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Films run gantlet for Seattle festival

SOREN ANDERSEN; The News Tribune
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They come in a flood, these aspiring Spielbergs and Hitchcock hopefuls. On DVD and on VHS (though fewer and fewer of those these days), they come, pouring into the offices of the Seattle International Film Festival from around the country and around the world.

They are movies from filmmakers hoping to find fame, or at least a measure of artistic exposure, by landing a spot on the festival program.

Organizers of Seattle's annual film marathon routinely boast that they show more movies than any other festival in the country. More than 230 features are on the schedule for this year's festival, which begins Thursday and runs through June 12.

This is SIFF's largest offering, says Carl Spence, the festival's director of programming. The Sundance festival, by comparison, screened around 120 features in January.

But that 230 figure is dwarfed by the number of submissions that flooded over the transom for SIFF 2005: just under 2,100, said Beth Barrett, one of the members of Spence's programming team. That's up from 1,386 received for the 2004 festival.

As many as 50 a day came this year, packing the festival's film vault, a small room tucked away in a corner of the SIFF headquarters near downtown Seattle. Most arrive unheralded in plain envelopes accompanied by an application form.

Obviously, the odds are long that any film will make the final cut. They're made longer still by the fact that only 10 to 15 percent of films submitted in this fashion actually make it onto the festival program. The vast majority of pictures screened at SIFF are ones programmers have seen at other, earlier festivals, or which have been recommended to staff members by people in the film industry.

So how does a mailed-in movie make it onto the big screen



BRUCE KELLMAN/The News Tribune
 The film vault at the Seattle International Film Festival office contains metal cases of film reels of some of the 340-plus feature and short-subject movies that will play during the 25-day festival.



BRUCE KELLMAN/The News Tribune
 Beth Barrett (left) and Carl Spence of the Seattle International Film Festival watched hundreds of unsolicited films as part of the process of selecting this year's lineup. Festival organizers store the movies, VHS tapes and DVDs, in this small

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at the Egyptian Theater or any of the other festival venues? It has to run a gantlet. In the case of "Deepwater," a psychological thriller wrapped around a murder mystery, that gantlet stretched all the way from Seattle to Palm Springs, Calif.

movies - VHS tapes and DVDs - in this small room.



Palm Springs is where SIFF co-founder

and longtime former festival director Darryl Macdonald now runs that city's film festival. Although he left Seattle two years ago to take the Palm Springs job, Macdonald still has close ties to SIFF and remains on its programming team. He was given first crack at "Deepwater."

It was sent to him in February by the staff at SIFF in a package containing about a dozen movies. It came to him unheralded.

In Seattle, "nobody had seen it," Macdonald said by phone from Palm Springs. It had been grabbed off a shelf in the vault with others at random.

SENSE OF EXCITEMENT



Macdonald didn't know who directed it. He didn't know who was in it. He didn't know what it was about. And that's just the way he likes it.

"I have a rule: I don't want to know anything about a film. I prefer to watch it completely cold so I have no preconceived notions," he said.

Watching it at home on his DVD player, he felt a rising sense of excitement. "This film made me stop and pay attention almost from the get-go," he said.

The tale of a rootless young man who winds up working at a rundown motel deep in the woods for a mysterious small-time gangster and his sexy young wife was unexpectedly polished and compelling. And although the writer-director, David S. Marfield, was unknown to Macdonald, he certainly recognized the actor playing the gravel-voiced gangster: Peter Coyote. And some of the supporting performers

were fairly prominent as well: Lesley Ann Warren and Michael Ironside, the latter perhaps best known for his work in "Scanners."

Even though the movie was obviously made on a small budget, it clearly had something to attract some quality people. That something was the script. It was quickly clear to Macdonald that Marfield knew how to tell a gripping story.

"There are certain elements you always look for in a film," he said. "You recognize relatively quickly whether the filmmaker had a feel for visual storytelling, and you recognize whether a filmmaker has a way with dialogue." Marfield, Macdonald recognized, clearly had both.

"I like a film that shakes me up. I like a film that provokes me to think intellectually or viscerally."

"Deepwater" did that. Not many movies do. "You're lucky if it happens one of out every 10 times."

SELF-INDULGENCE can be fatal

Too often, unheralded filmmakers remain unheralded for a reason: They don't know what they're doing.

In an age when relatively inexpensive digital video cameras and computer editing programs make it possible for vast numbers of aspiring Spielbergs to make films, Macdonald says the films many of them make aren't worth the videotape they're shot on. Far too often, he says, self-indulgence is the fatal failing. "Basically, they don't have the talent to make a film. They're just in love with being a filmmaker."

In 30-plus years of selecting films for SIFF and several other U.S. festivals, Macdonald estimates he has seen upwards of 40,000 films. Many have been dogs. Especially in programming season, when he's often watching movies from 6 in the morning until 10 or 11 at night, Macdonald admits "it's hard to keep your enthusiasm."

