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## The Sundance Experience

By Roberta Marie Munroe, author of *How NOT To Make A Short Film: Secrets From A Sundance Programmer* (December 2008)

It is without question that 90 percent of short filmmakers aspire to one day have their film selected for a Sundance screening in Park City. Many who have come before them experienced what most would call "the best screenings of my life." What makes Sundance such an extraordinary place for filmmakers? It's complicated from an organizational standpoint, but from a programmer's view, it's simple: The work that gets selected every year is *presented for the entire world* to see. At Sundance, you enjoy regular in-theatre screenings, online screenings (if you choose to opt for that) and an audience of the crème de la crème of the film industry.

What many filmmakers don't know is that, with more than 5,000 short film submissions a year, getting your short into Sundance is almost like winning the lottery. The simple reason is this: Out of 5,000 submission, about 200 to 250 are short listed as possible selections - and less than half that number (generally between 80 and 90 shorts screen every year) can be selected based on space availability. That means *less than 2%* of total submissions are actually selected.

As a Short Film Programmer for the Sundance Film Festival, I watched more than 15,000 shorts in the five years I was there. Many of the films I evaluated were mired in repetitive, clichéd storylines, poor casting and massive production inadequacies that, with the right team behind them, *could have been avoided*.

*Does your lead character, in desperation, drink Jack Daniels straight from the bottle? Is there a mime featured in your short? Modern dance sequence? Does your lead come out of the closet and is subsequently beaten by enraged father, thrown out of the house and loses best friend? Are there four white guys sitting around a table doing cocaine, calling each other "bro" or "my niggah"? Did you hire your barely-talented girlfriend to play the lead in your dramatic masterpiece?*



author Roberta Marie Munroe; photo by Angela Brinskele

Do short filmmakers lack creativity? No, no; I don't believe that. What I believe happens to short filmmakers is the same thing that happens to feature filmmakers. They don't get out there and watch enough of what is already being programmed, released or broadcast to see that their *brilliant idea for a film* has already been done - many times. Nor did they understand the collaborative nature of filmmaking when it came to hiring a producer and crew. Nor did they create a proper budget only to find themselves without the means to make their WWII masterpiece look like anything other than what it was: two guys running through the trees of Griffith Park, Los Angeles, circa 2007.

One morning I was sitting with a filmmaker friend, Tiffany Shlain, talking about a mutual friend whose film did not get into Sundance that year. The friend was crushed and writhing on their apartment floor in pain. I explained to Tiffany, in great detail, why our friend was one of more than 5,000 short filmmakers who received rejection letters. She slammed her coffee cup down and said, "You *must* write a book and tell filmmakers why their films don't make it past an audience of their family and peers." So I did. (She's pretty forceful.)

What stood out to me was, there was a clear and definable difference between shorts that successfully captured the director's vision and those that did not. When writing *How Not To Make A Short Film: Secrets From A Sundance Programmer*, I spoke with many successful short filmmakers, directors of photography, producers, editors and, most importantly, actors. The pattern was crystal clear: Directors who surround themselves with a brilliant team have a far better chance to create brilliant work than those who think they *know what they're doing*. (Really? On your first filmmaking experience?)

Regardless of what a great vision you think you have, *all* filmmaking starts with the script. And scripts have two crucial elements: story and structure. In my opinion, short films are

harder to nail than features. The short story needs to be fresh, which is less a constraint for features because they've got 90 minutes to explore their plot. Shorts have quite a different structure than features, *and* your story has to accomplish a significant amount of emotional connection (be it comedic or dramatic) in far less time. So many short films I see (as do my programming colleagues and many Hollywood agents and managers) seem to have a team behind it that believes their priority is slick cinematography and editing. Believe me when I tell you it's not.

Here are a few questions for the up-and-coming directors to ask themselves (or their seasoned colleagues, if this is their first film) as they begin to crew up:

- At some point in the festival circuit (if indeed your film was selected by one), did you ever wish you'd taken *another* pass at your script *before* you shot it?
- When making your last film, did you find yourself fantasizing about killing your producer?
- Did the director of photography ignore your shot list and waste valuable time getting *the shot* that didn't make your film any better or easier to edit?
- Did the actors you cast stage a mutiny whereby you found yourself listening to dialogue you didn't write?
- If this is your first short, have you found a team of people who are smarter than you?
- If you took your favorite shots out of your short, would the run time be around half of what it is *with* them? Take at least half of them out - you'll thank me from Park City.

While some people think the title of this book is irreverent, what it really is is honest. Ultimately, it's next to impossible to tell you what makes a great short - but it is very, very, verry easy for me to tell you how *not* to fall into an abyss of rejection letters. **-MPM**

*How Not To Make A Short Film: Secrets From A Sundance Programmer* is due in bookstores January 20, 2009 - yes, the same day President-Elect Obama hangs his hat in the White House. Ms. Munroe will be at a book signing at Dolly's Bookstore on Main Street in Park City on Wednesday, January 21st, 2009, from 1pm to 3pm. Come early to avoid the line. To contact Roberta Munroe, check out [www.hownottomakeashortfilm.com](http://www.hownottomakeashortfilm.com).

Book cover courtesy of Hyperion.

