



## BURGEONING TALENT

BY PAMELA COHN

"I made one independent film in my life and that was *Clerks*. Every other flick was financed by a studio. Harvey [Weinstein] has pretty much paid for every movie except for *Mallrats*, which was made for six million and grossed two million. I felt shitty after that. I lost someone four million dollars. The next one I'm going to do, *Red State*...it's the first time in 15 years I have to look for money."

And there you basically have the "state of the union," ladies and gents, courtesy of filmmaker Kevin Smith, the keynote speaker who opened the 30th iteration of IFP's Independent Film Week, formerly known as the IFP Market.

There were many changes afoot this year, not least of which was the event's name, which IFP executive director Michelle Byrd says, "better reflects our broader mission to support emerging talent in this ever-changing and fluid market. Organizations are not alive and relevant unless they are engaging their constituents. That is our responsibility — to remain relevant. Stagnation is death for a non-profit." This year saw a change of venue, as well, with all activity moving from SoHo's Angelika Film Center and Puck Building to Chelsea's Fashion Institute of Technology campus and environs. Filmmaker Doug Block, who was there with his new non-fiction project, *Almost Gone*, says, "Whatever name it's gone by (and there've been quite a few), I've been attending for 20 years now. I think it was very impressive for the IFP to take an event that was mostly working fine and completely rethink and revamp it, much for the better. To have everything — meetings, pitch screenings and panels — in one venue made everything much more intimate and manageable. The buyers were accessible and the whole atmosphere was more relaxed and informal."

But one meaningful change for filmmakers, particularly in the current economic climate, was the waiver of any fees for participants with projects accepted into the Forum, consisting of the Emerging Narrative strand for writers and writer-directors looking for producers; the No Borders International Co-production Market for producers seeking financing partners; and the Spotlight on Documentaries for non-fiction projects in production or post looking for financing partners and festival invitations.

As the oldest and largest membership or-

ganization of independent filmmakers, the IFP, once again, gave both emerging and experienced filmmakers a chance to showcase their wares to a wide range of financiers, sales agents, producers, distributors and regional film councils. Joshua Sanchez, the writer-director of *Four*, had this to say: "No Borders was great for us. It gave us a chance to introduce our project to many film executives at once. It would be so hard to have access to these people otherwise. We made some solid connections that I think will help our film in the long run." Filmmaker Avi Zev Weider concurs: "As someone who had two projects at the IFP, one in No Borders (*Zeros and Ones*) and one in Spotlight On Docs (*Welcome to the Machine*), we had a very busy week. With around 45 meetings between the two projects, we were able to introduce both the script and the doc to people with whom we are looking forward to working with."

The independent film business continues to dip and whirl and flail everyone around like a manic Tilt-a-Whirl ride. However the exploration of new financing strategies and alternate venues for content continued to be explored in somewhat optimistic terms by the executives and filmmakers who spoke on the dozens of panels and from keynote speakers Robert Greenwald of Brave New Films and Rick Allen, the CEO of SnagFilms, the brand-new Web-based documentary and independent distribution site (and new owner of *indieWIRE*). Allen told the crowd that "thousands of filmanthropists have donated the pixels on their Web sites and opened more than 10,000 online theaters that can stream for free any of the 450 films we now have in our library."

Another standout was the artistic strength of the work-in-progress projects this year. The first thing IFP Senior Director of Programming and Supervisor of the Doc Lab Milton Tabbott mentioned to me at check-in was how utterly impressed he was by the quality, diversity and depth of the non-fiction projects in the Forum this year. Most filmmakers I spoke with throughout the week agreed and were immensely flattered to be in one another's company. Currently in post with their film *Flat Daddy*, director-producers Betsy Nagler and Nara Garber told me, "It was thrilling for us to see our trailer with a standing-room only audience that



laughed and cried — in all the right places! It got people at the market talking about our film. We also got to meet a truly stellar group of fellow documentary filmmakers."

At week's end, the annual Independent Filmmaker Awards Ceremony, hosted by Ally Sheedy and Kevin Corrigan, presented more than \$130,000 in cash, in-kind support and grants, along with an assigned producing mentor for their projects, to the following filmmakers:

- The brand-new Independent Filmmaker Lab Finishing Grant of \$50,000 went to Joseph Cashiola for his debut dramatic feature *A Thing as Big as the Ocean*.
- The Adrienne Shelly Director's Grant of \$10,000 went to Dia Sokol for her debut feature *Sorry, Thanks*.
- The Kodak Grand Jury Screenwriting Prize of \$5,000 in cash and a \$5,000 Kodak product grant went to Benjamin Bates for his work-in-progress, *Walrus Eating Baloney*.
- The \$10,000 Fledgling Fund Award for Socially Conscious Documentaries was presented to Beth Murphy for her work-in-progress, *The Promise of Freedom*.
- The five winners of Panasonic Digital Filmmaking Grants (a three-week rental of a Panasonic A6-HPX500 package) are Damian Lahey and Ian Ogden for *Child in the Dark*, JP Chan for *Chinos y Negros*, Pascal Leister and Nissar Modi for *Gringo Bay*, Leah Meyerhoff for *Unicorns* and Shiva Ramanathan for *The Unseen*.
- The three Grand Prize Winners of the Panasonic Digital Filmmaking Grants (a three-week rental of a Panasonic A6-HPX500 package and P2 gear) are Annie Howell for *Black Kid*, Susan Youssef for *Habibi Rasak Kharban* and Matthew Porterfield for *Metal Gods*.