"You get burned out, particularly when you've watched a number of bad movies in a row. But all it takes is one film to turn your head and deliver the goods. It recharges the batteries."

"Deepwater" did that. Macdonald said he felt about Marfield's movie much the same way he felt about another

low-budget indie he screened more than a decade ago from another unknown writer-director. That picture was "Slacker," and Macdonald said he knew at once that Richard Linklater was the real deal, insisting that his film be placed on the festival schedule.

He said the film had been turned down by every other festival Linklater had submitted it to and credits the enthusiastic reception it received in Seattle to launching Linklater's career.

This year, the festival has included "Deepwater" in its New American Cinema competition, where it will compete with 11 other films for a \$5,000 cash prize. Marfield is scheduled to attend the festival to introduce his film.

Charged up about his new find, Macdonald fired off a set of enthusiastic notes to the Seattle office about "Deepwater." Seattle programmers grade candidates, and Macdonald gave Marfield's movie a B+, the only picture of the batch it came in to receive that high a grade. So when the video arrived back in Seattle, other programmers were eager to see it.

There are seven on staff, each with different tastes and areas of expertise, all of whom view hundreds of submissions for each festival. Barrett, for example, says she's partial to "dysfunctional Scandinavian dramas," adding with a laugh that that pretty much describes any Scandinavian film. She also likes road movies and teen flicks. "Heathers," she says, is a "classic." Programming director Spence calls himself "a generalist. I like all types of films," but when pressed said that science fiction ("Alien" is a fave) and the movies of Lars von Trier are favorites.

ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

Intrigued by Macdonald's rave review, Spence pulled rank and assigned "Deepwater" to himself and also to Barrett. (In most cases three programmers are called on to pass judgment on a particular picture.) They were both very impressed. "It took me completely by surprise by the end," she said.

Spence concurred. "It didn't really tip you off in an obvious way in the beginning about where you were going to end up in the end." A source of the surprise is that no one in the picture is quite who he or she seems to be.

Echoing Macdonald, they said the element of surprise is something they cherish because the process of winnowing through hundreds and hundreds of films each year to arrive at the precious few can leave a programmer jaded and exhausted.

"Sometimes you reach a point where you don't want to see another film, and then all of a sudden one gives you a sense of euphoria," Spence said.

Euphoria can be induced in several ways, Barrett said. "Some films take you in and they don't let you go. Others build nicely. And then there are the movies that you can't get out of your mind. You may not have (thought) that 'this is fabulous,' but then the next day you find yourself really thinking about them and thinking, 'Huh! That was really effective.'" "Deepwater," she said, was one of those movies that stayed with her.

With all three programmers unanimous in their assessment that "Deepwater" was a keeper, the film was put onto the schedule. It will be screened twice at the Uptown Theatre in Queen Anne, at 9:15 p.m. June 9 and at 4:30 p.m. June 11.

FILMMAKER excited

Euphoria was what filmmaker Marfield felt when he received word his movie had made the cut at SIFF. He'd submitted it to Cannes and Sundance, had been turned down at both festivals, and was feeling discouraged until Seattle came through for him. "Deepwater" is the 33-year-old Minneapolis filmmaker's directorial debut, and its Seattle showing will be the first time it will play on a big screen for a big audience. Better yet, it's screening during the final week of the festival, a time when film industry heavyweights traditionally come up and sample Seattle's wares. He's hoping the picture will generate buzz and maybe even find a distributor.

"To get the film seen is a huge deal," he said.

Not every film that makes it into the festival enjoys such smooth sailing as "Deepwater." "We've had knockdown, drag-out fights," Macdonald said, often over films with high levels of violence or sex. There has even, at times, been screaming.

"People get very passionate, and the more contentious a film is, the more passionate people get," he said.

And usually that's not a bad thing. "That passion is what fuels the programming," he said. "It reinforces you" and reminds the programmer that he or she loves film and "you love what you're doing."

What: Seattle International Film Festival

When: May 19-June 12

Where: Egyptian Theater, 801 E. Pine St.; Broadway Performance Hall, 1625 Broadway; Harvard Exit, 807 E. Roy; Guild 45th, 2115 N. 45th St.; Neptune Theatre, 1303 N.E. 45th St.; Uptown Cinema, 511 Queen Anne Ave. N.; Paramount Theatre, 911 Pine St.; Northwest Film Forum, 1515 12th Ave.; and the JBL Theatre at the Experience Music Project, 325 Fifth Ave. N.

Tickets: Available at main SIFF box office on the second level of the Pacific Place shopping center, 600 Pine St.; the Broadway Performance Hall; and individual theater box offices (day of show only)

Tickets by phone: 206-324-9996

Schedule of films: seattlefilm.org

Information: 206-324-9997

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