

## Two Men and Their Baby at the 1993 IFFM

by Paul Haddad

Any hack with a half-baked vision and a couple of credit cards maxed to the limit can call himself a filmmaker. With such loose criteria, my partner-in-crime and I wrote, produced and directed a feature called *Looking for Miami Beach*, only to run out of money once we had a cut workprint. Where to go when your friends and family turn their backs to you? The Independent Feature Film Market, of course, held every fall in New York City.

Billing itself as the only recognizable market that accepts works-in-progress, or "WIPs," the IFFM gives filmmakers a chance to leave their day jobs and hawk their labors of love — not just WIPs, but finished features, shorts, documentaries, even screenplays — to buyers from around the globe. For a mere \$375, Don and I were hoping to find finishing funds and a distributor for our little film-that-could, a twentysomething *angst* film with music by that *angst* rock-princess, Juliana Hatfield (still negotiating).

The following is a blow by blow account of our nine day journey at the IFFM. There's no need to keep score; I've already done it for you.

**Sunday, Sept. 26:** The guidebook says, "Pre-registration, 10-2." We arrive promptly at 10 a.m. We receive our blue ("filmmaker") badges and get thrown against a wall for a Polaroid snapshot, to be posted on

a board so buyers can identify us. I close my eyes and look like I'm on morphine. The entire ordeal lasts fifteen minutes. We return at 3 p.m. for the appropriately named "Kick-Off Seminar." Several participants from previous Markets speak, the most inspirational being Edward James Olmos. For a few fleeting moments, the room is transformed into a scene out of *Stand and Deliver*. But after an hour the group dwindles and those remaining fold their handouts into paper fans. It rains on us as we head home. Score after the big "Kick-Off": IFFM 7, Filmmaker: 0.

**Monday, Sept. 27:** Don and I are scheduled to screen our WIP promo today, the first official day of screenings. We sleep through our Casio watch alarms and wake up late. However, we arrive at Angelika Film Center early enough to stuff flyers in the boxes of buyers we think should see our film — October Films, Tapestry Entertainment, foreign distributors, etc. But first, Don and I make a ghastly realization: we are severely overdressed in our suits and ties. Other filmmakers screening today are sporting jeans and t-shirts. It's as if someone said "bring your suits," and we misunderstood, not knowing it was a pool party. Several filmmakers ask if our suits are a gimmick for our film or some kind of prop for our presentation (honest). Other film

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**YOUNG:** It's not so strange when you learn it from you your parents. We all learn from our parents, so it's just a question of what we learn. Ana was part of this cycle, and she was trying to do something different with her knowledge. Unfortunately, she was stopped.

**FILMMAKER:** You were the first documentary crew ever allowed on the main yard at Folsom Prison.

**YOUNG:** Yes, and it's an amazing place. First, just to be able to walk up to these guys and talk to them. But then to observe the culture and how it works. How separate a society it is, with its own rules and laws, many of which are enforced by the inmates with intimidation or rape or stabbing... And again, it was one of those situations where we were barely scratching the surface of what was going on.

**FILMMAKER:** Were you frightened?

**TODD:** It wasn't any scarier than riding around with paramedics in South Central, going from tragedy to tragedy. That was more upsetting to me than working in the prison. After a while in the prison, everything is pretty much routine.

**FILMMAKER:** It seemed that some of the gang kids were performing...

**TODD:** Everybody does that...

**YOUNG:** I feel that even when people are playing for the camera, they reveal something really important about themselves. It just happens in the moment when the camera is rolling. People are never in complete control of what they say, so they reveal themselves in some important way. In this case, I don't know if they were trying to be eloquent, and I'm sure they wanted to look good, and that to me is very interesting. When you see how eloquent these kids can be, you realize that they really could be doing great things as opposed to adding to the death statistics. They have committed violent acts that we all deplore but you realize that they are human beings and they could be something other given the right context.

**TODD:** I don't think the odds are really in favor of change being made in these people's lives unless we get a little more aggressive in providing opportunities.▼

## Wip

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makers mistake us for buyers, who favor fancier threads. More than once I was approached by a wide-eyed, salivating filmmaker, only to see him turn away crestfallen after seeing my blue badge.

Before our screening, I lament to a guy named Steven that our WIP is running at the same time as a WIP about AIDS which will probably attract all the buyers. Steven says, "My film is about AIDS." I find out that the film I'm complaining about is his. We laugh and wish each other good luck.

About 50 people fill the theater, though it's

hard to tell how many are buyers since many of them remove their green badges so they won't be eaten alive by filmmakers. Technically, this is against IFFM policy, but it's common practice. As our video-projected promo plays on the screen, I can hear the door to the theater opening and closing. I'm afraid to turn around because I don't know whether these badgeless wonders are coming or going. Our presentation goes relatively smoothly. Not many people come up to us afterwards, but we are told this is normal because everyone is rushing off to attend other screenings. IFFM 7, Filmmaker 7.

**Tuesday, Sept. 28:** By lunchtime a few business cards have trickled into our mailbox. (buyers are late risers). We also receive an official IFFM list of buyers who attended our screening. This is very helpful as now we know who to target. We are successful in finding four buyers and convincing them to screen the film at full length. IFFM 7, Filmmaker 14.

**Wednesday, Sept. 29:** I am assaulted at the entrance of the Angelika by a fat Elvis thrusting a flyer into my face. Shameless self-promotion seems to be the *modus operandi* here, transforming the lobby into a modern day Cabaret Voltaire. Promoting your film requires ticklish judgement. You want to make a splash, maybe a few waves, but you don't want to drown people in garishness either. And you better damn well have a good film to back up the hype. IFFM 14, Filmmaker 14.

