



“Let The People Decide”

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By Denis Seguin

We all know that distribution ain't what it used to be. But now it just ain't.

Consider Lilian Cavani's Venice contender *Ripley's Game*. Fine Line Features fully financed its \$16.5m budget and has now reportedly decided against releasing the film theatrically in the US, although appears willing to entertain offers from rivals. Fine Line's rationale aside – rumour points to internal politics – what is a producer to do?

It used to be that getting a distribution deal with a Fine Line or Sony Pictures Classics meant a producer could move on to the next project; even an onerous deal with Miramax could be used to whip up foreign sales.

It used to be that a producer could sell a film for more than it cost to make – a profit margin. Now distributors are paying less than cost and asking the producer to share in the downside risk – current odds at the New York box office are one in 20 that a film will wind up in profit. Now a deal does not even guarantee a release, let alone a piece of the action.

The distribution bottleneck is getting worse. Technology has lowered the barriers to entry to production resulting in a glut of product. Meanwhile, the means of releasing are shrinking thanks to rising costs in marketing.

The alternatives – service deals and self-releasing – are not for the faint-hearted, but sometimes they are better than nothing. A service deal is more service than deal. It requires a producer to front the p&a costs. The cost of releasing a film in just a few key markets will run at least \$100,000. Few producers have that kind of capital, and most would rather invest the money in another project. Self-releasing is even scarier because few producers have the booking contacts in the exhibition market. Of course, there are those film-makers who choose self-releasing because they do not trust anyone else with their film.

Andrew Jarecki is in this category. After his documentary debut *Capturing The Friedmans* took top honours at Sundance this year, he turned away standard distribution offers in favour of a partnership with Magnolia Pictures and HBO Documentary Films, which will air the film. This hybrid release will keep him in control of what is arguably one of the year's more specialised releases – inflammatory themes include paedophilia and incest. The difference is that Jarecki can afford to be choosy – he is independently wealthy, having sold his on-line ticketing business Moviefone to AOL.

But there is a third way. Or rather a new way of seeing an old route: the regional festival circuit that has mushroomed across North America in the past 10 years. From Newport, Nantucket and the Hamptons to Seattle and Palm Springs, the mini-major film festivals are showcasing independent films in an atmosphere far removed from the hype of the A-list events, and generating enough press for producers to leverage a home video deal.

This third way requires a new kind of middleman, and Los Angeles-based Filmbuzz Marketing is eager to play the role. It seeks to apply Hollywood-style research to independent cinema by tracking films at regional festivals, applying sophisticated calculations that expand on the polling approach of audience awards. Filmbuzz executive, Greg Kahn says: “There is one audience award winner but that doesn't mean the other 149 films are without merit.” Like a stock analyst, Filmbuzz will amass profiles of films and sell the information to distributors, who can identify the films generating buzz, and to producers of those films, who can identify the audience sectors where film is generating buzz, if any.

Of course, resonance or the lack thereof will always be key. But if film-makers want that opportunity they will have to keep looking for new ways to make the old way happen.