

## **The Heart of DocUtah**

I like to say I made a small film with a big heart and I discovered this weekend that DocUtah is a small film festival with a big heart and a place my film found a home. After submitting *HERE LIES MY HEART* to 40 film festivals it found a welcoming home at DocUtah – The Southern Utah International Documentary Film festival in St. George, UT. It was selected to be screened, so I was thrilled. The film had garnered awards from four other festivals, The Santa Barbara Ocean Film Festival, The Blue Ocean Film Festival, The Mexico International Film Festival and The International Wildlife Film Festival, but it did not screen before an audience at any of these festivals. It did have a screening at the Olympia Film Festival in November of 2010, but I did not know until a few days before when they wrote me asking for a screening copy. I was upset I could not go because I was on a trip many miles away from Olympia Washington; otherwise, I would have been thrilled to attend. So it was bittersweet moment, “how exciting my film has been chosen, but darn I can’t go. Why didn’t they let me know in time?”

Filmmakers make films so they can be screened in front of an audience. They want their stories told to provoke feelings, thoughts and possibly action from an audience. This is the power of film and why so many of us want to make films. It’s also a thrill for the filmmaker to sit in the audience and listen to an audience laugh or cry at those moments that affect you the same the same way or discover other reactions you didn’t know the film would evoke. It’s a thrill to have them “get” your film. That’s why screenings are great and especially when a Q&A can take place between the audience and the creator of the film. This is the behind the scenes of filmmaking where newcomers learn from the veterans and veterans can learn from the newcomers.

At DocUtah I saw an incredible variety of documentary films. I met and listened to a variety of filmmakers talk about making their films. It is always educational.

Andrew Hongo made *LEGACY*, an incredible thesis film from the NYU graduate program in journalism. He filmed street kids for six weeks on the streets of Cambodia. Sad stories of kids and their families that have been torn apart in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge.

Robin Kupferman made *SLIP CUE*, a film about the art and business of being a DJ. It shows people with a passion for what they do and offers good advice on how to do it. The creative use of music and images draw you in and allows you to feel the passion these folks have for their art.

Both these young filmmakers were inspiring to meet. They talked about how they love making films, but also how difficult it is and how they are contemplating getting “real jobs”. This is the dilemma so many of us find ourselves in. We love making films, but it is hard to get the money to make them and find a way to have your film seen and make money back. But that is why film festivals have grown so much. When I first started telling people about my plans to make my film, I remember a woman who worked in the business telling me, “oh, yeah, you just submit it to film festivals and it will get a

distributor”. It sounded so easy, but it is not for most of us. More films are being made now, therefore more film festivals are popping up, but the playing field is still very large and competitive. So many good films with so little time to see them all.

I also met another first time filmmaker, Mathew Callahan who made BEAVERBROOK, a fun, entertaining, touching and nostalgic film about childhood memories at camp and the sad fact that camps like this do not exist anymore due to the cost of insurance. Mathew did not go to film school, so when he decided he wanted to make this film he educated himself with books and hired a good crew to help him. He also found private investors to finance it which was impressive. So often, the creative types shy away from the task of raising money to do their creative endeavor since it involves a completely different skill. But Mathew made it sound so easy and you can see he has the personality for it, likable, enthusiastic and confident, all good skills to make it happen. I feel the film is good enough to be picked up by a distributor and have a theatrical run which is his number one plan, so I wish him success and I’m excited to see that happen.

Then there was the veteran filmmaker, Helen Whitney that has made big personal films. I had not heard about her and her work before this film festival. Yesterday, on the 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of 9/11, she gave a beautifully written intro to her film FAITH AND DOUBT AT GROUND ZERO. I remembered the end of her intro which resonated so deeply with me when she spoke of those final words that so many of the people in the towers said to their loved ones before they perished, “I love you.” Her film was equally profound and emotional. She interviewed 300 people when doing the research for this film. The result is a personal exploration into how people’s spirituality was changed by 9/11. It’s a deep and moving exploration of the pain, sorrow and love felt by those directly affected. After the screening, I felt so deeply moved and emotional, similar to how I felt after seeing “Shindler’s List” where your body feels heavy and numb and your emotions close to the surface.

The main character of my film is Pepe, a fisherman who lives on a tiny island in the Sea of Cortez. He expressed feelings about 9/11 shortly after it happened and we came to visit him. He told of his sorrow that this had happened to our country and how he felt the USA was the mother of us all and it was so sad that someone would do this and how it affects so many people. He was the only one in Mexico to make mention of this tragic event and it brought tears to my eyes from this man with such a big heart living on this remote island.

I’ve been to film festivals over the years and this was the first time I got to participate as a filmmaker! It was a different experience. The staff treats you special. You get your package of “swag”, a backpack with lots of info inside including a hat and water bottle. Darren, a film student at Dixie College was assigned to introduce me before my screenings. His genuine nature, kindness and excitement for films were so refreshing to be around.

I am most familiar with the Big Sky Documentary film festival in Missoula where films are screened in two theaters. I'd say the audiences there must really love films based on the fact that there are usually 50-300 people in these theaters.

I had two screenings on Friday night (5pm and 7pm); both had only 5 people plus a few volunteer film festival staff. I guess you could say, I was expecting there to be more. The next day I had two more screenings. The first was at the historical Electric Theater at 4pm on a Saturday. Well, this time nobody came, but at least this time I had lower expectations, so I was ok with that, a bit relieved thinking, ok, good I don't need to give my intro which I wasn't very good at anyway. I'm a filmmaker and more comfortable behind the camera, not in front of an audience. But the staff there said, we'll still show it for ourselves. So there I sat, by myself watching my film for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time.

I must say, I came to appreciate seeing it on the big screen. When you work on something for a long time, you become numb to it and it's harder to see it fresh, but I acquired a new appreciation for it, sitting through it again in that empty theater. It was wonderful to see the images projected larger than life and the sound and music sounding so good! So I learned patience and an acceptance for watching my film and actually enjoyed it. It was good to have this renewed feeling for it.

One film festival staff was in the audience, but got pulled away to do something. Then I wondered if the two theater workers were still watching. In the middle of the film, one worker brought me a bottle of water. This nice gesture warmed my heart. At the end, the two men working there told me how much they liked it and asked questions about the families, so I knew they were sincere. We talked about the changing world and how places like El Pardito where Pepe is from might not exist in the future. I knew they "got my film" and that made me feel good. Even though not many showed up to see my film the feedback I got was worthwhile.

For my last screening, a couple that had traveled to Mulege in the Sea of Cortez (near where the film takes place) told me how much they loved it and how well I captured the feelings of the place. Judy told me how it made her feel peaceful and calm and she saw the love the family had for one another and it was beautiful. This also really pleased me and I told her that is the feeling you get when you visit the island, so I'm so glad it comes across on the big screen. The beauty of the island is not only the scenery, but also the big hearts of the people living there that make you feel so welcomed and appreciated. The same goes for the DocUtah film festival. They are only in their second year, but everyone I met made me feel so welcomed and appreciated. A small festival, with a big, big heart, just like my film.

-- Linn Harter