

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall

AUGUST 2007: So here we are again: deep in the craziness that passes itself off as organizing and running an international independent film festival. It's year 25 for me in working in the non-profit arena and year 11 with the Rhode Island International Film Festival. This year's Festival launches August 7th and runs through the 12th. It has been a year in gestation with entries coming to the office as early as September. This year, it's been a record 2,500 films submitted.

What makes the Festival work is the dedication of the staff and the volunteers who have adopted the event. The office buzzes year round and the operative language is well, film.

One person who has impressed me with his insight, unexpected sense of humor and genuine love for what he does is our Program Director, Don Farias. Actually, Don serves as our Managing Director, but it's his work with Programming that makes the Festival sing. Don's work is what audiences see and how he pulls things together is like alchemy. In so many ways, he has made order from chaos.

I've worked with a great many people over the years and I've met programmers with other festivals. Don is the only person I've ever known who is totally motivated by what is best for the filmmakers who apply to and who come to the festival. To say he's filmmaker friendly is an understatement. Don is genuinely passionate. Perhaps that's from being a soccer coach for a team that just won the state championship in their age division. Don is self-effacing, dedicated and an individual I respect. Where so many folks in this field are self-serving and the centers of their own universe. Don is that refreshing breath of fresh air; he is a team player. The Festival is not a stepping-stone to the next rung on the ladder, but something he is helping to nurture and grow.

Amazing? Indeed. Better yet, let Don tell it.

GTM: Can you tell us bit about your background?

Don Farias: A very long time ago I graduated with a computer systems management degree and have worked mostly in the corporate world ever since as programmer, systems analyst, project manager and consultant. For two of those years I managed an educational software system at a local university. The program involved presenting international data to high school students to prepare them for the global marketplace. Simply put, the software helped them to learn about other countries and cultures. Using video conference technology, I was able to link local students with students from England and Chile; it was a lot of fun.

GTM: How did you get involved with the Rhode Island International Film Festival?

Don Farias: I needed to do something other than work in a small beige cubicle for 8-10 hours each day and I thought that volunteering at night might offer a creative outlet. I initially looked into assisting at a hospital to help with families of patients, but then I saw an advertisement for the film festival. Like everyone else, I like movies and I thought this would be a great opportunity to learn about the industry. My week at the festival five years ago gave me the knowledge and courage to volunteer as a PA [Production assistant] for a local independent feature film. That film and a couple of cable Public Access shows later and I was hooked. In addition, because I met so many nice people at the festival, it became a year-round volunteer "second job" for me.

GTM: You went from a volunteer to someone who actually programs the entire festival; what sort of jump was that?

Don Farias: Well, I confess that I was pretty lucky; I was in the right place at the right time. After my first festival, I immediately began assisting with the print traffic department. The experience was invaluable and I learned what really went on behind the scenes. It was quite complex actually and very impressive given that RIFF was completely a volunteer organization, top to bottom. My background as an analyst and years of experience with strict organizational controls and systematic processes allowed me to offer suggestions and tinker with the systems and procedures in place at RIFF. The executive director encouraged creative thinking and the friendly environment fostered independent ownership of tasks and volunteers could take pride in their accomplishments. As I logged in films, organized the computer systems and coordinated judging and print traffic activity, I watched the programming director in action. Her knowledge of films was incredible and her efforts to find the best films were untiring. On opening night, I sat in amazement as her top films stunned the audience. Wow! I learned a lot that night about how great independent films really were. These were films that most of the world would never see, yet they were better than many of the "Hollywood" features showing in the big theaters.

When a vacancy developed at RIFF, I made a crazy pitch that in my mind had little hope of success. My suggestion was that I would be able to coordinate the judging of the films in a democratic fashion that would give each filmmaker an equal chance at selection. My idea was to build a stable of judges who would provide me with stats and comments and I would be able to determine the top films based on those results. It would not be a "Don" festival, but a festival curated not only by film experts and professors, but moms and kids and factory workers and film students and other filmmakers.

The RIFF staff thought it was an idea worth exploring and my suggestion was approved. Of course, I immediately thought, "Holy crap, what the Hell are they thinking? What do I know about film?" But this year, RIFF had over 50 reviewers and judges, so the idea as grown quite a bit in 2 years. I cannot take all the credit though. Phil Capobres, RIFF's Director of Operations, is my partner in selecting the films that are screened during our festival. To be honest, I would be lost with him and the rest of staff: Adam Short, our Producing Director, and Demetria Carr who keep RIFF running smoothly. RIFF is definitely a team, a family.

GTM: Could you explain how RIFF manages film entries and reviews the films?

