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## not another film festival



These days it seems that every human settlement with a population bigger than a house has its very own film festival. So how do you come up with something new and underground to stand out from the crowd?

Simple. If you're the founders of the "Other Venice Film Festival," you rip up the hipster rulebook and create something utterly unique, based on the needs of a vibrant local community.

Sure, the OVFF features an amazing array of eclectic films in its four day March 16 to 19 window, but it also, according to festival publicist Kris Ellenberg, showcases "Visual artists, performance artists, live bands, videos, dee jays, and non-stop partying."

In other words, if you're a filmmaker intent on strategic Sundance-style market insertion, then this might not be the place for you...

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Film may indeed be the catalyst—and there are plenty of festival categories ranging from “Most Excellent” features and shorts through to audience favorites—but Co-Founder Gary Ellenberg observes, “It’s about integrity, it’s not just another Hollywood schmoozefest.”

Ellenberg, with Los Angeles entrepreneur AJ Peralta, and impresario Rueben De La Casas (the infamous instigator of “Ruby Tuesday” happenings around Venice) established the festival in 2004 as a catalyst for a creative ferment typical of the Venice scene. In keeping with the lateral energies of Venice, the criteria for selection—other than a majority “thumbs up” from the three co-founders—has less to do with rigid structures or categories and more to do with producing an engaging and enervating mix.

The exuberance of the festival, and an inclusionary and welcoming atmosphere for non-industry spectators, should not, however, detract from the quality of the submissions; competition entries have doubled yet again in the third year. Though packages arrive increasingly from other countries, there is also a solid portfolio of indigent efforts.

For instance, Gary Ellenberg notes that programming in 2006 reflects a massive increase in submissions from local female filmmakers. “Women directors are submitting by a 2-1 margin, and we have created a new showcase for this. Perhaps it’s a reflection that independent opportunities grow just as the commercial sector shrinks.”

The OVFF’s sense of grassroots means that it can have its cake and eat it: both showcasing some of the more diverse offerings of locals as well as the hobby projects of filmmakers who spend weekdays working on more commercial fare. Established filmmakers such as documentarian Stanley Mitchell, producer Michael Pressman and celebrated surfer/ director Stacy Peralta have all shown work.

In perhaps the most elegant example of the visible/invisible dynamic of the Venice scene, Peralta was honored in 2005 with one of the Local Maverick Spotlight awards, reflecting on his efforts in making celebrated documentaries “Riding Giants” and “Dogtown and the Z-Boys.”

Peralta, in turn, met the winner of the Audience Award short (awarded by ballot), Patrick Masson, who won for his hilarious no-budget spoof “Icetown and M-Boys”. Masson had been convinced by his collaborators - Venice residents all—to parlay his experiences as a production assistant to move up and direct the affectionate mockumentary. Renowned skateboarders Tony Alva and Tony Hawk got involved as the project built momentum over an eight-month period.

Peralta’s positive response “took a load off” of Masson’s mind (Peralta called him the next day to say how much he enjoyed the satire, and they have since talked further having bumped into each other at the local skate park. Which is not, for the uninformed, how Hollywood types normally do business...). In addition, local interest also “opened some doors. Instead of setting meetings up for other people, I was now being invited to attend meetings.”

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As for Peralta, he has his own passionate perspective. "The film business is the toughest thing in the solar system. Filmmakers consistently struggle, and festivals like this can be a place of support. The irony of the OVFF is that it reflects the tenets of Abbot Kinney. He developed the area on the principle of founding an artistic community, and more than 100 years later the OVFF is furthering the cause..."

Other positive developments surely await future filmmakers as the OVFF continues to build bridges. Highlights in 2006 will include: celebrated producer and director Roger Corman's honoring as 2006 Local Maverick Spotlight recipient; a screening of actor Danny Trejo's autobiographical "Champion", a one-of-a-kind view of drug abuse and incarceration; and a fundraiser screening of the pirate film "The Return of the Muskrats" by the local Cheshire Group Project, an organization that has set up disability summer camp projects from New York to Guatemala.

*photo by Joel H. Mark*

*Feb 2006 by simon herbert*

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