no investors; everyone donated and gave grants to the film and got tax deductions," Pastor said. "We're actually starting in the black, and the idea is through these community screenings, a sort of do-it-yourself distribution, selling DVDs at festivals and through the website ... there are a lot of different ways to monetize it, and the revenue we bring in we'll be reinvesting into the campaign of awareness to bring about real change.

"We're just trying to keep the train moving forward." {sbox}

Indiefest

What: 14th San Francisco Independent Film Festival

Where: Roxie Theater, 3117 16th St., S.F.

When: Thurs. through Feb. 23

Highlights: Opening-night film "4:44 Last Day on Earth," with director Abel Ferrara in person, followed by Spinal Tap-themed party at Sub-Mission; Closing-night film "Girl Walk // All Day" followed by dance party at Public Works; Several parties and live events.

Tickets: Festival pass, \$160; five-film voucher \$50; 10-film voucher \$90; regular film screenings, \$11; opening night \$20.

Information: sfindie.com.

E-mail Chronicle staff writer G. Allen Johnson at ajohnson@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/02/05/PKPO1MRGJ8.DTL>

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