

A Chameleon Grows in Brooklyn

Marco Ursino and the Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival

by Mark Kirby

When I first heard there was a Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival, I chuckled. Boy, the neighborhood is really becoming hipster central now. Then I heard it was showing at the Commodore Theater. Nice touch. That old theater has a special place in my heart because it has that classic, neighborhood theater look, like the one I went to every weekend between the ages of ten and fourteen, back home in Washington, D.C. Chipping, peeling industrial brown paint on the walls. Faded, worn carpeting. It has that smell from my childhood movie life, the smell of thousands of pounds of popcorn popped, dropped, and ground into the floor, a floor that's always sticky from generations of spilled soda.

Over the last three years, as the festival has grown from 135 submissions in year one, to over a thousand for this year's program, screening the films there is even more appropriate. Most of us got our initial love of movies in such a place. It is also the only real theater in Williamsburg, and, with its grit and low budget appeal, it represents what most of us moved here for (excluding those who came here after only after *Time Out* magazine said it was okay).

No one likes adversity, but necessity is the mother of invention. Armed with a European do-it-yourself aesthetic, born of frustration and desperation, Marco Ursino founded the festival in 1998. His reason? "My goal here was to give the opportunity to others that hasn't been given to me. I truly wanted to create a festival of filmmakers," he said (*Indiewire*, 1998). One that sidestepped the politics of "Who is your star, who's behind the film, any industry buzz?" The Sundance Film Festival, to name one, seems more like the publicity arm of corporate-controlled "independent" film studios, than a celebration of film making and guerilla creativity, like it was when it started. I mean, c'mon, 20 million dollar indie flicks? Please.

So in late 1997 Mr. Ursino began putting the first WBFF together, against the well-meaning nay saying of friends, who thought he was crazy. Crazy like a fox, as it turned out. The response from the community has been great and individual filmmakers' heartfelt kudos must make Marco and the others in the organization – Mario Pego, Director of Programming, Anna Schneider, Production Manager, Susan E. Mackell, Director of Development, and Abe Schragar, Technical Director – feel like all the work is worth it. But don't just take my word for it, read what these filmmakers have to say: Eric Cooper: "We were turned down by the first 24 festivals we entered. Nobody wanted to give us a break or saw the potential of the film. Marco and his crew . . . gave us a chance." Tamara Hernandez: "The Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival is the connecting point between European and American festivals. It has a truly distinctive film perspective . . . I just recently got my film sold and it is going to be distributed theatrically in the U.S.!"

Like our lovely 'hood, the Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival, otherwise known as "The Chameleon," because of the multiethnic hues of the neighborhood, has grown by leaps and bounds. With more submissions than ever, along with increased media visibility, advertising, and cinemaphile buzz, this year's festival and competition promises to be exciting, to say the least.

The following interview took place in the WBFF headquarters on South Fourth Street.

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

How did you become a filmmaker in the first place?

I came to the U.S. to study. I went to St John's University. The last year of school, I shot a one hour documentary. But even before I started school, I started shooting a feature, called "Clouds of Magellan." This was around 1995. I finished it in 1998, and we've started selling it now, in foreign territories. I do film because I love it, because it's the most beautiful form of art. It's a nice combination of art, of science. It's just a beautiful medium.

So you've done all your film work in America.

I'm from Italy. In Italy I worked in television, but in front of the camera. I did some standup (comedy) and some acting.

Was this independent television or the Italian equivalent of commercial TV?

No, no, no, never mainstream, absolutely independent for life. Always small things. But I started getting interested [in film back then]. And, to bring another medium in, I've been doing radio since 1976. I finished doing radio a few years ago.

How did you come to live in Williamsburg?

Actually by chance, I have to say. We're talking nine years ago . . . You know, it's the city, it's expensive, and everyone is searching for a place, with some space. And Williamsburg was the natural answer. Obviously, I wasn't the only one thinking that.

The WBFF website mentioned that the festival was created because you were frustrated by the politics of the whole festival circuit.

Yes, it was for that film ["Clouds of Magellan"]. I put it off-competition. The festival has always been a competitive festival, but I created [it] to show my film, basically, out of competition. The important thing was to show the film.

Regarding film festival politics, do you mean, like, "who's in your film and who do you know"-type politics?

Well, yes, but I would never say never [about succumbing to politics], because you never know what your choices will be. But I am saying it's a struggle to remain clean. As the company becomes bigger and bigger, there are different interests, economic interests [getting involved].

