

Sundance Film Festival

Tips for Filmmakers

Dates: 20-30 January 2005
Website: <http://www.sundance.org>



Introduction

Although Australian films are ineligible to actually enter Sundance's competition strand, a well-received screening and positive press review within the Premiere, World Cinema and Shorts Programs of Sundance can greatly benefit a film's positioning for the US. Because so many buyers and execs attend, Sundance can generate hype and excitement like few other festivals. This prestigious festival has screened over 40 Australian titles within the last 10 years.

The following are excerpts from reports written by AFC travel grant recipients who have attended the festival in previous years, highlighting the benefits of attending Sundance Film Festival for Australian practitioners in future years.

Why approach Sundance Film Festival?

... The film's producer, in conjunction with our local distributor and international sales agents, all agreed that the Sundance Film Festival was the perfect place to premiere the film. Since Sundance is an internationally acclaimed festival, with a recognised pedigree and an enormous cache, screening there would generate interest in the film back home in Australia, help with the future marketing and sales into overseas markets and other film festivals ...

... Of course everyone was also aware that in terms of sales the North American market is a difficult and lucrative one to crack. Sundance was perceived as a great place to begin our campaign ...

... A Sundance type of film, I think, is a modest, independent, low budget feature film, with a first time director ...

How to cope once you're there

... Attending all your screenings is very important to establish contacts. It is also nice to be there for the general public who often just want to meet you after the screening to congratulate you. Good for the ego if people love the film. After screenings you may end up on a shuttle bus with people who just saw your film—another place where the questions continue. Don't forget the audiences are who you made the film for ...

... If you are a director of a short film and plan to make feature films in America, make sure you have a finished script, unencumbered by co-writers or producer or anything else that means you do not fully own the script. This seems to be the best way to get a start in L.A. ...

... People may want to meet you, and the screenings are the best place for them to get in touch ...

... At Sundance the director is worshipped and celebrated ... it is a director's festival. The producer and the screenwriter were also really well looked after, but certainly did not get [as much] attention ...

... Your first thing to do at the festival: get hold of someone who has attended the festival before. They will give you tips on things like: where are the parties happening that are not advertised; what am I able to get into that they haven't told me I can get into? ... the afternoon cocktail parties are very casual and they won't knock back a filmmaker ...

... Pack warm clothes ...

... Sundance is a fabulous experience. And only by being there could you ever realise how big the American industry (beyond the studio system, a whole other story) really is ...

... Keep a daily diary of all screenings, meetings, and what you did on the day. Keep all cards given to you and write a memory jogger on the back ...

... Attend the functions that the festival organises, these are great opportunities to network as much as possible with filmmakers and producers of like minds ...

How the festival treats filmmakers

... Lots of lavish parties at night. Forums and panel discussion groups. Director's Luncheons where you got to meet other directors and industry people. An official Sundance Greenroom where you could relax, get a coffee, meet and talk to people. Bulletin boards with a constant flow and exchange of information ...

... The festival office helped with travel and accommodation arrangements. The liaising officer was most helpful until we got there and then, having safely brought us there, abandoned us ...

... I met lifelong friends through the share house I stayed at - a highly recommended form of accommodation: affordable on a budget and an excellent opportunity to network ...

... This festival would be better if it never forgot that it was originally started to honour TRULY independent films and their makers. It's become a bit of a mainstream circus ...

... The Sundance Film Festival was very good with looking after their filmmakers and filmmaking teams. They had organised events for each strand of programming, so there was always a function or event on where there was a 'home' for the filmmaker. They set up gatherings via functions, press events and presentations of films. This was really positive - by the end of the festival there was a large group of people who had really networked with each other, connected in areas of interest, and had assisted in providing cross-cultural

... Sundance is a fabulous experience ... But it is a lesson in focus. You have to be able to separate yourself from the hype of the festival and re-focus on your career plans ...

... I actually ended up meeting most people on the free buses that shuttle everyone to and fro around the various sites of the festival ...

... The festival's publicity office didn't do much. Too busy, I suspect, doting on all the North American films with big name actors and directors ...

information on our own film industries and ways of producing films ...

