



# The Alternative Theatrical Circuit

## WITH FILM FESTIVALS AS A LAUNCHING PAD

BY MICHELLE PASTER

Conventional wisdom leads most filmmakers to tour the festival circuit for a year and then, once they secure distribution, open commercially, with the goal to reach a large audience through positive press, and then generate significant distribution revenue. Yet a commercial run in theaters doesn't often come close to the full houses many filmmakers will have enjoyed at festivals. Increasingly, filmmakers are being more strategic, narrowing down a few A-list festivals as platforms to launch their film theatrically and looking into alternative venues such as museums and universities, to better control how their film gets out there.

Submitting to and playing at some festivals may help, but when filmmakers think of the festival circuit primarily as a direct exhibition tour that will lead to a distribution deal—or even a distribution mechanism itself—they are often disappointed. Filmmaker Paul Devlin truly adheres to the definition of a theater, whether the big screen is in a festival, museum, planetarium or university venue, taking advantage of what he calls “alt-theatrical screenings.” His third feature documentary, *BLAST!*, completed in 2008, reached its core audience of science and astronomy

enthusiasts, as it tells the story of Devlin's brother Mark, leading a tenacious team of scientists who try to understand the birth and evolution of the galaxies by launching a revolutionary new telescope under a NASA high-altitude balloon.

*BLAST!* premiered at Toronto's Hot Docs in spring 2008, launching the film's festival run, where it screened at the Sheffield Doc/Fest in England, the Florida Film Festival, and the Vedere La Scienza Festival in Milan, Italy, where it won Best Documentary honors. The film was not accepted, however, into the same festivals that had showcased Devlin's previous film *Power Trip* (2003), including the Tribeca Film Festival and SilverDocs.

Distribution strategies for *BLAST!* evolved from the film's screenings at the IFC Center and Cinema Village in New York City. The reviews from this run led to further press interest and a National Public Radio interview with Mark Devlin, on its *Science Friday* program, which reaches up to 1.5 million listeners. Stephen Colbert, a science enthusiast and a fan of the NPR program, booked Mark on *The Colbert Report*, which gave the movie a big push, leading to speaking engagements at exhibition spaces throughout the country.

*BLAST!* continued on the alternative theatrical venue circuit, including a screening at the American Astronomical Society's annual meeting, which capitalized on the fact that 2009 was the Year of Astronomy. Devlin explains, “It's rare to have a theatrical feature film on astronomy make it into the marketplace, so I think it was an exciting event for astronomers in their real working environment. There were 150 to 200 people in attendance.” Additional screening venues included the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Exploratorium in San Francisco and ScienceWorks in Ashland, Oregon, among numerous others. Future screenings will be held at Cal Poly Pomona University, Adler Planetarium in Chicago, the Explorers Club in New York, as well as a television broadcast on KVCR in San Bernardino, California.

Peabody Award-winning director Aviva Kempner strategized with Jewish film festivals to act as a platform for individual city screenings nationwide for her 2009 documentary *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*. The film tells the story of Gertrude Berg, known as “The First Lady of Radio,” CBS' first family sitcom heroine, and the first female actress to win an Emmy. She gained fame and

Filmmaker Paul Devlin on location in Antarctica for his film *BLAST!*. Photo: Mark Devlin



Filmmaker Paul Devlin (right) and his brother Mark Devlin, PhD., on ice shelf in Antarctica. Photo: Mark Halpern

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— Paul Devlin, Director, *BLAST*

success as the creator, writer, producer and star of the Depression and World War II-era hit radio show-turned-TV sitcom, *The Goldbergs*, which aired on CBS from 1949 through 1956.

*Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* garnered attention at the High Falls International Film Festival in Rochester, New York, which, in keeping with local heroines Susan B. Anthony and Cady Stanton, honors women in film—both behind the camera and on the screen. The film subsequently played at Lincoln Plaza in New York City. Kempner, along with Wendy Lidell, president of International Film Circuit Inc., exhibited the film through Jewish film festivals in Boston and San Francisco, the latter of which honored Kempner with a Lifetime Achievement Award, increasing press awareness and reviews. Her film opened commercially in San Francisco right after the festival. She and Lidell subsequently embarked on a national theatrical tour last summer.

