

How to succeed at Film Festivals

BY JEAN LEFEBVRE

After 21 years of working on festivals, I am struck by the fact that Canadian film professionals are not familiar with the festival scene: after all, that's not their job. As a result, they are too often prone to think that the *exceptional* success such and such a director has had at a festival is the general rule, whereas in fact it was purely a matter of luck, and sometimes of bad luck.

Here is an overall view on festivals: how they function, what is expected of participants, about how much it costs to enter – for example, a feature film at Cannes or Berlin – and on what the Festivals Bureau can do for filmmakers.

FESTIVALS ARE PUBLICITY VEHICLES

The bigger a festival is, the more publicity it generates. Think how much publicity mileage Canadian films such as *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Un zoo la nuit*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, etc., got out of the Cannes Festival's Directors' Fortnight. The critics raved about these films and the praise encouraged the distributors who were in Cannes to pounce on them, buy them up, and give them wide distribution. Now that's publicity!

On the other hand, the bigger a festival is, the more it can damage the chances of a film that doesn't impress the critics. A few years ago, Cannes, which hadn't selected *Diva* for competition the previous year, rushed to get Jean-Jacques Bénéix's new movie, *La lune dans le caniveau*, into the competition. The film was not a success, to put it mildly, and the whole world was immediately informed of the fact by the 1,500 journalists covering the event. Cannes had made it "legitimate" from then on to pour scorn on the hapless film.

There are, therefore, two factors to be taken into consideration before entering a movie for a festival:

- the publicity clout (for good or ill) of the festival chosen;
- the staying power of the film you're going to expose to the risks and confusion of the festival in question. (Is it well enough made to withstand failure in that arena – or, for that matter, to stand up to success on an unforeseen scale?).

Jean Lefebvre is head of the Festivals Bureau at Telefilm Canada.

The Promotional Package

It is useless to submit a film to a festival if your application is not accompanied by promotional material, especially if the film or video is a success. You need to produce:

- An information sheet with a reproduction of the film poster on the front (or a still, the title superimposed) and a synopsis on the back. (Send five copies of your information sheet.)

A synopsis should be a 150 to 200-word résumé of the action, in a punchy style ("Adam is desperate. For some time now Eve has seemed distant..."). Avoid personal statements ("I have attempted to..."), or describing the film's intentions: ("This film examines the relationship between Man and the serpent"). Put as much time and energy as necessary into your synopsis. Better still, have it written by professionals.

- A list of the major credits for the film.
- Technical information, including exact running time, projection gauge, video format, etc.
- A bio-filmography of the director: a list of his or her films or videos, with their production years, is sufficient.
- Still photos: These are absolutely essential. Make sure during filming to take professional-quality stills of the film's or video's action. You can take as many "family snaps" as you like, photos of the team or the shooting, but remember that only stills of the film's or video's action will help publicity. It is also useful for promotional reasons to include a photo of the director. (Send about five photos for a video or short; five to 10 photos for a feature film.)

For feature films, be sure to take black & white and colour photos (slides rather than just prints). As soon as the visual editing is completed, choose with the help of your national and international distributors, a set of 7 to 15 stills for marketing the film or video.

If you use a special graphic style for the film or video title, put it on a negative, and include this title at the bottom of each publicity photo. Take care to identify each photo: from left to right, the names of actors or persons interviewed (with the name of their characters in brackets). To simplify the task, make a composite negative of these identifications, and include it with the identification of the title at the bottom of the still.

- Add to the minimum documentation the following material, but only after you've found a Canadian distributor and a foreign sales agent. In fact, the following is their responsibility and comes out of their budgets:

- posters and other promotional material for the sales pitch;
- a commercial promotional clip or trailer for marketing the film;
- a press kit.

THE PRESS KIT

In a folder whose cover reproduces the film poster, you include in your press kit:

- a short synopsis of the action: 150 to 250 words, or simply the information sheet.
- a long (2 to 3 pages) synopsis of the story, with the key moments of the action in greater detail and including the name of each main character, with the name of the actor portraying him or her in brackets.
- biographies (1 to 2 pages each) of the producer, director and principal actors. (You may sometimes add biographies of the scriptwriter and cameraman, if the film leads to questions about them in the media).
- a complete list of credits, as it appears on the screen.
- a text by the director about his or her intentions, what he or she wanted to achieve, why he or she chose to do this film, etc.
- a few anecdotes about the production and shooting of the film, of the kind that will arouse media interest.

This documentation will be used for notes on your film which will appear in the programme and other festival publications. It will also be useful to journalists needing insights into outstanding works before the festival opens.

It is astonishing to what extent this documentation can help in getting a film selected. It is proof of the professionalism of the production. It can suggest ideas on how to publicize your film or video, if it is selected. It ensures maximum publicity for your film – always assuming it is selected – by allowing the festival to arouse interest in your work even before their own texts are ready.

Registration

The festival's registration form must be conscientiously filled out. The festival demands this information in order to:

- include all relevant publicity material on the films, which will eventually be accepted, in its official programme.
- have on hand the details the festival's forwarding agent will need to obtain a temporary importation permit for the film, and to be able to get the film through customs as quickly as possible;
- have the address and phone number of the producers and directors, in case the festival needs to consult them urgently, or to refer requests to purchase, or expressions of interest to them.
- have a return address for the copy, and often to have an indication of the means of transport used by the sender, so as to return the copy by the same means.

Even if the information requested in the registration form is already contained in the information sheet accompanying the registration form, it is worthwhile taking the trouble to fill out in full the festival questionnaire, rather than just writing "See documentation".

Include the text of the film's dialogue, and a translation of them (if it exists, or is required by the festival regulations). Also include the text of the subtitles, if the film is subtitled. The festival might want to screen the film with simultaneous translation.