A film festival is about real estate, mostly. Sundance was invented to exploit a certain area of the U.S., and [now] they have a huge resort there . . . It's mostly about attracting attention to certain neighborhoods. Now, in Williamsburg, the festival is one of these vehicles. The festival is one of the protagonists of this growth of Williamsburg, but then again, you have all these restaurants, all these bars, everyone has their own enterprise. But it's difficult to manage to keep clean. Now there's more politics than ever, kissing asses and so forth, but we try as much as we can to stay away from that.

How many submissions did you get this year?

A thousand.

That's about double what you got last year.

It encompasses 40 countries, but maybe more.

In an interview with the New York Times last year, you stated that you wanted more Polish, Russian and Latino films in the 2001 festival. Were you successful?

We got a lot more, and I'm very pleased. Again, we're not talking about too many, for the simple reason that we can only show about 70 films [in the competition]. Compared to a thousand, it's nothing. But of those films that are Williamsburg films, yes, and I'm very proud, they're nice, and I think they look very good in an international context.

So those groups were represented in the Williamsburg films?

But not only Williamsburg, Brooklyn in general.

Brooklyn is so diverse anyway, with more than 100 languages being spoken.

Yes. That's what we're trying to do [include more of Brooklyn]. Now many people – critics, journalists, and filmmakers – believe that if you're going to show Brooklyn, you should only show Brooklyn projects. But I have so much respect for this neighborhood. I think we should have new ideas coming in, [we should] see what the world is thinking, and bring that to a Brooklyn audience. I think that is treating the audience with respect.

You've been criticized for having films that aren't just those made by Brooklyn filmmakers?

Right. It's not about just Brooklyn filmmakers, but also the Brooklyn audience. We want to feed them with new ideas, with things from other countries you've never heard of. That's how you learn new things, as a filmmaker, and as an audience.

Do you see the WBFF growing, like Sundance, in terms of side projects like the scriptwriter's workshop?

The WBFF is growing a lot, but I don't see that kind of growth. I see a growth in terms of endorsement of content, trying to do a better a job between the filmmakers and distributors and television networks. Not becoming a distributor, but growing in that direction. Then again, it could grow in that direction [distribution]. I don't know. But it is becoming more than just an event. More venues are involved.

This year you're not just showing at the Commodore?

This year the competition is going to be at the Commodore. [But] what we'll do, starting in June or July, is to begin to showcase this years films. We're still showcasing last years films at the Pioneer Theater.

How did you hook up with Phil Hartman and Doris Cornish (the owners of Two Boots Restaurant and the Pioneer Theater, in the East Village)?

They contacted us. And it was very flattering, because they asked us, Slam Dance, Atom Films, and the IFP [Independent Film Project, one of the oldest and largest independent film organizations]. These are the four they asked for the Tuesday nights [weekly indie film showcases] at the Pioneer. Being associated with them is very good. I have respect for [those organizations].

So in the future, there'll be more showcases and outreach?

Absolutely. More showcases in other parts of Brooklyn, and Williamsburg as well. We'll try to find the right key . . . maybe use video projection in some places, maybe find a place where we can preview the films of the next year. We will be more present after this festival. Like I said, we have seventy films in the program. But, we're trying to keep a file that's about double that, of films that may not be appropriate for the international film competition, but that we will show somewhere else. Which means establishing relationships with more filmmakers.

Regarding the competition, are you showing any experimental films?

Yes. There are four categories: feature length, documentary, short films, and experimental.

The shorts are narrative?

Yes. Experimental is a broad category, obviously. It's for all those non-conventional ways of telling a story, such as non-narrative film, or media manipulation; whichever films do not fall into the other set categories. We still put animation under the experimental category, but we might have to change that, because the animation is becoming a category in itself.

You mean you're getting, say, narrative animation?

Yes. There are so many really good animations, that it's difficult to refuse them.

Has the festival's growth compromised your original vision?

Absolutely not. In fact, it's actually amplified [our vision]. We stick to our very simple, twofold mission: one, to discover, expose, and promote the filmmakers and, two, to draw attention to Brooklyn. We're sticking to the same thing [as always] just on a different scale.

Do you ever have time to make films yourself?

To tell you the truth, it's kind of a pity. The only thing I did in the past two or three years, is the T.V. commercial for the festival. And we are now finishing a documentary about the festival that is going to air on PBS in April. It's all festival related. But it's creative work, so it's okay. As soon as I have a moment, I'll shoot something.

Mark Kirby is a drummer, actor, and writer, who lives right here in Williamsburg. He tends bar at Artland on Monday and Tuesday, and on weekends does the same at Two Boots Grand Central.