

THROUGH MY VIEW FINDER

Arun Vaidyanathan

There's no escape from the creative bug for the director Arun Vaidyanathan, who grew up in Sirkali, a small temple town in southern India and now resides in Garden state, New Jersey. Arun's creative ideologies have been moulded by a mix of eastern and western cultures and philosophies. He seeks to make a niche for himself by replicating this in his movies and marrying the East & the West. Even as his many-years-old dream comes to fruition with Achchamundul! Achchamundul, it is only the beginning of another of Arun's dreams: to transcend parochial borders, and make films for everyone.



FILMS ARE THERE TO CELEBRATE!

A movie which is made by just swiping credit cards, an insurance settlement, selling comic books and especially with no stars would have never seen the light of the day, had it not been picked up by 'Sundance' in 1994. It opened the door for one of the finest film makers, Kevin Smith, who also resides in New Jersey (like me) and the said movie is 'Clerks'. This is one of the most-stolen video tapes (remember this format!?) in USA, says IMDB trivia. That defines the popularity of the little film which was made for mere \$27,000; even with inflation, if you raise the budget... it's not going to exceed the budget of an eternal song sequence of a Tamil hero and heroine in Bali island, New Zealand or any land except motherland India. The latest smash hit Paranormal Activity, which stirred the low budget indie horror scene, is found in Slamdance festival, and like this, I can compile a whole list of films which found an audience because of their festival success!

It is not necessary that only small films made by some risky adventures of swiping credit cards or shoestring budget gems find their way into festivals. A regular independent film like Garden State or Little Miss Sunshine can also find recognition and eventually studio distribution because of film festivals. From the film maker's perspective, festivals give free marketing to the film, lots of networking opportunities and in case you are into one of those biggies where distributors accumulate for the next big 'undiscovered' gem, your film can be sold!

Many film makers and producers ask me: 'Will I will make money by showing my film in festivals?' The answer is big 'No!' Remember, even big film festivals struggle to raise sponsorships, cover costs of renting a venue etc. At the end of the day, film festivals are born because of people who are passionate about this art. I do agree that most film festivals are getting commercial, but still, this is the only hope for independent film makers who have no godfather in the industry or a studio to back them up. Although Internet screening can get you

audiences, even some money, festivals are a totally different experience. The late night parties... Yes, alcohol will be flowing, delicious snacks which can make you gain few pounds just by looking at them will be served, but at the same time, you will be sitting next to a film maker who could have made one of your favourite films. That's the beauty of the film festivals; real equality does exist over there! Some of the seminars and interviews will underline the fact that each and every film maker has paid his/ her dues. It will give you the feeling that you are not the only soul who went through sleepless nights and struggles to make and release your baby. Film festivals can motivate, encourage, teach and discover! How did film festivals play a catalyst role in my career?

Right from my childhood, I always wanted to be part of the entertainment industry. Friends who know me from school or college days never raised their eyebrows when I recently told them, "I am quitting my day job to make films." But they all did when I flew to USA as a software professional ten years back. I did everything I could to educate myself with films although I had worked in TV channels back home: joined a part time film making course in NYFA, made short films, saw one film per day and read encouraging life histories of achievers and film related books as much as I could. But I didn't know when I would make the plunge into film making as my full-time career. I used to narrate my stories and dreams to life partner Rajitha and used to crib, how boring it is to compile a software programme and sit in meetings where people discuss requirements, deadlines and deliverables. I think most film makers or any creators feel how stupid this world is when they are in this phase. I have felt it, but at the same time, I wanted to fix a goal before making the big decision. I wanted to make one short film which could find its place in an online film festival founded by now Academy award nominee Dana Brunetti (21, Social network) and Academy award winner Kevin Spacey (Usual suspects, American beauty). Actually,

this festival itself was introduced to me by my American friend Jeff Beres who used to work with me and was very passionate about screenplays. I chose this particular festival because it is conducted in the most democratic way possible.

Films are reviewed and rated by audiences to become one of their official selections. It is a library of short films and screenplays where each and every day, hundreds of films and screenplays get uploaded. I found a virtual buddy where I could start discussing about films with my fellow film makers, writers and film buffs, a great way to channel all my energy. One fine day, my horror short film The Seance found its way into the official selection purely by audience votes and after ten days of the same, I gave my notice to the leading MNC



WITH MANI RATNAM AT IAAC, NEW YORK

where I was working as a senior consultant. Although this experience was condensed in one paragraph, the same can itself be narrated in a few pages.

This entire article is intended for film makers who want to make meaningful films, something different from the run of the mill. Meaningful doesn't mean it should not be entertaining. Your film can be horror, thriller, comedy or any genre. Film festivals do not mean 'slow and boring'. If you think that way, it definitely means you haven't attended some of the best film festivals in the world. As a matter of fact, film festivals and their audiences love humour!

I am going to share some of the lessons I have learnt from attending film festivals. This can be



WITH MIRA NAYAR

very useful for film makers and also for some film buffs who always wonder about the mystery behind film festivals.

