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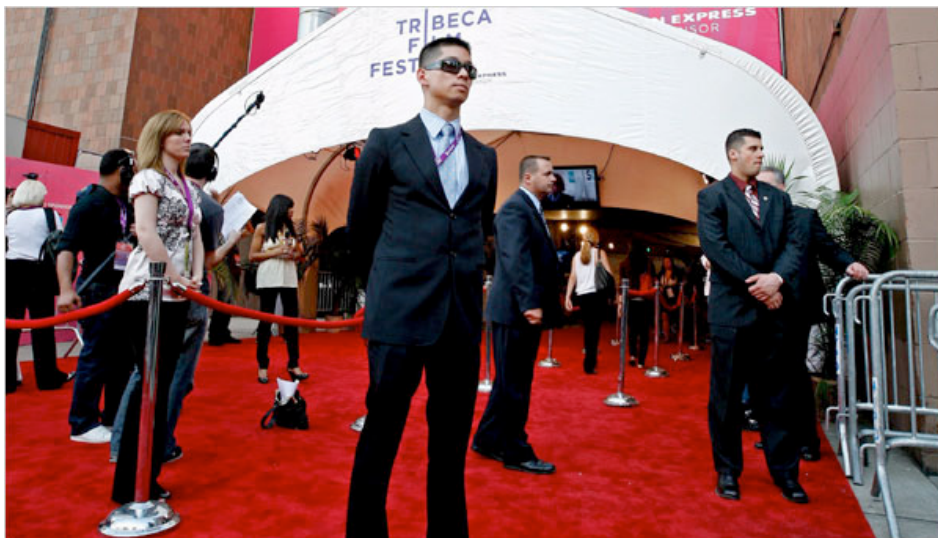
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Who Needs Cachet if You Have New York?



Peter Foley/European Pressphoto Agency

The premiere of "I Am Because We Are" at the Tribeca festival.

By DAVID CARR Published: April 30, 2008

Over the course of its seven-year history the Tribeca Film Festival has built a following, hosted numerous world premieres and played a significant role in helping a neighborhood find its footing after Sept. 11. Every year thousands of filmmakers clamor for hundreds of slots before the festival starts, and once it does, stars and directors mingle at downtown boîtes while the public queues up outside theaters in numbers that suggest that free whiskey is being handed out. The festival's main sponsor, American Express, just signed up for five additional years.

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It is an enviable record of growth and accomplishment, to which the cinephiles say, "Is that all you got?" Tough crowd, it's true. But for a film festival to enter the pantheon of Cannes-Sundance-Toronto-Berlin-Venice it has to have a commercial or cultural salience born of big movie sales or impossibly exclusive content, neither of which is a calling card of Tribeca.

The festival, a civic gesture conceived

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by the business partners [Robert De Niro](#) and [Jane Rosenthal](#) to help downtown New York overcome a nightmare, has assets, including its enormous size, a catholic range of film interests and a backdrop in a world-class city. But those advantages raise expectations, and the event has had trouble establishing an identity and a niche to match.

Factor in a democratic history of inviting all manner of film that has left the festival open to criticism that it is overbooked and not discriminating enough.

Positioned just weeks before the storied [Cannes Film Festival](#) begins, in the middle of May, Tribeca is viewed as flyover territory by many in the industry seeking sales or buzz. Physical geography works against it too. Anybody who has been trapped on a Sundance shuttle bus will tell you that much of the kinetic energy and serendipity that makes for the festival experience derives from isolation and an absence of distraction. New York City is the headquarters of distractions, making it difficult for Tribeca to grab attention.

“We have to work hard to rise above the din of New York,” Ms. Rosenthal said, sitting at lunch at Megu in TriBeCa on Monday. “And maintaining attention in a city where many of the people who work in the film industry can go home at night to their families, well, I always say to them, what’s so bad about that?”

“The audiences are clearly enjoying what we are doing,” she added. “And the rest of it? Well, it’s like [Keith Richards](#) said, I am sort of beyond analyzing it. I know what our objectives are. New York clearly had a desire and need for a big festival, and we are connecting.”

