



Film festivals feature an intriguing combination of star gazing, project pitching, relationship building, scandal manufacturing, and industrial attitudizing situations and encounters. And, oh yes, some people actually watch movies between the endless stream of hype and hucksterism marking such events. The experience of festival going—fun, predictable and utilitarian—is a natural for replication in the new dimension of cyberspace.

The Virtual Film Festival (aka VFF) was launched this fall at Toronto's International Film Festival. This particular Trojan Horse came, like its classical antecedent, equipped with gifts for its host and their guests. Free demonstrations, possible web-sites, and potential access to the Internet were offered to all interested parties. Directors, producers and distributors joined the line-up to see what the VFF was all about.

What they saw was only part of what they will get. The VFF is in its nascent stages, and like all swaddling infants, has some growing to do. Still, what film directors and VFF producers Glen Salzman (*Milk and Honey*) and Peter Wintonick (*Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*) have assembled so far is pretty impressive.

The VFF is modelled on the type of film festival that everyone from the wide-eyed film

buff to the most hardened Billy Wilderesque professional has attended. Nifty icons and graphics replicate the look and glamour of cinema. Virtual rooms have been created for nearly every aspect of the festival-going experience. Marquee, Lobby and Concession sections exist to warm up the new VFF habitué. Forum, Library and Press Conference rooms have been set up to please virtual journalists who would rather E-mail their questions than stand up and deal with the celebrities of the late 1990s. (And who can blame them?)

Past those areas, the VFF offers a Screening Room. Unlike regular festivals, you don't have to queue up for hours to see the latest hot film. That's the plus; the minus is that you only get to view a trailer of it—downloading a feature film is still too costly and time-consuming at this point. Instead, you are offered other goodies. Information on the director, actors and producers is available; so are reviews of the film, if it isn't having its premiere launch at a "real" festival that week. Clearly, the Screening Room can be useful for film goers deciding on what new work to see (and why); it can also help distributors who are always looking for new ways to market their wares.

The heart of the matter can be located a

little further down that simulated hall. Just like real film festivals, a lot of wheeling and dealing is intended to take place behind closed doors. A Virtual Film Festival feature is its Industry Room, designed for professionals only to enter. It is in this space that filmmakers will be pitching projects to producers and directors; Canadian Indies should arrive forewarned: be prepared to display the guile of Dennis Martinez combined with the stuff of David Cone. This will be the Major Leagues for the VFF. If projects happen because of contacts made through their Web-site, the world will be beating a path to its virtual door.

Both Salzman and Wintonick have negotiated their way through the administrative tickets of Telefilm Canada, the CBC, the Canada Council and NFB. Neither would be where they are in the industry if not for their ingenuity and perseverance in the wake of the disasters that frequently visit the Canadian film industry. More than most, they understand what the Internet could mean to producers in Canada. However, does the Virtual Film Festival have enough psychic and graphic satisfaction to persevere until something like a launch of a hit movie in cyberspace takes place? It will all depend on the response from the industry ●

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