



**SENDING
YOUR SHORT
TO FESTIVALS**

by Ela Thier © 2010

After getting discouraged with a few failed attempts, a fellow filmmaker asked me for tips on how to tackle the festival circuit with her short film, and I proceeded to write one of my verbose emails while riding the train. My friends know me for those very long emails.

I later realized that this letter would have been super useful to me if I had gotten to read it when I first started sending my own work. So here it is the email, finessed just a touch so it reads more like an article. If you made a short film and are sending it out, I hope that it's useful to you:

One thing that makes the festival circuit easier with shorts is that it's rare anyone cares if the screening is a premier. With a feature film, you have to be entirely focused on where your film premieres because it will only premier once. The well-known festivals won't even look at a film if it already screened elsewhere. They like virgins, I guess. Shorts you can whore around. Nobody cares. You can start handing out copies of your short to everyone you know, sell it on your website the moment you finish it, and still submit it to Sundance a year later.

The only thing I would hesitate to do is make it available for free online. That might deter a festival. Short of that (pun intended), you can pass your film around like nobody's business.

That said, making it available free online is not something I would rule out. Make a YouTube sensation and get over a million hits. What festival will give you that kind of exposure? In fact, in the age of YouTube (time limit is now 15min and you can upload HD material), you could make the argument that festival screenings are no longer necessary?

But ok. Let's say you're a stuck-up square-thinking old-school snob like me who still thinks that festivals is where it's at. (Boy, my computer's grammar checker *really* hates "festivals is where it's at"!) OK. So we're determined: we want to show at festivals. Now what:

You begin by creating a project profile at Withoutabox.com. This website (owned by imdb) is the clearinghouse for most festival submissions. There are still a few stubborn festivals that don't use Withoutabox (Berlin, Tribeca). We hate them because they add hours of work to our already over-stretched lives by not allowing Withoutabox submissions. But they're Berlin and Tribeca so we cower and cooperate. Any festival that is not a big name and does not accept Withoutabox submissions will never hear from me, and shouldn't be hearing from you either.

Once you've created a project profile, start searching for festivals on Withoutabox . They list thousands of them. Yes, thousands.

Luck is a big factor, so you want to play the probability game. Remember: the advantage of short is that you can whore them out. The premier is not important. You can send your short to a gazillion bazillion festivals (my grammer checker doesn't like that one either...)

I have a super-talented friend who is an accomplished director and after submitting her short to 40 festivals she got into 3. I'm sharing this with you so you don't hang yourself if that happens. Not only is that a common scenario, it is actually the norm. If it happens to you, go for those youtube hits! If you don't want it free online you can still sell it online.

There are three types of festivals, as I learned from Debra Zimmerman's distribution workshop, which btw I highly recommend. There are many workshops/panels/what-have-you's on the topic. By a long shot, Debra's was the clearest and best one that I've attended.

But I digress. The three types of festivals (in order of prestige) are:

Industry festivals:

So called because industry attends these festivals to buy films. These are Sundance, Toronto, Cannes, Berlin. That's all folks.

However, the mysterious and allusive “industry folks” in those festivals are there to buy features. But from what I hear, there are people who buy short films, although I never met anybody like that. They must live next door to unicorns and Santa Clause.

According to Debra Zimmerman, the industry festivals where folks specifically buy and sell short films are:

Clermont Ferrand film festival

<http://www.clermont-filmfest.com>

Oberhausen film festival

<http://www.kurzfilmtage.de>

Tampere film festival

<http://www.tamperefilmfestival.fi>

When it comes to industry festivals, having a great film is not enough. You need luck too. And contacts. Every day, the folks who watch these films get several brown paper bags stuffed with dvd's. They get a couple thousand submissions and you're at the mercy of the first chump watching your film who may be tweeting, stalking their ex on Facebook, and playing Doodle Jump, while “watching” your film. (It's the only explanation I can come up with when I get a pass letter.)

When it comes to the big industry festivals, *connections matter*. They get buried in film submissions and are grateful if someone they know and trust offers them a recommendation. It doesn't mean that your film will be selected, but it means that the programmer won't play Doodle Jump while watching your film. If you know someone who knows someone who worked at such-and-such festival, do not pass go, do not collect a hundred dollars (do kids still play that game?). Reach out to each and every imaginable contact that you can think of, let them know that you submitted your film, and ask them to recommend your film to the programmer that they know there.

I repeat: when it comes to the big, fancy festivals, personal contacts **MATTER**.

Once you've submitted your short to the industry festivals, assume you won't get in and move on to mapping out your festival strategy. When you get the pass letter, here's what I do:

1) I tell everyone that they didn't actually watch it because no one would turn down my film unless they didn't watch it, or had just been concussed right before they pressed play.

2) I'm not generally a vengeful person, but I do save all my pass letters together in a folder so that I can publish them some day.

