

AV Video  
1990

***IN THE DARK***  
***Judging a Film and Video Festival***  
***By Mark Freeman***

I've just completed a marathon. Viewing over one hundred entries to the 23rd Annual Humboldt Film and Video Festival takes stamina and determination. Carbo-loading like a long distance runner, the experience left me bleary eyed and ten pounds heavier. The Humboldt Festival is held at the Minor Theater in Arcata, California in the heart of the Redwood Empire. Unfortunately for the visiting judges, we spent four days in dark screening rooms with only a rare glimpse of towering redwoods and an occasional whiff of ocean breezes.

Judging a festival was a new experience for me. I'm an independent producer, and I'm much more familiar with entering festivals than judging them. (This year I submitted a recently completed documentary --*The Yidische Gauchos* -- to a half a dozen festivals here and abroad. I collected my share of rejections as well as an award or two.)

Festivals come in all types and sizes. Some are for students only; others feature corporate productions. A few specialize by genre --experimental (Ann Arbor), documentary (Global Village) or narrative (New York). Some only accept film, not video. For others running time is a crucial determinate. Enter festivals selectively. It's a waste of resources to follow a shotgun approach. I was surprised to see that Pyramid Films, a major distributor, submitted 6 or 7 entries none of which met the Humboldt Festival's criteria of "providing a forum for personal expression (and) innovative, exciting contemporary work." The conventional themes and treatments of the Pyramid entries would have been more appropriate for an educational festival like the National Educational Film and Video Festival or the American Film and Video Festival. Independents sometimes submitted every tape they ever completed. Seeing five submissions from a single videomaker I couldn't help thinking that he was asking me to decide which was the best. (None were chosen for the festival.)

What was most surprising was the number of entries that were technically well crafted, highly polished and ultimately unsatisfactory. (Sample story lines included a road movie with the "hero" killing his girlfriend, stowing her in the back seat of his cruisemobile and heading out across the desert for endless soliloquies. Or how about a dark, deliberate, angst filled story, which turns on pig shaped packaging for a new pressed pork food product. One of the most tasteless entries was a series of anti-Semitic sketches set in the mortuary business.) No amount of production value can compensate for the lack of a coherent concept. Some festival entries seemed to be competing for special awards for vapidty, stupidity and boredom. Trading compelling writing and convincing acting for crane shots and lush musical scores is self-defeating. A misplaced emphasis of form over content marked much unsuccessful work. This is a fault common to narrative, documentary and experimental work.

On the other hand, whimsy and playfulness give a submission a distinct competitive advantage. After dozens of ponderous, self-conscious and often pretentious entries, comic relief proves irresistible. "Every Day is a Beautiful Day" is a no budget musical comedy with giant dancing potatoes and a singing village policeman. "Condensation" is a pseudo documentary about the horrors of household mold. A short comic animation is almost sure to be programmed. It's obvious that many more short films and tapes can be programmed than longer entries. In a festival that accepts work of any length, an hour long program needs to be three times as good as a twenty minute work. Festivals and judging are inherently unfair to longer, lyrical works that need more time to establish a mood and capture an audience.

Judges are often required to not only choose the winning entries, but to create screening programs. A film or video may be left out of a festival for reasons as "irrelevant" as that it proved impossible to pair with other compatible work. Judges select work for paying audiences. An evening's viewing is often structured for variety, pacing and length considerations, which may work against including a particular film or video. On the other hand weaker films sometimes look better because they benefit from the context of their companions. And some entrants do have a home court advantage. (For example, a picaresque documentary about Humboldt residents driving a yellow bus full of medical supplies to a sister-city in Nicaragua was chosen as a local crowd pleaser.)

Judges and festival directors are by no means free of pre-conceptions, artistic or personal biases and political agendas. But favoritism has no place in a well-run festival. And these factors tend to be eroded by the sheer volume of material considered. Judges soon become hungry for well-made work. A tape or film's most critical job is to grab and sustain viewer attention in the first five minutes. Once hooked a judge like any good viewer willingly suspends (a great deal of) disbelief.

Despite disparate experiences and personal working styles our judging process quickly achieved consensus for each entry considered. We even made an effort to review a portion of the 150+ submissions that had been eliminated by a pre-screening selection committee. In choosing films or tapes worthy of a second look we relied heavily upon the entry forms submitted by the producer or director. Here some filmmakers seemed to go out of their way to sabotage their submissions. We looked careful at the synopsis of each entry. Some were illegible or missing completely.

Some were vague and abstract to the point of (self)-parody. But entrants who could pique our curiosity or who attached reviews or information regarding prizes at other festivals were often selected for a second look. (It's true that well-known makers also were more likely to be considered further. This by no means assured their selection for the festival. In fact sometimes new work by more well known film or videomakers suffered by comparison to their earlier efforts.)

Our final task was the pleasurable one of choosing award winners. The Humboldt Festival is

unusual in that entry fees are very low (\$25) and yet a large number of cash awards are made. This year major prizes included Best Documentary, Best Animation, Best Experimental, Best Woman Filmmaker, and the Salvador Dali Award for Surrealism. In addition about dozen more entries received smaller cash awards. In contrast many other festivals charge over \$100 for entry fees and offer no cash awards.

If my experience as a festival judge is any evidence, being selected for inclusion in a festival is only partially a function of the intrinsic merits of a submission. All the more reasons not to take a rejection personally. My advice is to research the venue carefully. Match your entry to the types of productions that have won recognition in the past. And when your work and effort is finally recognized be sure to toot your horn a little. Let friends, colleagues and clients know of your success. There's nothing like a few framed awards or the odd statuette to cheer up your office on those cold and dreary days when your proposal is making the rounds and your waiting for the funding to begin shooting your next award winner.

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Mark Freeman is an independent producer. His films and tapes have been featured in many festivals including Chicago International Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival, Festival dei Popoli and the National Educational Film and Video Festival.