Don Farias: Filmmakers send us films, we watch them and we show some of them to our Rhode Island audience. Yup, I think that's it. (chuckles)

GTM: Hmmm, maybe you could expand upon your answer just a bit. What actually happens behind the scenes?

Don Farias: Well, it is a bit more complex than that. Each film is logged into a database and transferred to a judging area where our reviewers can check them out—similar to a library. Each film is scored using a judging form and the reviewer basically lets us know if he or she liked the film and why. My goal is to have each film scored by at least 3 people, more if possible. In addition, Phil and I will score as many films as we can possibly watch giving most films at least 5 reviews. This is important because some people don't like "experimentals" or horror films and I need to account for those "biased" scores. With 5 scores, it is easy to ignore one low one. In simple terms, if a film receives 3 negative reviews, then it will most likely be rejected. But Phil and I still try to take a look just to make sure we are not missing anything. Those not immediately rejected advance to a 2nd round where more reviews take place to weed out films. Finally about 400

films make it to the 3rd round where the staff and genre “experts” review the top films to pick the selections. The 3rd round is not a fun time for judges. The films are all good and only a few, maybe 50 or so really stand out. The rest are mostly worthy of acceptance and it is a difficult and emotional process to select the final films to be shown.

GTM: What do you look for in selecting a film that should be screened at the festival?

Don Farias: That is a tough question to answer. If I had to choose between Casablanca, The Godfather and Citizens Kane, what would I do? Well personally I would choose the film with the prettiest girl. You see, no matter how objective you try to be, the process is biased. What is the best color, red or blue? Do I accept a horror or a comedy as the last film selected?

In my five years at RIFF, I've seen how different people like different movies for different reasons. I like comedies and I don't understand experimentals, so I let other reviewers judge those films. In fact Phil laughs at me and will not let me judge them because I don't get them and my average score messes up the stats.

My selection process is more about watching and learning my judges than it is with watching the films. Phil and I have learned which judges like romantic comedies and which ones like animations, but hate documentaries.

But getting back to your question, I have studied the films that were selected during the past 5 years and looked at many of the films that were not selected. I have watched the films that were chosen by the Academy of Motion Pictures and seen the films chosen by other festivals. There are common traits such as a great story, an intriguing beginning and a fabulous finish. To be honest, the technical value is not as important as the story. The story is really the most important part of the film. We have films that are beautifully shot and nominated for our cinematography award, yet it is rejected because of the direction, acting or dialogue. I would say that editing is the second most important part and the one thing that bothers judges the most. Lack of editing kills a lot of films. Some of our reviewers will argue over seconds of film in a feature. In general most films could be shorter. Watching so many shorts has ruined my ability to enjoy features. So many of them would be perfect 20 minute films, but the filmmaker or writer padded the story to fill 90 minutes and in doing so destroyed the original story.

We get films with a budget over 1 million dollars and films made using pocket change. It's obvious that the inexpensive film cannot technically compete with the big guys, but at RIFF, they are given an equal chance. “Discover the new voices of independent film” is just not a motto of ours, it's our mission. From the 12 year-old to the film school graduate, they send us their films with high hopes and big dreams and I really try my best to ensure they are treated as if they were Spielberg.

The selection committee does set target numbers for each category and genre. We like to include a little bit of everything to offer our audience a variety of experiences. So if there are 15 great animations, a few may miss out because we are limited to only showing 10. I can honestly say that we are not necessarily showing the top 275 films but that we are showing the highest rated horror films, animations, comedies, documentaries, etc. But, one thing is for sure; they all have a good story, except of course for the experimentals which go over my head.

GTM: How many films do you personally see during the course of a Festival season and what have you learned from this process?

Don Farias: This year I have seen over 1,000 films, possibly closer to 1,200 or 1,300. Now I have not watched every minute of all the films. Sometimes I am just trying to verify what the other 3 judges have suggested. Phil handles most of the features and probably sees close to 1,000 films.

In my 2 years as programming director, I have seen over 2,500 films and because of this, I believe I can pick out the top half of films. I ask a lot of questions and the experienced judges and our executive director have gone out of their way to teach me what they know about film. I also talk to a lot of filmmakers and ask them the same questions. Why did you use this lighting and why did you decide to cut away at that moment?

In summary I would say that I've learned what not to do if I should ever attempt to make a movie. I'm not sure I would be able to have the creative vision to sit behind the camera, but I have learned what the really good films look like. There are many different ways to personify a story and textures to filming it that the possibilities are endless. I'm not critical of the process and ignore common mistakes. I am looking for the film that leaves me sitting in my chair in amazement. After watching 20 to 30 pretty good films, one finally captures me with powerful emotion and visual wonderment that I just sit there, smile and think it's good to be me. I get excited that I will be able to present this film with others.

