

Gotham Awards Kindle Indie Spirit

By S. JAMES SNYDER

The math is simple and, for a newcomer, discouraging. There are more movies being made each year than ever before, competing in an ever-increasing lineup of film festivals to attract the eyes of distributors. At the same time, the number of art-house screens across the country — even across New York City — has slowly fallen.

It's enough to leave independent filmmakers scratching their heads, confounded at how they might succeed in creating a film that wows critics and festival audiences alike and doesn't also confer them perpetual anonymity.

"Everywhere we've gone, we keep getting great reviews," said Jeremy Stulberg, who, along with sister and co-director Randy Stulberg, has taken his film, "Off the Grid: Life on the Mesa," to more than 30 film festivals. "It really speaks to how tight the market is right now, that such a powerful film — as everyone seems to agree we have — that it's so incredibly difficult to find distribution."

For the Stulbergs, and for four other filmmakers behind some of this year's most compelling festival entries, that dead-end road has instead become a bypass into the express lane, all thanks to the city's annual Gotham Awards. Since 1991, the Gothams have announced an annual slate of competitive awards, but the most vital category wasn't devised until 2005: Best Film Not Playing at a Theater Near You. With its nominees selected by the editors of Filmmaker Magazine, who are referred titles by festival programmers from across the country, the award aims to call attention to outstanding films that have somehow slipped through the cracks — films facing the prospect of never again being seen in a movie theater.

"How many thousands of films are simply not released each year?" said Michelle Byrd, the executive director of the New York-based Independent Features Project, which facilitates the Gothams. "We wanted to create an award that really speaks to the kinds of filmmakers who would ideally be a member of IFP, who are out there making great works of art, but perhaps don't have the kind of corporate support, or the support of a classic division of a major studio, that you sometimes need to get your film out there."

Two years ago, Caveh Zahedi's "I Am a Sex Addict" was picked up by IFC Films after regaining momentum at the Gothams. Just last Friday, the second winner of the "Best Film Not Showing" award, Steve Barron's "Choking Man," opened for its premiere theatrical run at Cinema Village (it continues screening this week), backed by distributor International Film Circuit. And starting Friday, this year's five nominees will be screened for the public in a special four-day showcase at the Museum of Modern Art.

"A big part of this is that, just by being nominated, we've seen interest renewed in people asking for screeners, talking to us about the film," Ms. Stulberg said. "But all that aside, we're just so honored to have the film shown at MoMA. For any filmmaker to be given that sort of prominence, it's exhilarating."

Ms. Byrd said that the public MoMA screenings are intentionally scheduled prior to the November 27 Gotham Awards ceremony, so that the full slate of nominees, and not just the eventual winner, can be celebrated.

"We screen the group together and ensure that, for all the nominees, we have a group of people who are committed to advocating on their behalf," Ms. Byrd said. "What's most amazing is that occasionally we hear from distributors who did not even know about some of these films, that maybe they played at smaller, regional festivals or didn't have major stars and that they are not even on some people's radar. We feel a real sense of pride that we're able to bring these movies the attention they deserve."

On Friday evening, the MoMA screening series will kick off with both "Off the Grid" (also showing Sunday), which tells the story of a group of outcasts that has abandoned civilization and set up its own society in the rural New Mexico desert, and Lanre Olabisi's "August the First" (also showing Sunday), a drama about a fractured middle-class family being torn apart during a graduation party.

Also screening are John Fiege's "Mississippi Chicken" (showing Saturday and Sunday), a guerilla documentary about the horrors of an exploitative poultry industry in the American South; Ronald Bronstein's "Frownland" (showing Saturday and next Monday), an unconventional tale of a reclusive and introverted New Yorker struggling to connect with the world around him, and Chris Fuller's "Loren Cass" (showing Saturday and next Monday), which offers a scathing indictment of American indifference and apathy amid a period of racial unrest in Florida circa 1996.

For most of the filmmakers behind this year's nominated works, the Gothams represent a flicker of hope in a dark time for truly independent filmmakers. "This is such a conservative, almost anemic time for American independent film," said Mr. Bronstein, who intentionally embraced a less-than-mainstream approach for "Frownland." "Maybe it started when the industry descended onto Sundance, but it's been happening for so many years now, and things are reaching a tipping point, where audiences are feeling disenfranchised and getting so upset at studios playing it safe. So I'm hoping this nomination leads distributors to take a second look, because 'Frownland' is really not as difficult as some might think."

Mr. Olabisi sees his Gotham nomination as the tangible calling card that, to this point, his acclaimed "August the First" has been lacking. "It's been quite the learning experience," he said. "I thought that all you had to do was make a good film, but now I realize just how naive that was. I've been told that if we had a 'known' director, or actor, or producer, or if it wasn't a family drama, our chances would be greater. But with this nomination, we've already been contacted by one distribution company, so maybe things are about to change."