



Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* is a film that found creative solutions to the reality of a low budget.

**John Pierson's book** *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Film* is a most unusual creature indeed, in that it surveys contemporary film from the point of view, not of the filmmaker, actor, writer or even producer, but of the distributor. And not a large mainline distributor, but a small, independent one. That's what makes it interesting.

After graduating from the film school at New York University in 1977, Pierson went to work for an outfit called Bauer International, which distributed German films, particularly those of Wim Wenders. The name Bauer was chosen from the phone book because it sounded German, says Pierson, who ended up "driving Wim around the country on his first U.S. tour, as he was preparing to go to [Francis Ford Coppola's] Zoetrope Studios and spend the next four years of his life making the film *Hammett*, which would become an enormous source of inspiration for up-and-coming independent American directors."

At various other times, Pierson helped found the first major festival of independent films in the U.S. ("at a theatre in the East Village—a big, old 2,000-seat barn of a Yiddish theatre from many decades earlier") and was a programmer for various rep houses and art houses around New York (such as the famous Bleecker, which appears in Woody Allen movies). At yet another point, he "began to program

a theatre on West 42nd Street where we did a lot of rock 'n' roll movies." He adds: "We did some wild and woolly things as we were in this weird location and hadn't anything to lose. We distributed Cuban films, for example. Of course, Americans aren't supposed to be doing any business with Cuba."

Like many cinema books, Pierson's is not exactly linear in construction. It's partly narrative, partly thesis, partly a fan's notes, with the whole affair laced together by interviews with Kevin Smith, the director of *Clerks*. The story that emerges, however, is a worthy one. Pierson was the person who found the means for Spike Lee to finish *She's Gotta Have It*, which turned out to be Lee's bridge to major money and a mainstream audience. Pierson is also the person who (at the Toronto film festival) arranged a \$3-million sale to Warners for *Roger and Me*, Michael Moore's eccentric but effective documentary about the fate of Flint, Michigan, and its autoworkers. One way or another, Pierson seems like a fellow with an unusual perspective on the independent film scene in general, including the Canadian sub-scene, with which he's often been in contact (people such as Linda Beath and Kay Armatage keep popping up in this book).

For these reasons, I thought he would make a worthwhile interview, and I was delighted to discover that, like many another film-book author, he's considerably more cogent and articulate in person than he is on the page. The gist of the book seems to be the story of how the function previously fulfilled exclusively by an informal but efficient network of rep houses is being taken over by arms of major studios. How and when did that come about? I asked.

"It's not been taken over completely," he replied. "There are still a number of significant individuals who play a big part by running specific theatres in specific cities. And there are important distributors at the middle level. It's not as though Disney has bought the entire world. It's not like Cineplex and AMC own every theatre. So, I think what we have is a hybrid situation where the larger, growing and more fully capitalized distributors (in some cases owned by the big companies) have not entirely lost the vision they had when they started out. To us, a fantastic Canadian example, Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* was bought and released by Miramax (which is owned by Disney) who has a lot of clout. They have a division called Dimension Films, which is designed to push things out more widely, faster, using TV advertising. So *Exotica* could open on one screen in New York in its first week and go through the roof; be very well received and much loved by the serious critics. And because there's this extra little angle—the film's sexual content or the perceived sexual content (enough to put into TV ads)—three weeks later this film was on 440 screens in malls. Lo and behold, a director whose previous films had been seen, in the United States, by a total of a few thousand people, was suddenly playing everywhere. Now, of course, you can't do that with every film. But when you can push that button, it's great."

The Toronto International Film Festival is one of the big three that take place each September (the other two being the Telluride Film Festival and the New York Film Festival). I asked Pierson how he would measure the impact of the

Toronto festival. "Well, Toronto certainly made *Roger and Me* in September, 1989. This is where it took off and had some perceived value, just as I think that the film helped to establish the Toronto festival afterwards. In January of that year, *sex, lies & videotape* had the same impact at the Sundance Festival. In both cases, the film made the festival and the festival was the launch point for the film."

Pierson continued: "Although some try to discount what I'm about to say, the fact is that the Toronto festival brings in the notion that there are real people, real movie fans, in the audiences, whose reactions have to be taken seriously. That's one big plus. I also feel that Toronto is perfect for the North American media. Film journalists from all over the continent flood in, because, let's face it, this is a festival that's affordable, one where you can catch up if your paper or magazine isn't sending you globetrotting with a big budget. In addition to brand new films, you can see the cream of the crop that you missed by not going to Cannes or Venice earlier in the year. From the point of view of the distributor, it's a fantastic event for monitoring both crowd reactions and press response." Although Toronto's is an important festival, Pierson believes it's threatened by the rise of Sundance. "At least where American independent films are concerned," he said.

I asked him, inasmuch as he sees a lot of Canadian films, whether he thought he could detect a Canadian style. "I don't think there's a distinctive American style," he answered. "I don't think there's a style period. I have a bias towards these pick-yourself-up and do-it-yourself movies. One of the earlier Canadian films to do that was Bruce McDonald's *Roadkill*. When I saw the film for the first time up here, I thought: 'This has a nice shaggy-dog, make-it-up-was-we-go-along quality. But how many American indie films have I seen like this in the past six months? Too many to count.' Yet this film was a keynote for the new Canadian let's-not-wait-for-subsidies philosophy. Another one that just went out on its own was *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. (Miramax bought that right after they acquired Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls*, in 1989.) *Mermaids* is a film I felt connected to. I thought it was a fantastic movie, with this seat-of-the-pants quality but beautiful artistic control and a movie that found creative solutions to the reality of a low budget. The confessional diary on video. The tacky flying shots. Charming, ingenious touches."

He added: "Clearly, over time, there have been more do-it-yourself movies, but I'm not sure that I see a common style to them. I've seen a lot that I find interesting but I don't know how to generalize, except to say that a lot of those on the edge have not had the conventional three-act screenplay. They've been written on a different model. I support that. In any funding-agency situation, the orientation is going to be towards the traditional screenplay. In terms of content, the material may be in various voices that you wouldn't expect, involving groups that haven't been presented so much in film. But in terms of structure, the screenplay has been pretty rigid. But some of the Canadian films have busted out of that. Some American ones as well." ■

**Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Film** by John Pierson. Hyperion-Miramax Books, Los Angeles. Distributed in Canada by Little, Brown & Co. 371 pages. \$29.95.

# Versatility



# Diversity



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