

Breaking Away

By Gregg Goldstein



With a new date and a hipper sensibility, **New York's Gotham Awards** are positioned at the front of the awards-season pack

As awards season slips into gear each year, two of the most difficult questions facing the film industry are when that period actually begins and how independent studios and talent will fare against better-funded competition released by the major studios. The 15th annual Gotham Awards ceremony, set to take place Wednesday at Pier Sixty within New York's Chelsea Piers sports and entertainment complex, hopes to signal answers to both.

Sliding into what is arguably the awards-season kickoff slot for a second consecutive year, the Gothams clearly have heightened their cachet. Whether that is enough to bestow the gravity to which their presenter, the Independent Feature Project, aspires — or to get the show out of the shadow of the Los Angeles-based Independent Spirit

Awards — remains to be seen, but it's a step in the right direction at a crucial point in the IFP's history.

In May, IFP/LA — now known as Film Independent, or FIND — split from the IFP and its five U.S. chapters. The defection is believed to have stemmed at least in part from the branches' dueling trophy shows: IFP/LA's Independent Spirit Awards, traditionally handed out the day before the Oscars, were considered to be hogging the spotlight — while being L.A.-centric to boot.

Gothams organizers moved their ceremony from September to late fall last year because while the earlier slot coincided with the annual IFP Market & Conference, the later berth seemed designed to preempt the National Board of Review's honors as the starting gun for awards season.

"We saw a window and an interest in us moving to the start of the season," IFP executive director Michelle Byrd says. "From the point of view of distributors, it's useful for certain films to have early accolades and key announcements, particularly those without a huge audience. Those kinds of things translate into dollars."

The move also seemed to generate friction between the then-two IFP branches by encroaching on the date of the Spirit nods, which are set to unfurl this season on March 4 as the Film Independent Spirit Awards. The Spirit ceremony in April announced a four-year extension of its telecast deal with Rainbow Media and the Independent Film Channel, which also aired last year's Gothams. This year's Gothams will air on the regional channels NYC TV Channel 25, which reaches 7.3 million homes in the tri-state area, and LA36.

According to Byrd, the IFP concluded after much discussion that "growing or expanding the broadcast was not our priority this year. Our priority was to focus on the show (and) on our media photo campaign to promote it."

That said, though, the Gothams seem well-positioned to reinvent themselves as New York's hip antidote to the coronationally themed Los Angeles awards scene. With HBO's Sheila Nevins and prominent indie financier/producer Bob Yari as co-chairmen and Kyra Sedgwick as host, this year's Gothams have bolstered their "street cred" — an effect heightened by the selection of Jim Jarmusch and Matt Dillon as feature tribute recipients.

The Gothams also occupy a niche as what Byrd believes to be "the only juried awards program," one that runs "more like a film festival. (The awards) are not voted on by a membership." The ceremony also has geography in its favor because "New York is considered the stomping ground of the indie film scene," according to Henry-Alex Rubin, co-director of ThinkFilm's best-documentary nominee "Murderball." "It's nice that we have an awards show to call our own."

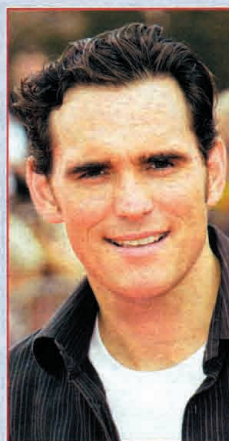
Terrence Howard, Gotham-nominated for breakthrough actor for his role in Paramount Classics' "Hustle & Flow" and as part of the ensemble of Lions Gate's "Crash," puts it more bluntly when he says that New York can lay claim to "the true artists that Hollywood borrows most of its creative spirit from."

There remains a quandary, though: The Gothams wish to establish their own identity yet feel a need to remain Hollywood-inclusive. Byrd notes that the ceremony's nomination committee is bicoastal and that Nevins and Yari are based in New York and Los Angeles, respectively. Such bicoastal unity places the emphasis on filmmaking, rather than politics, according to Yari, also a producer on "Crash."

Interestingly, while the Spirit nods this year announced that they will be limited to films with budgets of less than \$20 million and will require a certain percentage of financing to come from independent sources, the Gothams have no such restrictions and, as of last year, have been open to major-studio releases. The strategy seems to be working because there are signs that Hollywood

Native Son

The IFP offers up a tribute to a local boy done good — recognizing there's just something special about Matt Dillon



dialogue

With roles in more than 40 films and a career spanning 25 years, Matt Dillon is a natural pick as a Gotham Awards feature tribute recipient. He's a true-blue New Yorker (born in New Rochelle) who has successfully bounced between edgy independents like 1989's "Drugstore Cowboy" and mainstream hits like 1998's "There's Something About Mary," playing tough guys and schmucks with ease. Not content to rest on his acting laurels, Dillon added director and screenwriter to his résumé with the 2003 U.S. release "City of Ghosts." But 2005 could prove to be his banner year thanks to his nuanced portrayal of a racist cop in Lions Gate's "Crash" and an expected hit in Picturehouse's upcoming drama "Factotum," a standout at May's Festival de Cannes. Speaking from the set of Universal's upcoming "You, Me and Dupree," Dillon spoke recently with **The Hollywood Reporter's** Trisha Tucker about the Gotham tribute, his longevity and some Big Apple memories.

The Hollywood Reporter: Congratulations on your Gotham Awards tribute. With past honorees including Robert De Niro and Meryl Streep, you're in pretty good company.

Matt Dillon: Yeah, it's great. I feel like I'm kind of young to be winning an achievement award. But when I look at everything I've done, it spans quite a period of time. And I'm a New York guy, you know. That's what's really nice about (receiving the Gotham Award) — I really am a New Yorker.

THR: What are your favorite New York filmmaking memories?

Dillon: Well, I feel like I haven't made enough movies in New York. A real eye-opener for me was doing "The Saint of Fort Washington" back in (1993) when we were working in a homeless shelter in the Fort Washington Armory. There were like 900 men in this one large football field-sized room. That really was a different time in New York, and it wasn't that long ago. (And) the crews are great in New York. When we did (1984's) "The Flamingo Kid," we had to shoot in the fall. Right after Thanksgiving, we were doing this summer beach movie out in Rockaway (New York). I remember the first (assistant director) yelling out with a bullhorn, "Hot day in Rockaway!" trying to convince the extras to get back in the water. (Laughs) It was freezing.

THR: What's the most important element you look for when picking a project?

Dillon: As an actor, the best thing you can hope for is to work with directors who have a vision, who are trying to do something different. I've been fortunate to work with directors like (Francis Ford) Coppola (on 1983's "The Outsiders"), (Gus) Van Sant (on "Cowboy") and Cameron Crowe (on 1992's "Singles"), who have a very specific vision as filmmakers. I had a great experience working with Bent Hamer on "Factotum." It brought me back to the independent filmmaking I was doing in the '80s.

THR: You've been quoted as saying that the filmmaking process nowadays doesn't allow for much preparation or rehearsal time for actors. Do independent films allow you more of that time?

Dillon: That's an interesting question because independent filmmaking often seems more virtuous. It seems there's more passion, energy and resourcefulness put into independent films, but often, they come together overnight. Sometimes, the manner is very fly-by-night, so you're going by the seat of your pants. I kind of miss that. When I went off and directed my own film ("City"), it didn't financially make sense for me to do it. It wasn't a career move. It was just something that I had to do. And sometimes it's great to be on a film that feels like it has to be made. I wouldn't trade that for anything in the world. ■