On Monday night, a wet, chilly evening that cried out for a quick cab ride home and Netflix, Theater 1 at the AMC 19th Street East was packed for “[War Child](#),” a documentary about the Sudanese child soldier turned rapper Emmanuel Jal. There was chatter in the audience about the early movies of [Natalie Portman](#), government-conspired famine and the moral implications of children committing murder. It’s hard to argue against a festival that draws all different demographics for a film that would normally have a hard time getting exhibition space.

Tribeca, rather than being a big player in the global film marketplace, has become a successful local event, partly because the organizers have avoided film elitism and mastered the high-low New York landscape.

Last week Vanity Fair hosted a glittery opening party at 60 Centre Street with [Jerry Seinfeld](#), [Bette Midler](#), [Billy Crystal](#) and [David Bowie](#). A single table included the juxtaposition of [Robert M. Morgenthau](#), district attorney of Manhattan; [Drew Nieporent](#), the restaurateur who conceived Nobu; and [Lauren Bacall](#), who does not require identification, seated with an underdressed reporter from a local daily newspaper and Cindy Adams, a gossip doyenne on The New York Post. Only in New York, right, Cindy?

Two nights later, on a warm spring evening, the plaza outside the World Financial Center was hosting all manner of “[Thriller](#)” nostalgia at a Tribeca “drive-in” event, with free popcorn, glitter gloves, zombie face painting and a staged re-creation of that 1983



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Michael Jackson video. It was not a big moment for cinema, but the hundreds of people who took seats under the pink lights had a wonderful time.

The festival has been tweaked to make a daunting roster of activities seem more manageable. This year there are 120 feature films, 40 fewer than last year. “It’s more closely curated than it’s been in the past,” said Peter Scarlett, Tribeca’s artistic director. And two experienced executive directors, Paola Freccero and Nancy Schafer, have reworked the festival, which used to sprawl all the way to the Upper West Side, concentrating it in the dual hubs of TriBeCa and Union Square.

The festival is also starting to make inroads on the awards circuit. Last year Alex Gibney’s [“Taxi to the Dark Side”](#) was sold at Tribeca and went on to win the Oscar for best documentary. The year before, [“Jesus Camp,”](#) another Tribeca-nurtured documentary, was nominated. [“Transamerica”](#) was purchased at Tribeca and went on to earn an Oscar nomination and a Golden Globe for its star, [Felicity Huffman](#).

As for sales, the marketplace aspects of the festival are now being overseen year-round by Genna Terranova, a former Weinstein Company acquisitions executive. Last year distributors bought 34 movies that had their premieres at Tribeca, about double the number in 2006. For the time being, though, Tribeca is less a hotbed than a seed bed, a place where projects are seen and take root in public consciousness. “It’s a great place to show a movie, but not a great place to buy one,” said Tom Bernard, a co-president of Sony Pictures Classics. When Mr. De Niro was shopping his film “What Just Happened,” he did so at Sundance, not Tribeca. (It did not sell, but Tribeca executives said it would not have been appropriate to put it in a film festival he started.)

But Jonathan Sehring, president of IFC Entertainment, is taking a more ambitious approach to the festival. “We are showing a number of films, and last Friday morning I saw a number of senior acquisitions executives in the screening I was at,” he said. “And we plan on coming away having bought several films.”

John Sloss, principal of Cinetic, which sells and finances independent films, said Tribeca was a young festival that may be one big hit away from becoming a destination for both sales and screenings. After all, not many people had heard of Sundance until “Sex, Lies and Videotape” was shown there in 1989.

“It’s a chain reaction,” Mr. Sloss said. “If they could hit a lick like that, the press would pay more attention, the industry would pay more attention, and it would really have an impact on the dynamics of the market.” Besides, he added, small movies can get lost in the clutter of Cannes.

Christopher Weekes, a writer-director who came all the way from Sydney to show “Bitter and Twisted,” a suburban seriocomedie that is one of the more talked-about features at the festival, said over a lunch of organic chicken and Kobe beef that New York had something all directors crave.

“I came here for the audience,” he said. “I knew that they’d come out and see my movie.”

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