How to promote your film at the festival

... Our international sales agents went into negotiations with a couple of small, so-called boutique North American arthouse distributors ... This festival has become a feeding ground for Hollywood executives looking for product: small, independent films to buy, directors and writers and anyone else who can feed the hungry Hollywood movie making machine ...

... The festival has its own sales office which facilitates sales and distribution for anyone eager to register and hire their services ...

... Our publicist gave us producers time to concentrate on 'networking'. However at the same time we also heavily promoted the film ourselves. Best of all we really worked as a promotional team but having someone devoted to it certainly made a difference ...

... Our film did not attract any buyers. Its length [short feature] and its subject were not of great commercial interest at the festival. Sundance has both a large Hollywood contingent and a large independent contingent, but the film did not really attract interest from any distributor or buyer ...

... Our sales agent sent a couple of their reps to the festival, who wined and dined people and shopped my film around ...

... I did an enormous amount of local and international press, local television and foreign television, local radio and print press interviews with journalists from around the world covering the festival ...

... Of course we went to the never-ending festival parties and, until we were drunk, just simply spruiked the film ourselves ...

... The best bet is to try and get in touch with Australian media to continue the interest in your film that would have started as you were leaving for the festival ...

... We distributed leaflets throughout the media office, the headquarters, the documentary house, and pin boards on the streets to further promote the film ...

... We had also contracted the services of a small LA-based public relations company who had represented films at the festival before. They had a reasonable track record, seemed like genuine people, and were keen and affordable: INDI PR. And they had approached us and assured us that they were only taking on a few films ... other companies who approached us seemed to be taking on too many projects, over-committing themselves ... From Australia, before the festival, we liaised with them, organising press kits and a strategy. They ended up being very pro-active, organising the bulk of the press we did. Also their office, in the main hotel that over the duration of the event becomes the festival

... Sundance is definitely a market-place ...

... Our publicist organised the media ... This was extremely helpful and probably got us a lot more promotion than would have been achieved without him ...

... Sundance is mainly a feature seller's market rather than a short film seller's market ...

headquarters, became a sanctuary and safe house for us during the hectic days of press commitments. We also got to hear all the festival and industry gossip, which is surprisingly helpful ... It also inadvertently helped us that they were repping another film, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, from Ireland, which was generating an enormous amount of controversy and eventually won the Audience Award. The American and international press were always in the office covering that story and would often pick up on my film in passing. Serendipity ...

Screening stories

... All screenings sold out and the press screening well attended, or so I'm told. I attended all the screenings except the press screening which the director is not allowed to attend ...

... Directors of the films in my shorts program didn't turn up for screenings as they were too busy schmoozing around town at the brunches, lunches and parties ...

... The cinema seated round 300 people and after the film a great response and a long Q & A session ...

... The first time my [short] film screened was the first day of the festival and the reaction was amazing. The crowd was very appreciated and coming out of the film I was kind of swamped by card waving managers, agents, producers and lawyers and spent the rest of the day and night in meetings ...

... Word seemed to spread during the course of the festival and my film proved to be an effective piece to draw the attention of those agents and producers I came over to meet ...

Outcomes

... I learned more about the machinations of international film festivals (the politics and intrigue) and about the importance of marketing your film ...

... I got to witness the responses of an American audience to my film. And since I'd always thought that I was making a very parochial film, a film very purposefully and perhaps even exclusively speaking to Australians, it was satisfying to see and hear the response of others. It's a very film literate and critical crowd at Sundance, testing and judgemental ...

... The film has gone on to countless international festivals as a result of Sundance, especially in North America. So many in fact that we are finding it extremely difficult to service its appearance at so many festivals, just through pure lack of resources to get tapes, freight and media packages to so many and to put in the labour to organise this. While we are desperately trying to achieve this, there are still too many requests to keep up with ...

... I got an offer while I was at Sundance to direct another film in Australia. A big budget Australian/English co-production ...

... Screening helped us secure the closing night at the Melbourne International Film Festival ...

... Various American agents and lawyers approached me in regards to representing me and I was approached to direct a film ...

... Made very good contacts with distributors and filmmakers. We were exposed to the Indigenous filmmaking culture of North America, Canada and New Zealand ... Made very good contacts with international corporate financing people ... Improved our ability as producers to be invited to the international arena, providing professional development for us in this marketing area ...