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Features

DISPATCH FROM NYC | Winners and Porno: IFP's Independent Film Week Defies the Economic Woes with \$50K Prize

by Eric Kohn (September 18, 2008)

The savviest independent filmmakers showing a wide variety of works-in-progress this week at IFP's Independent Film Week Conference understood the importance of pleasing their audiences. On countless panels and ongoing discussions around town, members of the industry lamented the current state of affairs with familiar anxiety, discouraged because the current glut of product hasn't made things any easier. But when **Kevin Smith** took the stage last Sunday to mark the fifteenth anniversary of his own journey to IFP with "Clerks," he insisted that filmmakers set on finishing their projects mainly need to focus on impressing anyone willing to invest. "It doesn't matter if you have ten bucks or ten million bucks - your job remains the same," he said. "Making it with someone else's money is better."

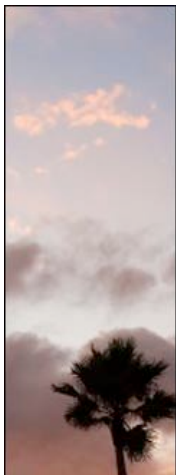


"A Thing as Big as the Ocean" director Josheph Cashiola with directors Craig Zobel and Ramin Bahrani at the IFP awards lunch Thursday. Photo by Brian Brooks/indieWIRE

Smith, of course, has a resolutely populist approach, since every film he made after "Clerks" was technically done for a studio. Nevertheless, the tidbits of films from the IFP's Independent Filmmaker Labs, which screened outdoors last night at the pier on 23 Street and East River, formed a series of attempts to create commercial appearances - at least to the point where industry folks might decide to open their wallets.

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On the narrative side, several of the features previewed in brief trailers and clips appeared to seamlessly move from their treatments to the screen. **Anthony Stephenson's "Good Intentions,"** a black comedy about a southern woman whose desire to get rich leads to acts of robbery, was presented in a sleekly-designed trailer, complete with an omniscient voiceover from the Don LaFontaine playbook ("a less-than-perfect childhood..."). A series of clips from **Patrick Epino's "Mr. Sadman,"** the story of a former Sadaam Hussein impersonator trying to find work in 1990 Los Angeles, played up the comedic potential of the story and hinted at its solemn undertones.



The documentaries from the lab were also nicely packaged to showcase their commercial viability. Chief among them, "**The Hand of Fatimah**" follows documentarian **Augusta Palmer's** attempt to understand the legacy of her late father, rock critic Robert Palmer, whose obsession with a 1,000 year old band in Morocco forms the centerpiece of this clearly beautiful, sharply provocative meditation on the significance of hippy enlightenment. **Troy Word's "The Presence of Joseph Chaiken"** put last night's audience in a contemplative mood, since the movie surveys the highly experimental theater work of the New York artist, with input from Sam Shepherd, F. Murray Abrahamson and others. **Lee Storey's "Smile 'Til It Hurts"** got one of the strongest receptions, with its naturally amusing look at the goofy sixties "Up With People" group, which combined cheerful singing with social activism.

Back on the narrative side, even the blatantly dramatic works were assembled as crowd-pleasers. **Gerry Ballasta's "The Mountain Thief,"** set amid the ongoing insurgency in the Phillipines as a father and son flee the surrounding chaos, intentionally highlighted chase sequences and other intense moments. The audience roared in approval. Another topical entry was **Joseph Cashiola's "A Thing As Big as the Ocean,"** a nuanced romance about two lovers (one of whom is a Katrina refugee) wandering around the desert. The minimalist approach to love and social issues recalls **Barry Jenkin's "Medicine for Melancholy,"** an upcoming release from **IFC Films** that opened Independent Film Week on Monday.

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Adrienne Shelly director's grant recipient Dia Sokol ("Sorry, Thanks") with Ms. Shelly's spouse, Andy Ostroy at the IFP Awards lunch Thursday. Photo by Brian Brooks/indieWIRE

Appropriately enough, "Ocean" landed the Independent Filmmaker Lab Finishing Grant, a \$50,000 cash prize courtesy of an anonymous donation, at the Independent Filmmaker Awards ceremony today. The Adrienne Shelly Director's Grant, a \$10,000 cash prize established to recognize female directors, went to **Dia Sokol's "Sorry, Thanks,"** another popular lab participant. Additionally, IFP awarded the \$10,000 Fledgling Fund Award for Socially Conscious Documentaries to **Beth Murphy for "The Promise of Freedom,"** a documentary included in IFP's Project Forum.

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IFP selected 156 films for the Project Forum, where filmmakers were invited to show clips to small industry audiences throughout the week and take questions and comments. Half of these projects were documentaries with obvious niche audiences in mind, and it's such specificity that will become their preliminary assets going forward. In **"Our School,"** Romanian filmmakers **Mona Nicoara** and **Miruna Coca-Cozma** explore the tribulations of gypsy children attempting to integrate in a segregated Transylvanian town. The directors have been gathering footage for over two years. "We've grown up with a black and white image of them," Nicoara said of the gypsies. "It's much more complicated than that. We thought it would be interesting to see how it played out in a small community."

In **"Anatomy of Poverty,"** **Elinyisia Mosh** investigates social/political issues in Africa. [By request of the filmmaker, further information has been withheld due to ongoing production related to the doc.]

All of these dense, topical works are a far cry from "Clerks," but Smith, during his appearance, understood the range of intentions at the gathering. "Talk about 'Zack and Miri!'" someone shouted when the filmmaker first took the stage, making a reference to his upcoming feature, **"Zack and Miri Make a Porno."**

"Not much to say," Smith said awkwardly, then set the agenda: "Let's talk about independent film." And so they did.

Full list of Independent Film Week honors:

Independent Filmmaker Lab Finishing Grant: "A Thing as Big as the Ocean," directed by Joseph Cashiola

Adrienne Shelly Director's Grant: "Sorry, Thanks," directed by Dia Sokol

Kodak Grand Jury Screenwriting Prize: "Walrus Eating Baloney," written by Benjamin Bates

Fledgling Fund Award for Socially Conscious Documentaries: "The Promise of Freedom," directed by Beth Murphy

Panasonic Digital Filmmaking Grants: Damian Lahey and Ian Ogden for "Child in the Dark; J.P. Chan for "Chinos y Negros"; Pascal Leister and Nissar Modi for "Gringo Bay"; Leah Meyerhoff for "Unicorns"; and Shiva Ramanathan for "The Unseen"

Grand Prize Winners of the Panasonic Digital Filmmaking Grants: Annie Howell for "The Black Kid," Susan Youssef for "Habibi Rasak Kharban," Matthew Porterfield for "Metal Gods."

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