

## PRODUCTION VALUE IS OVERRATED!

GOOD ENOUGH WORKS WELL ENOUGH WHEN IT COMES TO FESTIVAL FILMS

by Mark Stolaroff

You did it! You sweated, starved, begged, borrowed and stole to get your no-budget film made; now you've been accepted into a major film festival, say, Sundance, Tribeca or Los Angeles. You must be talented because few filmmakers make it this far. Now you have a chance to be the next big thing. So, what do you do? Your instincts say put your best foot forward, open up those purse strings and start spending money you don't have to make the film as good as it can possibly be.

### DON'T DO IT!

For years I've been preaching the controversial idea that production value—at least what we generally associate as production value—is overrated. When it comes to no-budget filmmaking, where dollars and human resources are scarce, you must choose your battles wisely. You have to understand the kind of movie you're making because the rules for a micro-budget independent festival film are exactly the opposite of those governing traditional commercial films. What makes them work is different, the audiences' expectations are different, and how they play out in the marketplace is different (if they ever even enter the marketplace at all).

For every project there are key aspects that must work if the film is to succeed. For indie festival films the top three are story/script/dialogue, strong performances, and filmmaking talent. You'll note that production value doesn't make my list. High production value will not save your movie if these other things aren't working. If you spend all your precious resources worrying about what format to shoot on, or how well-lit your images are, you're making a costly mistake. I teach that production value needs to be just good enough to support the top three elements.

For example, in a dialogue-heavy character piece, good sound is critical to fulfill the potential of the script and the performances. How high your camera's resolution is, or whether you're shooting with a 2/3" chip, is just not important in that context. In fact, good no-budget films have an organic evenness to them where every aspect is in sync. Throw off the balance by having one element at another level and suddenly the movie's faults become glaring.

### MINIMIZING LOSSES WITHOUT SACRIFICING POTENTIAL

Most talented no-budget filmmakers instinctively get this. They gladly shoot on whatever camera they can get their hands on and tell unique stories in a way that jibes with their available resources. But many of these folks trip up at the end, after so ingeniously pulling lemonade out of lemons. When they get accepted into a major film festival the stars in their eyes obstruct their vision. I've interviewed many successful filmmakers who spent nearly nothing on their features and then, after getting invited to Sundance, raised \$100,000 to "finish" their films. In my former life as a principal at Next Wave Films, I invested that kind of money myself to finish films. Of course, back then you needed to have a film print to be able to screen at a festival, and conforming or color correcting on a home computer wasn't an option. Today's 24p cameras and feature-rich non-linear editing systems are incredibly empowering. What hasn't changed is the marketplace—in fact, it's gotten worse. For every *Napoleon Dynamite* there are thousands of festival films which simply don't have the revenue potential to justify spending big dollars on post-production.

You've already done what you need to do—you told a good story with strong dialogue and solid performances. You have visual talent and you took the time to get the edit right. Your job at this point is to assess the commercial potential of the film. If it's a small art film, then you should continue your frugal methodologies all the way to the end, or at least until it's absolutely necessary to spend more money. Don't waste thousands of dollars in a \$500/hour color correction suite,

## PRODUCER'S NOTEBOOK

The business end of filmmaking



or spend three weeks on a 5.1 mix, until you absolutely need to, which may be never.

Getting your film accepted into Sundance, Tribeca, or the Los Angeles Film Festival is not that moment when you need to fly headlong into debt. Case in point: I saw a film in Dramatic Competition at this year's Sundance for which I'd read the script a couple of years prior. I knew it was not a commercial movie, but for some reason they unnecessarily spent \$50,000–100,000 to screen their film on 35mm. Why? Sundance has the best HD projection of any festival in the world and you'll never need a film print unless you get a wide theatrical distribution. If you get that distribution—and that's a big "if"—you can spend the money on a film-out then. As I anticipated, this film didn't get distribution and I haven't heard a peep about it since. Now they are that much further in the hole financially.

Audiences don't care how much money you've spent. If your movie works, it works. If a distributor steps up with a fat advance, or covers the costs of post-production, you can achieve perfection then. ■ **Mark Stolaroff** is an L.A.-based producer and the founder of No Budget Film School ([nobudgetfilmschool.com](http://nobudgetfilmschool.com)), a unique series of classes specifically designed for the no-budget filmmaker. He was formerly a principal of IFC's Next Wave Films, which provided finishing funds and other vital support to exceptional low-budget films, including the debut features of Christopher Nolan and Joe Carnahan.

### THREE SCRAPPY FILMS THAT WON ANYWAY

The makers of the following films correctly assumed that their titles were good enough for the festival circuit without investing heavily in post-production.

**JELLYSMOKE** Director Mark Banning screened this film at the 2005 Los Angeles Film Festival in rough-cut form, with no discernible post sound work and no noticeable color correction. Shot on 16mm, it was projected on video and was one of the roughest looking and sounding films I've ever seen in a public screening. None of this prevented the film from winning the \$50,000 Target Filmmaker Award prize.

**AUGUST EVENING** The 2007 Target Award winner at LAFF not only won the big money, but was also picked up for distribution in spite of its homemade sound design and mix (performed by director Chris Eska himself in Adobe), and with only ten shots color corrected.

**THE DEATH OF MICHAEL SMITH** Director Daniel Casey did all the sound and color work on his desktop computer and finished his feature, soup to nuts, for only \$540. The only money he spent to prepare his film for this year's Slamdance, where he won an award, was \$400 to bump it to Digitbeta to project it.