Who needs Hollywood anymore?

By Scott Kirsner | January 31, 2005

PARK CITY, Utah -- Quickly, you realize that most everyone here for the Sundance Film Festival, which wrapped up yesterday, has a project.

I was getting a demo of some movie-editing software from Michael Phillips, who works as a product designer at Tewksbury-based Avid Technology, when Phillips started using some footage from his own personal project as part of the demo. That project, "Johnny Slade's Greatest Hits," was shot in Massachusetts with several players from HBO's "The Sopranos," on a $500,000 budget. Phillips, who is supervising the post-production of the film (but didn't direct it), is hopeful that it'll hit the festival circuit later this year -- though it wasn't being shown at Sundance.

Walking down Main Street, I was stopped by Matt Kresling, a writer/director/editor whose film, "The Milk Can," was playing at Slamdance, the alternative film festival that is held alongside Sundance each year. Kresling had made the movie, about a football rivalry between high schools that erupts into outright war, for $15,000. Referring to the latest digital editing and effects technology, Kresling told me, "I can do epic things in my bedroom." A member of his crew, passing by us on the street, confirmed that with a sly grin: "I've been in his bedroom, and I've seen him do epic things."

The movie industry is on the verge of a major technological transition -- one that seems likely to be a jump cut, rather than a slow fade. Inexpensive digital video cameras, editing, and effects software that runs on a laptop, and a new set of Internet- and DVD-based distribution mechanisms are cracking open the clubby Hollywood scene. At Sundance this year, 6,500 features, shorts, and documentaries were submitted to the festival organizers for consideration -- up from 5,874 last year. Of the 202 films that were picked to be shown at the festival this year, an astounding 51 were from first-time filmmakers.

"We're at an inflection point," says Stephen Saylor, a vice president of Adobe Systems who was in Park City to promote Adobe's editing and effects software, which competes with Avid's. "What we saw with the desktop publishing revolution in the 1980s is now happening with cinema. Technology is making it easier and cheaper to make movies, whether you're a hobbyist, a 'prosumer,' or an artist."

Since it's well-known that techies thrive in low-light environments, the festival's Digital Center was located in the basement of a building on Main Street. Sony was showing off a new $5,000 digital camera that shoots high-definition video. Avid and Adobe were demonstrating their editing and effects software, and Intel was boasting about how it had used WiMAX long-range wireless networking technology to beam a documentary called "RIZE" from Salt Lake City to...
Park City, and then up to a ski lodge in the mountains, where the film's premiere took place using a digital projector. The days of shipping around metal canisters of celluloid are nearly over, predicted Intel executive Joe English.

"What I saw was the single-most perfect projection of a digital film ever," said Ian Calderon, director of digital initiatives for Sundance, who was at the premiere. Wireless distribution of films, along with less-expensive digital projectors, will lead to a world of "content-on-demand, where films can be delivered to nontraditional theaters, and to PDA-type devices that are yet to be designed."

In the 1980s, Calderon was an early believer that video cameras would one day be used to make movies -- even though Sundance board members like Sidney Poitier and the late Jessica Tandy were skeptical. (This year, 74 of the 202 films screened at Sundance were shot on video.) His latest project is outfitting Sundance founder Robert Redford's home so that he can watch films downloaded from the Internet. "He's a guy from the '50s," Calderon explains, "but when I showed him some of the films from the Sundance Online Film Festival on my computer the other day, he was very excited."

Like all technological shifts, the digital cinema revolution is threatening the dominance of establishment powers -- in this case, the major movie studios. One afternoon at Sundance, I had coffee with Jeremy Coon, the producer and editor of "Napoleon Dynamite," a movie made for $400,000 and picked up for distribution at Sundance last year. Coon edited the film on a Macintosh in his apartment, using Apple's Final Cut Pro editing software. (Coon says he spent a total of $6,000 on the hardware and software he needed to finish the film.) "Napoleon" has grossed nearly $50 million in the United States, and the DVD was the top-selling release over Christmas.

"As long as it was cost-prohibitive to make a movie, there was less competition for the studios," Coon says. "The studios just want to keep releasing their crappy $80 million movies, and they expect people to go see them."

Coon says that digital cinema lets people with different, non-studio sensibilities make movies. "If you want to go make a feature film, there's no reason not to do it," he says.

Of course, the newly lowered hurdles to making a movie also mean that film festivals like Sundance and Slamdance are forced to sift through a lot of junk.

"The weeding-out process is gone, because anyone can get their hands on the technology," says Coon, who helped to select films for Slamdance this year. "But it's worth it. You do get a few gems, like 'Tarnation' " -- an intensely personal documentary from last year's Sundance made on an iMac for less than $250 -- "that never would've gotten made 10 years ago."

Might we get to a point where there are simply too many movies being made?

"The only people who'll suffer are the festival programmers like me," says Adam Roffman, who helps organize the Boston Independent Film Festival every April. "And I don't consider it suffering."

When I spoke with him on the fifth day of Sundance, he'd already seen 17 films.

At the end of our conversation in the subterranean Digital Center, Roffman couldn't resist handing me a postcard about a project he was helping to promote: "The 1 Second Film," a one-second animated movie being made for IMAX theaters. For as little as $1, Roffman explained, I could help fund the movie and be listed as a producer. Pierce Brosnan had already invested $10. How could I resist signing on -- if only so I could have a project of my own?

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