

How not to run a film festival

STEPHEN HARVEY

ONE OF THE MOST SEDUCTIVE fringe benefits for fledgling film makers, critics, and archivists is the fact that nowadays film festivals have sprouted up in exotic locales throughout the world from Avoriaz to Zagreb and that, with a little luck, one may actually be invited to participate, all expenses paid. Film school laureates who don't know any better tend to have rather utopian visions of combining business (professional recognition for their maiden efforts on screen or in print) with pleasure (all those decadent après-screenings one hears tell of). Their first mistake is to assume that every such gathering is like Cannes, which, as everyone—including those *disgraziati* like myself who have never attended—knows, is both nonstop bacchanal and endless celluloid *grand bouffe*—sort of Harold Robbins meets André Bazin.

More-seasoned types have been around long enough to realize that film festivals are as diverse in spirit as the cinema itself. Rotterdam means arcane independent films; Karlovy Vary signifies opuses from the Eastern bloc; others focus on documentaries, animation, or science fiction; and, of course, there are those that dish up your basic cinematic smorgasbord. In the whoopee department, the experienced have long since learned that the most sybaritic doings likely to be found at any Italian festival (save Taormina) are polyglot round-table assemblies of structuralists and/or semioticians on the nature of art—so sensitive are the local leftist intel-

lectuals these days to the possible charge of *mondanità*.

Nevertheless, it would require a considerably more ascetic character than mine to resist the lure of free airline tickets (particularly in the midst of a cheerless New York January), the prospect of a sheaf of temptingly unfamiliar films, and the company of congenial movie mavens from the world over. So when a sunbelt film festival (name cheerfully supplied on request) invited me to organize a sidebar event bringing prominent directors and some of their best work down there, I agreed with enthusiasm. Never mind that the previous, inaugural year of this festival had been shrouded in a haze of financial impro-

Theaters used for screenings must be at least 10 miles apart and 15 miles from festival headquarters.

prieties, while showcasing films so lamentable that even the most backwater of UHF outlets would have shunned them. This year, the festival was under new management, and everyone involved swore it would have the aesthetic rigor of Telluride mingled with the cosmopolitan pizzazz of the Venice film festival in its *Dolce Vita* prime, all orchestrated by a staff of near-Teutonic efficiency and IBM-esque expertise.

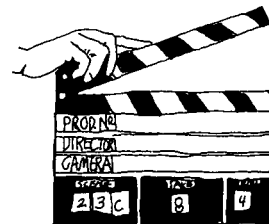
Two weeks and several mild attacks of colitis later, I stumbled back to New York in a state of chagrined befuddlement. On the hazardous assumption that you can learn from adversity, I have herewith compiled a primer for the aspiring film festival organizer, guaranteed to ensure that said event will be something all in attendance will never forget, however hard they try:

1. *Make sure that your board of trustees is packed with local socialites.* First of all, such people realize better than anyone else

that the real function of a festival is to provide an excuse to treat oneself to loads of buffet suppers and cocktail parties, preferably scheduled to conflict with screenings of whatever movies are in competition. Local socialites also provide a boundless source of amusement to any inveterate film type who might brush shoulders with them over the hors d'oeuvres tray, especially if they're the sort whose idea of a foreign movie is *Three Coins in the Fountain*.

2. *In hiring your chief festival administrator, rely on the Peter Principle above all other criteria.* Don't even consider conferring such an honor on someone who's actually run a festival elsewhere before—this type wouldn't really appreciate the distinction, and besides, he might even turn a bit refractory on realizing that his prospective employers don't know very much about movies and don't care. Instead, your best candidate is someone whose role model is apparently Faye Dunaway in *Network* (after all, it did win her an Oscar) and who, accordingly, projects competence and authority mainly by dressing in crisp beige suits and surging through anterooms barking terse ultimatums to a bevy of cringing underlings.

3. *In governing your administrative staff, take as your motto "l'état c'est moi."* This way, even if you have inadvertently managed to engage some intelligent and/or knowledgeable people to work under you, by the time the festival begins, they'll quake at the thought of making even the most trivial decisions without consulting you. Consequently, you'll ensure that during the course of the attendant chaos, your impotent staff will be besieged by irate film makers, VIPs, and gentlepeople of the press, while you're tending to important matters like clinking daiquiris with Brooke Shields's mother.



4. *All theaters showing films for the festival must be located at least ten miles from each other and fifteen miles from the festival's center of operation.* This will first of all diffuse any sense of drama and occasion your event might have managed to engender. Moreover, since your official transportation fleet consists of a battered station

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wagon and a Cadillac reserved for the administrators' use, should any of your imported guests actually want to see some of the festival entries, they'll have the opportunity to get to know the authentic locals via hitchhiking.

5. *Schedules are meant to be altered beyond recognition.* If you must adhere to your original game plan for screening times and places, keep it a state secret worthy of the Nixon White House, lest all those soothing acres of empty seats be invaded by bodies clutching valid tickets. If you have to, seize any excuse to shift things around, but don't let anyone in the metropolitan area (particularly the press) know until fifteen minutes after the screening has started. If by some chance the right schedule should hit the papers, make sure the director's name and/or the title of the film are misspelled—only pedants would notice, anyway.

