



WHY FILM FESTIVALS ARE STILL ESSENTIAL FOR FILMMAKING

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The Sedona International Film Festival is back in town, and I reviewed some of its films the other day. As I said before, I have a great deal of respect for the festival, and I appreciate all the life and culture it's breathed into the city (and state).

And this brings an important point to mind.

Film festivals are not only a cultural boon to the local populace and a convenient way to bring international and independent films to broader audiences – most importantly, they're the main alternative to the mainstream Hollywood film industry.

As I'm sure you know, film festivals are famous for selecting films based on quality and expression rather than profitability and box-checking, and this mentality is incredibly helpful to aspiring artists and filmmakers who are just starting out and haven't hit their "big break" yet, or who don't want to sell their soul to the industry to develop their stories.

The main advantage of "selling out" is to have your work produced professionally as opposed to having to develop it yourself, which is not easy by any means.

The trouble is, it's all about the money and the fame.

If George Lucas wanted to create a photorealistic CGI movie about twelve talking celery sticks who travel from Soviet Russia to the moons of Jupiter looking for their missing keychain, he could afford to do it and people would probably go to see it (including myself).

But if some unknown indie filmmaker who's only made one film wanted to develop the same thing, not only would he be laughed at by almost everyone, but he wouldn't have any means to produce this whatsoever unless he has a rich uncle who's willing to waste millions on that nonsense.

Ergo, the solution for many creatives is to sell out to the industry. Sure, the executives might still produce your celery movie, but it won't be anything like you originally wanted, and you might feel betrayed and empty inside.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to either being a broke failure with no way to create your projects or a sellout who feels dead inside – submitting your films to a film festival.

While it's very unlikely that you'll be able to come up with something with a super high production value, that's not what matters. What matters is that you create a film that's good regardless of whether you spent \$10 or \$10,000,000. If you can tell a story so fantastic with three actors, one set, and \$25, you are a good filmmaker, and you'll make an incredible story with a bigger budget – and film festivals will

allow this to be possible because, if they like your low budget movie, they'll feature you and give you awards, which will open the door for you to make important contacts which could lead to your being able to create blockbusters.

Is any of this possible with the mainstream film industry? Nope. Not only is it highly unlikely that you'll even be able to pitch a script or a concept, but they'll take all creative control away from you if you're just some unknown writer or filmmaker.

This is why film festivals are important – they give every filmmaker a chance to be great. A chance they probably wouldn't get in Hollywood.

So, when I hear talk of film festivals (and cinemas, for that matter) being phased out in favor of streaming services (especially during the COVID era), I get worried.

This is very personal to me because film festivals have been instrumental to my career, and I hold them close to my heart. In fact, I was introduced to them at the age of three when I was featured in a documentary called *The Artist and the Shaman* (2002), which was subsequently screened at the Sedona Film Festival after debuting at the Montréal Film Festival.

Since the beginning, I've found filmmaking interesting – which made me want to explore a filmmaking career of my own

I created a short film, *Beyond* (2019), for my video editing class, and my video editing teacher really liked it and encouraged me to submit it to various film festivals.

To my complete surprise, as this was my first true narrative short film, and I did nearly everything by myself (writing/directing/acting/editing/music/VFX, etc.), the film was accepted into the Jerome Film Festival and the Santa Fe Film Festival, as well as being shortlisted for the Thessaloniki International film festival.

I was so honored and grateful that these festivals and people enjoyed my work, and it inspired me to keep making films (unfortunately, COVID has gotten in the way of that at the moment).

Without film festivals, I would have had no success and would have had to write formulaic screenplays to sell on the open market to make a name for myself.

And now I'll mention something very sad.

I used two websites to submit to film festivals, FilmFreeway and Withoutabox (which was owned by Amazon).

Unfortunately, Amazon decided to shut down Withoutabox for whatever reason, and now they've encouraged affiliated filmmakers to submit their films and shows to Prime Video Direct, which is like a cloud-based streaming version of a film festival.

And while I have nothing against Amazon for that decision, since it was a smart business move and doesn't necessarily hurt indie filmmakers who submitted through Withoutabox, it paints before us the uneasy future (amplified by COVID lockdowns) where everything is on the cloud, and archaic relics such as Blu-ray Discs and theaters will be long gone.

So, if film festivals end up being closed down due to streaming becoming more all-encompassing and driving theaters out of business, that will be heartbreaking.

It's easy to take the value of film festivals like the Sedona Film Festival or Jerome Film Festival for granted, or think they're redundant, but just consider how valuable they've been for all these years.

As I'm sure you're well aware, there were no streaming services when the Sedona Film Festival was founded – festivals like that were the

only viable way for independent or international content to gain a spotlight and reach a wider audience.

Therefore, if you ever find yourself thinking that film festivals are unnecessary to some degree, just consider all the good they've done for their respective communities and the artists that they've helped. Without them, many creators (and actors) who you might even be fans of wouldn't be where they are today.



In conclusion, I will forever support film festivals such as the Sedona Film Festival for all they've contributed to culture and the success of independent creators, and I sincerely hope that we'll keep them both in our hearts sentimentally and afloat financially. Streaming is undeniably useful to society because it makes content viewing more accessible to audiences, but we need to keep the greed in check if we want to truly ensure a future where storytelling remains good.

Think about it, if one private company controls indie film streaming, how is that any different from the mainstream Hollywood industry? It's a slippery slope.

All we can do is keep up the hope.