GTM: What's the hardest part of doing this job?

Don Farias: Rejections, no question. I ask myself all the time why I would want a job where I disappoint 90% of the people I work with. I get around this by telling the filmmakers that Phil rejected their film; it seems to work.

Actually, I take it personally. That is why I try my best to be as democratic as possible. I don't want one person's bias to affect our final decision. Its simple math: 2,000 submissions, 200 accepted films, 90% rejection rate. It sucks. It's especially bad because of the quality of the films we receive. I cannot explain to a filmmaker whose film was ranked number 201 why he was not selected; there is no answer. I held up 2 films in front of a committee and they chose the film in my left hand. There you have it Mr. Filmmaker, if I had picked up your DVD case with my left hand, you would now be a part of the exclusive Rhode Island International Film Festival. Instead you get nothing; your film isn't good enough. That's how I feel and why I hate this part of the job. The film ranked number 599 is better than anything I could ever possibly make and I'm the God crushing the filmmakers' hopes and dreams. I look at each DVD case as I place it in the rejected bin and I remember the finalists on the TV show Survivor looking at the torches of those people that did not make it. I remember the film, the story and the characters. If I don't, I sometimes watch it again because I need to know why I'm putting it in that bin. A lot of great films end up in that bin and it's not right. Except of course for those really terrible films which made me want to poke my eyes out.

GTM: What do you believe is the most critical thing that the film festival accomplishes for filmmakers?

Don Farias: Our festival is more about bringing people together to share ideas and knowledge than it is to show films. There are over 3,000 festivals worldwide and plenty of places to watch movies. Our festival brings together some of the most talented filmmakers not yet in Hollywood. We may show a couple of blockbusters, but 95% of our films are independent, home-grown projects. Our filmmakers are making a mark on the industry with their incredible creations and they are very close to fulfilling their dreams, if they have not already. The excitement at RIIF is evidenced by the filmmaker smiles and the friendships that are made during our week of fun.

We provide an outlet that is not there at the Showcase or on CBS. They can be discovered here by distributors, producers and other filmmakers. Being able to nominate our best short film for an Oscar is especially exciting for the both the filmmaker and RIFF. It's an honor that we take very seriously and it is never easy deciding which film gets the nod. Because of our history and reputation a film that plays at RIFF normally goes on to win awards at other festivals. This year we had 5 filmmakers who submitted to us last year sitting at the Academy Awards ceremony hoping their name would be called by the celebrity on stage. It was very exciting.

Plus we put some cool coupons and shopping discounts in our filmmaker bags.

GTM: If you were to work with a filmmaker from start to finish with his film what advice would you share and what insight would you provide?

Don Farias: This may sound cliché', but I would say follow your instincts and don't be closed in by years of training. It is important to follow all the traditional rules and guidelines, but experiment with your craft. As a person you are different than everyone else, make a film that is something you love.

Technically, I would focus on direction, choose the right actors, stick to your story and edit, edit, edit. What I have seen is that many films focus on one or two of those points, but let the other two slide. To be good, all 4 of those elements are equally important. Is bad acting the actor's fault of the directors? Many people tell me it is the filmmaker's fault because he has control over who is hired (or should have control) and he can correct the terrible acting by providing the right direction. If the actor is bad for the part, then cut him or her loose. The interaction between the actor and filmmaker apparently is very important and it shows on the finished product. I previously mentioned how important the story is and of course, the editing determines how the story is told.

A filmmaker that can keep his attention on these areas has a good start to making a good film. Then again, gallons of blood in a horror film helps a lot.

GTM: Can you share with us some of your experiences in dealing with filmmakers over the years? Humorous and otherwise.

Don Farias: Oh God, where do I start? I can be on a phone call with a filmmaker during our stressful selection week and it will usually be very pleasant.

"Don, thank you for taking my call, I know how busy it can be this week. I was just hoping to find out how my film is going. I value your input and respect your opinion. You know that my cousin dated a friend of someone that rode on a bus with Julia Roberts and she might come to the festival if my film is accepted."

"Really, what is the name of your film?"

"I Got Egg Juice on My Feet, Part II"

"Oh yeah, I saw that film, it was pretty good. I really enjoyed the scene with the monkey. A couple of our judges laughed and laughed, and few thought it was OK, but nothing special."

"So, what does that mean?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say that it did not fare well against the competition and is not ranked in our top 200 films."

"So I'm rejected?"