(1) When you discuss budgeting, make sure you allocate some decent money for film festival submissions, promotions, travel and subtitling. Submissions can be expensive before even you realize the same. If you really do your research, you can find some great film festivals which charge nothing for submissions.

Most festivals can't afford a flight ticket, although accommodation is usually provided. I have been given a flight ticket to Germany for one of my short films which runs under seven minutes; my project paid my travel expenses for some festivals with my feature; each and every festival is different. Although most top tier festivals will try their level best to sponsor your travel and accommodation, it is better to be safe while you plan your budget. The money you spend in travel will be peanuts when compared to buying TV spots or one week paper ad; yes, you read it right! You need to make an informed decision on which festivals you want to attend. That in turn will give you more exposure. Choose your battles! A decent set of brochures and posters can always attract more eyeballs to your screening; remember that.

(2) If you want to know whether you can sell your film, you need to make sure that there is a market associated with the festival. It's better to do some research according to your needs before applying to a festival. If your film is really good and critically acclaimed, the chances of selling television rights to various territories are high. To achieve the same, you need to retain all the rights; so a passionate producer who can back your film till the end is very essential. This process is not fast and sometimes, it might not yield the desired results. If you are in a hurry to see the money, forget this route. If you are really lucky, you might find a sales agent who will pick your film and try to sell the same in various territories by attending various markets. Nobody can say that these things can never happen; I have seen real

stories and some of my fellow film makers who achieved this; but selling a film is always more tough than making it.

(3) Don't miss the parties or any networking opportunity at the festivals. You might find your next producer or actor or director of photography! Make sure you have your business cards handy and never worry about the communication part. I have seen some of our film makers do not open up because they cannot communicate in the local language/ English. It is okay not to know English and you can convey your thoughts by broken English. Film makers are interested in knowing about your way of breaking into the industry; they don't care about your communication skills. Look out for some representatives of countries where they talk about incentives if you shoot your next film there. There is a rigorous process and paper work behind it, but it's all worth it. I was guiding one film maker about where he can find a good vegetarian hotel in Goa and a few minutes later, found he is Paresh Mokashi of Harishchandrachi factory (awesome film). National Award winner Anirudh Roy Choudhury and I became good friends because we met in a festival. Film festivals can be filled with lot of good surprises like this and you might earn some great friends.

(4) Make sure you have the right format of your film: print or HDCAM or Digi Beta or whatever they ask. Check the print before your screening and have a replacement copy handy. You never know who is among the audience; I have seen great write ups about my film where I have never met the journalist. For example, Achchamundu was chosen as one of the 'Top 10 films of IFFI' in Goa by Sachin Chatte and a glowing review in the same page. I have never met either Sachin or the reviewer and didn't even know when they watched my film. Good things can happen. Be positive! It will be also nice if you can call or Email them with a thank note – after all, getting a free promotion and that too by merit, is not easy!

(5) Awards: Nothing can motivate a film maker like an award! Making a film itself deserves an award; getting selected and winning is only a bonus. Don't sweat if you don't win one. If you do win, that can be a huge promotion for your film. Make sure you release a press note with photos as each and every press would love to publish this kind of news. Remember, people who run magazines and channels are also as passionate as you about this art. Never underestimate them. Achchamundu got one of the finest reviews I can ever imagine; the glowing stars and

'Must watch' tags really made the film more prominent and visible.

(6) Try to submit your film as soon as your final cut is ready; it's not good to send 'Work in progress'. If you release your film before festival selections, it can never benefit your film but can only benefit you, the film maker. You should give at least five to six months once the final cut is ready and make sure you plan your festival strategy beforehand rather than deciding at a later stage. Spread your festival options – yeah, every film maker wants a spot in Sundance and Cannes – but be realistic too! That doesn't mean you should not submit to them, but getting rejected by one festival doesn't mean your film is not good. I have been rejected by some small festivals, but the same film played in some top tier festivals.



WITH DANNY BOYLE AT SHANGHAI INTERNATIONAL FF

Finally, people ask whether festivals need recommendations or referrals. In any business, knowing someone will always help, but that's not the only way. I got into Shanghai International Film festival without knowing anybody and honestly, I didn't even think I had a chance with that festival. There is no submission fee to the festival, which means lots of entries and it is one of Asia's biggest festivals recognized by the International Federation of Film Producers' Associations. My short and feature films played in various festivals right from New York to Italy and I didn't know a single person in most of the festivals. If you know someone and they can recommend your film, more power to you. If not, you should still go ahead and submit your film. Being patient and positive is an important characteristic of a film maker!

Films are made because of producer's vision, money, lots of people's passion, skills and hard work, but it all starts with one person's dream to tell a story, usually a director. A boy born and brought up in a remote town Sirkali met and shared his debut feature experiences with Danny Boyle in Shanghai and walked the red carpet with Mani Ratnam in New York, thanks to film festivals. So my final word is: Keep dreaming and work towards the same.