**Thursday, Sept. 30:** It's clear by now which films have generated a "buzz." Ours is not one of them. Word is, only one work-in-progress has made a sale. We are finding WIPs to be at the bottom of the Market feed trough. If I had to rank the categories according to the buyer food chain, it would look like this: finished features, shorts, documentaries, scripts, works-in-progress. IFFM 21, Filmmaker 14.

**Friday, Oct. 1:** We are told that the list of buyers who missed our screening but viewed our film at the Sony video library will be available later today. This list never comes, although other filmmakers get theirs. That night at a party one filmmaker who flew in from Alaska tells us that her WIP screening was at 9 a.m., and that literally *no* buyers showed up. Moral: Be sure to request an afternoon screening. IFFM 28, Filmmaker 14.

**Saturday, Oct. 2:** Don and I spend most of the day choosing which completed films to watch based on the tag lines of the one-sheets in the lobby. We stay away from such films as the one advertising itself as "a Modest Post-Modern Screwball Melodrama." Our favorite blurb is the one for *Spare Me*, a movie about "the darker elements of bowling: "When you hear thunder, that's God bowling." Still no word on who watched our film at the video library. I'm getting frustrated. IFFM 35, Filmmaker 14.

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## \$64,000 Question

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the film for \$40,000, he'll only need \$100,000." October Films president Bingham Ray, who released Gregg Araki's no-budget *The Living End*, agrees with Meistrich's assessment. Knowing a film's micro-budget "would color my negotiating on the picture but it wouldn't color the projections I would make on the film," he says. And, he adds, "if more than one company is interested in the film, the production costs are largely moot." Producer and Strand Releasing president Marcus Hu recommends that producers seek the counsel of an experienced producers' rep when closing the deal on a no-budgeter.

For filmmakers toying with telling it all, Ray says that "it's important to put a spin right from the get go on either the radical, funny, or original way they raised the money or on the amount of money." Producer and Good Machine co-president James Schamus, known for the No-Budget Workshops he conducts with Christine Vachon, goes even further: "It's only worth talking about having no money when you have a distributor with a lot of money to publicize that fact."

Indeed, poverty-level publicity helped films as diverse as *Slacker*, *She's Gotta Have It*, and *Hollywood Shuffle* — all films with larger distributors. And recently, publicized low-budgets may have helped films like *Laws of Gravity* and *The Living End* — and may help the upcoming *Clerks* — because these films sell a streetwise energy, low-rent milieu, and a lack of artifice. Meistrich notes that the decision to publicize one's budget may depend on the nature of the film. "I think if you're trying to make a mainstream movie for not much money, people will say 'It was made for \$100,000 and it looks it.' You can't compete against studio art films. And if you're [revealing your budget] solely as a financial issue, then it's harmful." Indeed, if one is making a film like Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan*, a low-budgeter which targeted the well-heeled, Merchant-Ivory audience, one would do well to follow distributor New Line's lead and play down the cost of the production.

Although no one interviewed categorically advocated spilling one's budget beans, no one recommended lying either. Hu said that it's hard to disguise the budget for some low-budget efforts. He commented, "If you lie, the distributor is going to know or they will think you are incredibly stupid. The 'under a million' line is a pat answer." ▼

## Wip

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**Sunday, Oct. 3:** Last day of screenings. We take the day off from the Market, planting our-

selves at a bar to watch the Dodgers dismantle the Giants. If you're ever in SoHo, visit TGIFridays and ask for Lincoln. He bought us several beers and even let me "drive" (bartenderspeak for entrusting a patron with the remote control). Score remains IFFM 35, Filmmaker 14.

**Monday, Oct. 4:** We attend the New Line-sponsored Independents Day of panel discussions. A word of caution: sign up for these lectures early. There were many disgruntled filmmakers left without a paddle. IFFM 35, Filmmaker 17.

**Tuesday, Oct. 5:** I'm feeling a little dejected on the flight home to L.A. I wonder if things will pan out for our film. Fortunately, I meet a young woman named Robin who is flying home for the Jewish holiday Succot. We talk about different faiths — she about her religion, me about my film. I explain that my film is a difficult sell because it appeals to a specialized audience, the cerebral art-house crowd. Robin says I did the right thing by making a film in which I had something to say instead of some mindless slasher film designed to sell tickets. She believes I will be rewarded for this, that it will find its audience. Even though she doesn't go to the movies, she promises to say a prayer for mine. I don't have the heart to tell her that few films succeed solely on the basis of ethics, prayers and good intentions. Still, she restores my faith in our project. That night I dream that our film premieres to a packed house of orthodox Jewish schoolgirls in a synagogue off Fairfax Boulevard, with a few Frenchman nodding their approval in the back row.

Regardless of the type of work you're pitching, the IFFM remains an excellent opportunity to meet buyers and other filmmakers. The key is not to get overwhelmed and just have fun with it. Treat it as a means, not an end. In the few days since I've been back, I've already received several calls from distribution companies. IFFM 35, Filmmaker 19.

I realize the game does not end on the closing date of the Market. Like my film *Looking For Miami Beach*, the IFFM experience is still in progress. ▼

*Paul Haddad got his M.F.A. from USC's School of Cinema and currently works for Robert Zemeckis Productions in Los Angeles. He is still looking for Miami Beach.*

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