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2004 IFP MARKET

By Mary Glucksman



Christian Bale in *The Machinist*.

A lot changes in a quarter century and in year 26 the IFP's annual September Market unfolded in a buttoned-down business-first environment aptly reflecting its mature status. Gone is the carnival undercurrent of anxious filmmakers swamping buyers and fest programmers with gaudy giveaways and top-this backstories. This year's carefully curated program of fest-ready docs and shorts plus narrative and nonfiction projects-in-progress was as no-nonsense as the usual smorgasbord of how-to panels and buyer presentations that complemented them. With 1632 submissions whittled down to a program of 224 projects, the event has a righteous claim to selectivity. Big names this year included doc directors Albert Maysles, Stanley Nelson, Josh Aronson and Liz Garbus, all IFP Market veterans, while fiction projects came with attachments like writer Charles Burnett, star Kevin Spacey and exec producer Rosie O'Donnell.

"We set out three years ago to radically rehaul the event and redefine what a market could be for American independent films — a destination for filmmakers seeking collaborators and connections," says IFP New York chief Michelle Byrd. "This year we hit the formula. We involved heads of companies we hadn't previously tapped as a resource for directors and the future of the Market,

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hosted over 1,000 one-on-one meetings for participating filmmakers, and boosted attendance of agents and managers for scripts looking for representation or producers.”

With the glittering Gotham Awards bumped out of their traditional market week slot to December 1, the Market opened and closed with giddy premieres of films that could trace their existence to support from past markets. “We wanted to celebrate filmmakers in a red-carpet way we hadn’t been able to in the past with a competing event in the same time frame,” says Byrd.

Introducing fourth film *The Machinist* at the Ziegfield Theatre on September 20, director Brad Anderson recalled bringing an 18-minute work-in-progress print of debut feature *The Darien Gap* to the 1994 event to look for finishing funds. He didn’t get them, but was back the next year with the finished film and that time got a Sundance invite; two years later his sophomore feature *Next Stop Wonderland* sold to Miramax at Sundance in a deal that ignited the high-priced bidding that prevails today. (Paramount Classics bought the Spanish-financed *Machinist* at Sundance ’04.) Premiering as the event’s closer three days later at the multiplex Magic Johnson Theatres was Rodney Evans’s no-budget Harlem fantasia *Brother to Brother*. The film’s script won the Market’s Gordon Parks screenwriting award in 2000 and it was shortlisted for a directing prize as a work-in-progress entry in 2002; a special jury award for its Sundance competition premiere this year was followed by a dozen other accolades and the film is out this month from Wolfe Pictures. Bookending the Market with twin representations of filmmakers successfully realizing off-mainstream visions against formidable odds had to be inspiring to neophytes struggling to define, finance or complete projects.



Rodney Evan's *Brother to Brother*.

Back at the Angelika, several docs were generating serious buzz including Ralph Arlyck’s growing-up-hippie portrait *Following Sean*, biopic *Toots Shor: Bigger Than Life* from Kristi Jacobson, and Susan Kaplan’s *Three of Hearts*, snapped up by ThinkFilm after its Toronto premiere the previous week.

“I was surprised at how many distributors came to our screening,” says Arlyck, whose feature is a now-and-then look at the title character of his 1969 classic short about a Haight-Ashbury four-year-old, Sean. “We’ve had quite a bit of interest from distributors and my guess is that’s attributable to the fact that documentaries are now considered commercially viable. Sometimes it’s just people casting a very wide net but there’s also genuine interest from people who think it’s a compelling story.”

The Market’s ever-unwieldy fiction section was condensed to just 20 projects in 2002 and while it has been some years since it yielded a discovery on the order of *Clerks* (1993), James Westby’s Film Geek sounded like this year’s *Napoleon Dynamite*. (You could have seen that Sundance ’04 selection MVP here first in ’03.) The doc feature section, conversely, has long been a feeder system for festival programmers with several films regularly cherry-picked for Sundance competition premieres, like the 2003 Market’s *Neverland* and *A Place of Our Own*.

“We always find at least two or three things we want and the quality seemed higher this year than in the past — there was a lot of promising work and a lot I’m going to be pursuing,” says Florida Film Festival programming director Matthew Curtis, a veteran of nine consecutive markets. “For works-in-progress

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what I'm doing is laying the groundwork for future years and building relationships to bear fruit down the road so I almost feel like if I miss a year I'll break the cycle."

"Out of the last 18 years I've attended 17 and I encourage filmmakers to attend even without a film for sheer education," says independent film consultant and producer Bob Hawk. "I consider it one of the most important weeks of the year to keep my finger on the pulse and in the current era of streamlining and synthesis it's a much more user-friendly environment. I talk to festival directors throughout the year so I need to know what's out there and I try to see as much as I can and pass the word on. I saw more strong documentary work this year than I've ever seen and at least three narrative shorts I thought were festival award caliber. My biggest complaint was a reduction in the video library hours."

For films still lining up financing, the Market's 10-year-old No Borders section links experienced producers — those with a track record — with buyers, investors and agents. The program is open to both U.S. and international filmmakers and supported 35 projects this year, up from 22 in 2003. Recent participants already on screens include this year's Sundance hit *Maria Full of Grace* and Toronto entry *Lila Dit Ca (Lila Says)*; projects in production include performance artist Miranda July's *Me and You and Everyone You Know*, which IFC is financing. This year's producers included *Maria*'s Paul Mezey with Tom Gilroy (*Spring Forward*) drama *Location*.

The IFP offers six cash awards, this year totalling over \$200,000. Two Gordon Parks Awards honor emerging African American filmmakers and this year Seith Mann's black Baptist church feature *Come Sunday* won both the Gordon Parks Screenwriting Award and the all-Market Emerging Narrative screenwriting award at \$10,000 each. The Gordon Parks Award in directing, also valued at \$10,000, went to Andrea Williams's short *A Spoonful of Sugar*, about a teen born HIV positive about to lose her virginity. The Emerging Narrative short award (\$5,000) went to Bernardo Loyola's suicide-plan comedy *The Perfect Day*. The final two awards are for completion of works in progress and Scott Dalton's Medellin gang portrait *La Sierra* won the documentary division and \$10,000 cash.

The big-money Emerging Narrative completion award — \$160,000 in goods and services — went to TV director Mark Sobel's JFK assassination docudrama *The Commission*. The film stars Martin Landau, Sam Waterston and Martin Sheen, and was adapted directly from the recently declassified Warren Commission transcripts.

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