The Beatles got rejected from more labels than they could count. Stephen King used to impale pass letters on a roofing nail that he put in the wall. He eventually had to replace the nail with a stake because he couldn't fit the number of pass letters on that nail. Joanne Rowling (who went by JK Rowling because it's way harder to get published when you're a gal) got rejected by 12 publishers before a small-timer gave her a \$1,500 advance and agreed to print 1,000 copies of *Harry Potter*. One of my favorite Oscar moments was when Michael Arndt, writer of *Little Miss Sunshine*, (it was his first script sale), thanked his producer for being "the only one willing to make this film when NO ONE else would." Can you imagine how many pass letters he got? A comedy ensemble with a suicidal uncle and a pudgy girl: I can't *imagine* the number of numbskulls that turned that script away.

OK. So you did the big-name festival thing. Regardless of whether you get in, it will only help to widen your film's exposure by submitting to many more festivals. Remember that getting into an industry festival is a probability game. So, let's talk about the other two types of festivals:

Regional festivals:

If there's a town, there's a film festival. It's that simple. If there's a geographical location that pertains to your film in some way, it's a good idea to submit there.

Consider the hometown of the director, the writer, producer, lead actor; the town where the story takes place; the town where the film was shot, etc. The New Jersey International Film Festival, for

example, specifically has a category for films that were shot in New Jersey. Milk it.

Constituency festivals:

When it comes to giving your short exposure, constituency festivals are your best bet. In the case of my film *A Summer Rain*, I went for Jewish film festivals, women's film festivals, and children's film festivals (these were the three categories that applied in my case). Children's film festivals were very responsive to my film, and women's film festivals went nuts over it. I don't think I got turned away from a single one of those. I didn't do as well with Jewish film festivals, but I also didn't pursue it as much (only sent it to three or so...? Remember: probability. Three submissions don't get you in!) I was, however, recently solicited by the second largest Jewish film festival in the country. They wanted a screener of my feature, which is based on a short that I had sent there. So, my short clearly did leave an impression but wasn't programmed.

I can't say this enough: if you're a female writer or director, or if your film is about a woman, submit to women's film festivals. It's not about limiting your audience. It's about finding a place for the film to hatch so it can gain some momentum from there. In last year's Cannes film festival, there were NO women directors in competition. The indie world is just as dismissive of women filmmakers and women's stories as the mainstream industry. Use women's film festivals to your advantage. They're there for you.

If the filmmaker or story highlights a specific cultural group (African heritage, Asian, Indian, etc), by all means make use of it. Even if you spent your whole life distancing yourself from your roots, changing your name to John, and feeling embarrassed by your parents, when it's time to distribute your film, turn to them. You'll need their help. My film has a Vietnamese character and ended up winning "Best Short" at the Vietnamese International Film Festival.

A few more tips:

Festival's mission statement: This one is less important and it's also time consuming, but: I also casually browsed (on the

Withoutabox website) the various film festivals' mission statements to get a sense of their taste. I sent my film to a little-known festival in Australia just 'cause the description of their program sounded like my film, and like me overall, as a filmmaker. Sure enough, I received a personal note from the festival director who said she cried watching my film and I was nominated for "Best Short". Even better, through this programmer I got two non-exclusive distribution deals off of that festival. So it ended up well worth it for me to look at mission statements and figure out what festival would dig on the style and message of my film.

The "Touring Film Festival": Touring festivals have become increasingly popular in the recent past. They're a very interesting concept: if your film is selected, they take your film along with the rest of their program and tour it all over the country or world. The one touring film festival that my film got into brought it 20 times more exposure than any of the other festivals it showed in. So look for those!

Saving money: Unfortunately, the probability game is expensive. As much as possible, target festivals where deadline-wise, you can still get in on an early-bird submission fee. You'll save a lot of money that way. Withoutabox also has a search function that can help you find inexpensive or free submissions. Use that. You've got a good two years to submit your short from the time it's completed, and the time it's completed is flexible, if you get my drift.

Alright, let me be specific here: you want your completion date to be as late as possible so you can submit it as long as possible. Most festivals won't be interested in seeing a film that's been around for a couple of years. So: make your official completion date the date that you first get into a festival.

Attending festivals: Unless it's an industry festival, don't spend money attending festivals. Just go to local screenings of your film. You don't need to be there. The "networking" isn't worth it. How do you follow up with your contact in Douglas, Wyoming? You might get a couple of facebook friends out of it. Tops. Network locally; that's where relationships happen that can grow over time. Relationships take time and a cocktail with someone in Wyoming won't cut it.

This, of course, is not a hard and fast rule. If your film only gets into two festivals and one of them is in Douglas, Wyoming, then heck, Wyoming is a beautiful place.

Congratulations making your film! I hope you win the grand jury prize at Sundance, *then* get over a million hits on YouTube, and are then offered a three-picture deal by a super rich indie producer who understands that you need complete creative control of your work start to finish.

But seriously, I do wish you success.

Ela ☺