Before shipping

Above all, reread carefully the festival's regulations.

Often, an article in the regulations specifies the number of press kits required, so prepare the exact number necessary. If you, or a representative of the film, are to go to the festival, prepare also a set of 25 to 50 copies of this documentation, to be handed out during the festival.

It is a good idea to send the documentation and the film separately. If you send both at the same time, make sure that the film and the documentation are in separate boxes. The documentation will go the press service while the film will go to the festival's central film library. If the documentation ends up in the film library, it may get put away in a corner by whoever works there. Meanwhile, the press service, having received nothing from you, will only give you the absolute minimum of coverage.

CHOOSE CAREFULLY

You need to be careful about choosing the first festival where the film is to be shown. All festivals are not equally important, and the major ones insist on presenting *premieres* only. The regulations for eligibility are quite clear. The typical festival is open solely to films:

- produced in the twelve months prior to the festival, and
- which have not been screened outside their country of origin, and
- which have not appeared in other film festivals.

These are the rules both for great festivals such as Cannes and Berlin and for specialized events such as Nyon (documentaries), Mannheim (first works), Leipzig (documentaries), Annecy (animation), Krakow (short films), etc., etc. Once your film has been accepted for one of these events, it is no longer eligible for other major festivals.

So it's vitally important to choose the right festival for your film's first showing outside Canada. After that screening, it can be entered in other less important festivals (which may be more useful in terms of distribution).

STUDY THE REGULATIONS

Read the festival regulations carefully before deciding to take part in a festival. These regulations describe in precise terms the festival's goals, its dates, the eligibility criteria for films and videos, and the participants' obligations. Festivals expect to abide by their regulations, and expect participants to follow their instructions.

Of course, there is sometimes room for negotiation over the application of a regulation, or a festival may agree to bend the rules to some extent. But such occasions are very rare, and such exceptions are negotiated individually.

Most festivals are recognized by the FIAPF (the Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films), which insists on very precise basic rules. Festivals affiliated to the FIAPF must respect these rules, and the FIAPF makes sure, both while the event is being held, and when a festival applies to renew membership, that the rules have been followed.

Don't forget that once you have signed the registration form for a festival (and they all have to be signed), that this is a *valid contract*, which obliges you and the festival in question to respect the rules.

Finally, some information on a process which often seems mysterious to most filmmakers registering for festivals: the festivals' selection criteria for films.

WHY DID THEY PICK THAT TURKEY?

You often hear it said apropos of a festival's selection: "Why did they choose such and such a film and not this other one which is much

better?" For a major festival, the answer is often quite simple. Apart from some errors of judgment (anyone can be wrong sometimes), this "lack of taste" usually occurs because the producer of the overlooked "good" film simply chose not to exhibit at the festival in question, or could not guarantee that the film would be completed in time, or chose to show it elsewhere.

Every festival director will tell you that he or she has only one criterion for selection: *quality*. Unfortunately, quality is subjectively defined. Like the average filmgoers, those who select films for festivals have divergent opinions.

To choose a slate of movies, many festivals set up selection committees while others rely on one person. Most festivals opt for a formula of half selection committee, half individual selector. Decisions made by the festival director, after trips abroad, are ratified, or, if the choice of film is controversial, referred to the selection committee. Sometimes, films submitted to the festival are scrutinized by the selection committee (which in this case acts as a pre-selection committee), before the final decision is made by the festival director.

WHAT'S "QUALITY"?

Certain factors come into play in the definition of "quality." I list them here in any old order. They don't all apply at the same time, but can influence the selection:

- A crucial factor is the personality of the person making the selection;
- Currently fashionable topics (for example, at the moment, films on terrorism or guerrilla warfare);
- The festival's political stance (a left-wing festival, or one with a leftist intellectual director will tend towards films with a social content or socialist tendencies);
- "In" countries: films from certain countries are popular for a few years, and then when the novelty has worn off, they are, as it were, put on the shelf, as if we resented having been so smitten with them;
- The surprise factor. Festival selectors have seen innumerable films over the years, from all over the world, and it takes a lot to surprise them. Nevertheless, surprise or professional astonishment is a key factor. Give a festival director a pleasant surprise, and you will be selected.

Unfortunately, in Canada we don't have access to all the new stuff being produced, which sometimes limits our ability to surprise. Our distribution system only allows into the country American films, some French ones, and a few good films from overseas. Our overall view is not truly global. I have often presented a Canadian film which seemed to me novel, unusual, surprising, only to be told that such and such a film made a year or two ago covered the same topic, and often in an even more original style.

Telefilm helps if...

- The films eligible for assistance from Telefilm Canada's Festivals Bureau must be legally Canadian productions, represented either by their producers, their directors, or their foreign sales agents.
- The Bureau does not attempt to take the place of the participants when it coordinates Canadian participation in festivals. It is understood that the participants may, if they wish, remain independent and take responsibility themselves for taking part in these events. In these circumstances, however, the Bureau refuses all responsibility, all control, and all obligations with regard to the participants. The financial assistance the Bureau can offer is conditional on the Bureau's being involved from the phase when the film or video is submitted to the festival in question.
- The festival must be an event recognized by the Bureau.

FILM ANIMATION FILM PRODUCTION FILM STUDIES

A search is under way for qualified candidates for full time faculty positions in the Department of Cinema. Applications are invited for these positions:

Film Animation: One tenure-track full time position

Film Production: Two tenure-track full time positions

Film Studies: One tenure-track full time position and one leave replacement full time limited term position

A description of each position and the qualifications required of applicants is available from the Department of Cinema. The deadline for applications is May 31 or when the positions are filled. In accordance with Canadian immigration requirements, this advertisement is directed to Canadian citizens and permanent residents. Concordia University is an equal opportunity employer.

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