6. *Make invidious comparisons.* By now you've learned that all the film makers present are tiresome worrywarts who live by the delusion that a festival showcase might actually affect the course of their careers. So when you inform them that the fruit of six years of their labor has been slotted to show twice—at 10 A.M. in some outlying shopping mall, and in direct competition with the Superbowl telecast, be sure to remind them how much more disorganized *last year's* festival was. To the now gray-faced auteur, this will be tantamount to saying that compared to Krakatoa, the eruption at Vesuvius was a dip in a hot tub.

7. *Treat foreign cinéastes as if they were illegal aliens.* Over here no one knows who they are anyway. Don't meet them at the airport. Never find the time to introduce yourself to them personally. If you start

to feel a slight twinge of remorse upon hearing that said guests have been padding around their hotel lobby talking to themselves for three days, send flowers if you must, but neglect to check whether the bill is enclosed by mistake. You'll be much better off ingratiating yourself with visitors from the West Coast, even if such luminaries are the director of *Tilt* and one-time blaxploitation king Fred Williamson. You never know when a contact in Hollywood will come in handy.

8. *Remember the Mussolini-at-Salò syndrome.* Once you're certain that everything has been irremediably botched, retreat to a spot where you and a squad of faithful die-hards can remain comfortably incommunicado. A well-guarded hotel-condominium complex far from the main action is ideal—the food is better, the suites are larger, and there's always somebody around to screen your calls.

9. *After the fall, keep your sunny side up.* Never mind those churls who write for the local newspapers or those kvetches who accepted your largesse and then

bitched, bitched, bitched from the second day they arrived. *You* know the festival was a roaring success, and that any last-minute snags were the fault of your scant and inexperienced staff. Remind your board of all those notables you managed to sucker into appearing (never mind that they'd rather be hijacked to Libya than ever come back again), and promise an even more stellar lineup next time. Once the smoke has cleared, you'll still have months of planning and preparation to make sure that 1981 will make this year's festival look sick—redundant though that may seem. When next year rolls around, just keep invoking Rule Six, "You should have seen what a fiasco last year's was," without neglecting all the other rules. You'll have an established film festival and a credit to the community. Only pretentious outsiders will dare to criticize you.

Now that I've shown you the ropes, just one more thing: Please make sure my invitation to return next year gets lost in the mail. Otherwise, the next time an arctic front hovers over the eastern seaboard, I might even be tempted. □

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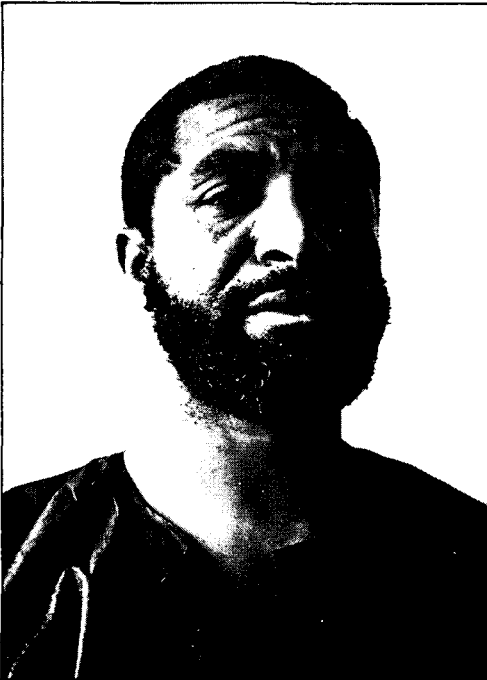
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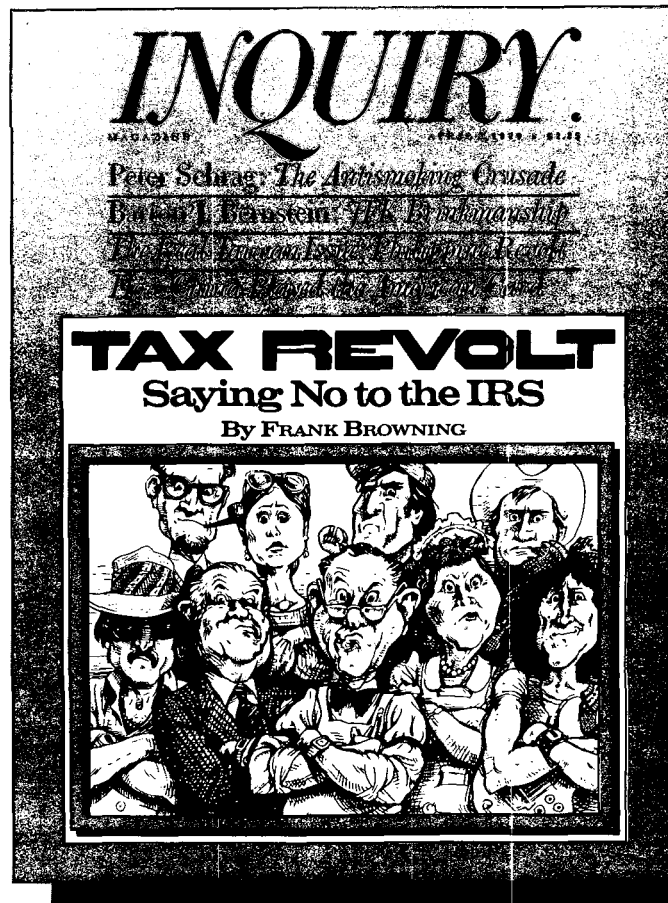
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