Mitchell Block, executive producer and co-creator of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Carrier*, and president of the distribution company Direct Cinema Ltd., deems festivals a business—to rent condos, bring in tourists and accept submission fees—rather than an artistic venue for filmmakers to attract core audiences. The awards and exposure one gains from the festival circuit do not necessarily produce direct outcome if the goals are to secure a distribution deal and get your core audience to see the film. Festivals yield many “award-winning” films, but, as Block explains, “It’s like Lake Woebegone,

where all of the children are slightly above normal.” So if festivals are your priority, even a prestigious venue like Sundance doesn’t always lead to money or more work, and awards don’t always pay the bills.

But speaker fees do, and in Devlin’s case, the *BLAST!* theatrical release indirectly led him and his brother on a nationwide tour to universities, planetariums and museums. “The whole idea of ‘theatrical’ is evolving,” Devlin notes. “It used to be you played in big theaters across the country and used this derogatory term of ‘non-theatrical’ to describe anything else.” His speaking

engagements in 2009 included one at Ohio State University that earned him a \$10,000 speaker fee. This venue was an exception, as Devlin and his brother’s fees range from \$3,000 to \$5,000. If they don’t show up to the screenings, they negotiate a fee of \$150 to \$1,000. Appearances continue through 2010.

As his alt-theatrical strategy began to bear fruit, Devlin hired a producer of marketing and distribution, whose job is to book venues. “When you go to a distributor, you put your film up for adoption,” Devlin asserts. “If you want to raise your own film the way you would raise a child,



BLAST balloon inflated and prepared to launch. From Paul Devlin’s *BLAST!*. Photo: Mark Halpern

then you've got to do it yourself. So in essence, we've hired a nanny."

Birthing a film to a theatrical distributor would have been less cost-effective and less hands-on for both Devlin and Kempner. Kempner's previous film, *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg* (2000), about the first major Jewish baseball star in the Major Leagues, earned \$1.7 million in box office revenue. However, Kempner explains, "It was a different feeling for *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* because I knew my base was older people. The best thing for me to do was get those older people in the theaters before they die and before the big art movies come out in the fall."

To date, *Yoo Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* has earned \$1.13 million in box office revenue. That number might have been even higher, ironically, were it not for her core audience: senior citizens, who pay discounted ticket prices, which, according to Kempner, meant 25 percent less revenue. She jokes, "It could be \$1.17 million in revenue. I always tell Wendy to put an asterisk."

The rewards for filmmakers investing their time and money on self-distribution outweigh the risks of solely prioritizing festivals; net ticket revenue goes to the filmmaker's team, rather than directly to the film festival. "I don't think being programmed at a festival should be a goal, unless you are a student or independently wealthy," Block maintains. "Filmmaking is a business. Either make films to change the world or to make money, or to do both."

In addition, Block advises, sell your film before you make it. If the film does not have a television sale and/or theatrical deal in place

Molly Goldberg, from Aviva Kempner's *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*. Courtesy of Aviva Kempner

before entering a festival, then the filmmakers should try to shop the work before showcasing it at festivals. Block cautions, "Films are worth more *not* finished than finished, since distributors and networks have different needs, markets, and deals for works-in-progress versus finished works." Devlin pitched *BLAST!* as a work-in-progress at the 2007 Hot Docs Forum, and international commissioning editors, including

the BBC and Discovery Canada, came on board for TV distribution.

High-profile festivals generally reach a primary audience comprised of journalists, sponsors, agents, distributors, filmmakers, festival programmers, etc. But if a film can reach its core audience where the filmmaker controls the exhibition and distribution, then alternative distribution strategies—coupled with a well-positioned festival launch—may continue to be the wave of the future.

For Devlin and Kempner, self-distribution—or some hybrid thereof with festivals as one component, but not the driving one in their overall distribution plan—proved to be the optimal strategy for their respective films. For Devlin, targeting astronomy and science enthusiasts made the most sense, while Kempner's audience of senior citizens, the Jewish demographic and feminist groups helped drive box office revenues past the \$1 million mark. Rather than put their films up for adoption through distribution, as Devlin suggested earlier, both filmmakers nurtured their films through adulthood. □

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Peabody Award-winning director Aviva Kempner. Photo: Kevin Clark. Courtesy of The Washington Post