"Well, yes it looks like your film may not make it into our top 10% this year."

"Don, you're an idiot. CLICK"

Actually, the majority of my conversations are exceptional and fun. I enjoy explaining our process because I think it is fair and it usually puts the filmmaker at ease. I love asking questions about this scene and that storyline. I'm learning all the time. During the festival, I am lucky enough to meet most of these people and I'm almost always pleasantly surprised; they are normal people. They are not rich, fancily dressed snobs who would not give me the time of day. They love the Q&A we provide after their movies and eagerly look forward to the questions.

From a work standpoint, they have been incredibly personable and helpful. Sometimes we will make a mistake such as drop a DVD or get an email wrong and the filmmaker could not be more forgiving and friendly. Meeting the filmmakers during the festival and emailing back and forth during the months leading up to the festival are the best part of the job.

Of course I realize that many are initially nice to me to me because I have the title and perceived power and the calls for Mr. Farias are almost embarrassing; but it usually only takes moment for them to realize that I'm an average guy too. From that point on, we are a team working together to try to get their film selected. I let them know what I think and I ensure that they get a fair shake.

GTM: What do you think is the most misunderstood part of your job?

Don Farias: I think the filmmakers don't realize the number and impressive quality of films we view. Most of the filmmakers believe they have an extraordinary film and that is a good thing, they should. But since they don't usually get to compare their film against 1,000 other films, they do not see the difference. Many times, I am personally blamed for a film being rejected when in fact it is the filmmaker that should take the blame. I know that sounds mean, but I equate my position to being a coach of an athletic team. A player will come to tryouts thinking they are the best. As a coach, I can see who has been training and is taking the sport seriously. I can tell which players have been focusing on the skills necessary to succeed and working hard to improve. With films, it is easy to spot the stars, but we can also spot the films that are rough around the edges, but have told an incredible story in a beautiful way.

I think people think I watch all the films and I decide what I personally like. If I reject a film, well I don't understand what the filmmaker was trying to do or I'm a snob for rejecting a film with a smaller budget. Just like the ball player that blames the coach, he sometimes is not looking around to see what the starters are doing differently.

RUFF is an international competition; we are fortunate to receive some of the best films from over 70 countries. Statistically speaking, a film may have been judged to be the best film in Massachusetts, but when compared to the rest of the world, it is ranked #350 out of 5,000. This is still an incredible ranking, but not good enough to be the top 200. So what does this say about the film? Nothing really, it is a great film and we will acknowledge that. But once we reject that film, we run the risk of alienating a lot of local filmmakers because they all know that the film is the best around. In fact it is the best around... around Massachusetts. It would be unfair for me to

reject the best film from Africa just because I want appease the local filmmakers. In reality I accept the best local films in addition to the best international films, but the point is that we reject great films; we don't have a choice. The same thing happens with horror films and other genres. We are sometimes viewed as a festival that does not like docs about power plants or films about butterflies. I don't know where this comes from, but I hear it all the time from filmmakers who wonder if we would be willing to screen a film about so and so. I give the same answer each time: I am looking for the best films, period. The subject and genre does not matter; I want to show a film that will impress our audience.

GTM: How long does it take for you to ramp up with each festival in terms of planning and execution?

Don Farias: Oh boy. Would you believe that just this week I was actually thinking about 2008 and how I can make it better than this year. Phil and I have already made improvements to our current judging system that we plan to incorporate in September when the new films begin to arrive. This week I have been in the office well into the morning because our deadlines are tight and I want to be sure I am not missing a great film.

The judging process begins in September, but the actual get down and dirty planning begins in January. RIIF is actually one event put on by the Flickers Arts Collaborative and our staff is really a Flickers organization. We have festivals, events and educational workshops throughout the year. Our Roving Eye Documentary Festival in April coordinated by Adam Short, multiple events organized by Demetria Carr, a Horror Festival in October directed by Ric Rebelo and Josh Gravel, a Short Shorts festival in November, a Christmas event in December, a weeklong summer filmmaking camp for kids headed by Christina Mealey and Keith Brown. The summer film festival is our biggest attraction, but it is only one of many events hosted by Flickers.

RIIF is successful because of the many volunteers and interns who spend countless hours each week to create this annual event. They work hard and without them, RIIF could not happen. They all have ideas and suggestions to make us better. I was one of them a few years ago and I know how one small crazy idea can grow into a reality. RIIF is a collaboration; I am actually just a one part of a large volunteer organization. My job is to help the filmmakers get accepted. For me, it has become a full time effort. But I get a week off in late August to sleep before it's time to start anew...

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blog/Websphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>