

The Gotham Awards Remind Us of What Matters in Indie Films

By S. JAMES SNYDER

Michael Moore? The latest Sean Penn film? Paying tribute to the all-star cast of Ethan Hawke, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Marisa Tomei, and Albert Finney?

There were some spurts of confusion at Brooklyn's Steiner Studios late Tuesday night, as the 17th annual, indie-oriented Gotham Awards once again kicked off the year's awards season in controversial fashion. But there were also a few moments of invigorating consensus, in which the more established names in attendance rooted for the underdogs, and where the true purpose, and impact, of the Gothams — still an event poised somewhere between the independent fringe of the studio system and the true independent filmmaker who's struggling to find funding and a distributor — could be felt in an intense, immediate way.

Late in the evening, as the final award for "Best Feature" was about to be announced, all one had to do was look in the direction of the table seating Pat Healy, Kene Holliday, and Craig Zobel — the stars and creator of the nominated "Great World of Sound" — to appreciate the profound effect the Gothams can have. An hour earlier, Mr. Zobel had taken the stage to receive the award for "breakthrough director," a relatively unknown filmmaker celebrated for a movie that few have seen, thanking a room filled with major stars. And from that point forward, the stream of those offering congratulations to the "Great World" table, and seemingly talking business with Mr. Zobel, was steady.

"Isn't this great? This night — who could have expected this? It's awesome," said a giddy, and perhaps slightly tipsy, Mr. Zobel after the ceremony. Given the lengthy road he's traveled, from festival to festival and appearing to introduce the film during its limited run at the Angelika Film Center, one can hardly blame Mr. Zobel for seizing on the honor and partying the night away. But when the Gothams air on television for the first time, at 9 p.m. Tuesday on NYC TV (channel 25 on Time Warner Cable), what might surprise some New Yorkers is how little the winners list seems to differ from what one would expect from more mainstream contests, such as the Golden Globes or the Academy Awards.

Taking home the evening's top award for "Best Feature" was Sean Penn's critical darling "Into the Wild," which has quietly been gaining momentum since its Sept. 21 debut and was welcomed with enthusiastic applause by the Gotham audience. In a poignant awards speech, Emile Hirsch, who stars in the film, deferred all attention to the movie's real life, short-lived adventurer, Chris McCandless: "When this film came long, I was 35 pounds overweight sitting on a couch with a shaved head. I'm not anymore."

The "ensemble acting" resulted in a tie, between the cast for Sidney Lumet's "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead," led by such well-known names as Messrs. Hoffman and Hawke, and the cast of "Talk to Me," led by Don Cheadle, Cedric the Entertainer, and Chiwetel Ejiofor.

One could notice a palpable sense of shock with the bestowing of the "best documentary" award. Winning out over Amir Bar-Lev's provocative art expose "My Kid Could Paint That," Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg's searing, critically-lauded Darfur documentary "The Devil Came on Horseback," and Alex Gibney's torture tale "Taxi to the Dark Side," the Gotham went to Michael Moore's "Sicko," which grossed \$24 million. Some polite, scattered applause greeted the

announcement, but the relative silence at the Brooklyn auditorium said volumes.

While some awards celebrated the establishment, others directed the spotlight to more independent projects. Mr. Zobel was joined by the likes of Ellen Page, who won the "Breakthrough Actor" award for her turn in "Juno." Not opening in limited release until Wednesday, it was obvious that few in the audience had yet seen Ms. Page's captivating performance, and that Ms. Page herself has not yet quite processed the way that her rave reviews at this year's Toronto Film Festival, and the resulting awards buzz, will change her life.

In fact, Ms. Page seemed even more excited to meet director John Cameron Mitchell, who handed her the award, than she was about the honor itself. "I'm so proud and thankful to know that a female lead like this is going out into the world," she said, noting that hopefully this award will encourage studios to "stick me in a couple more movies." Given that that "Juno" was one of the five films nominated earlier in the day for a Spirit Award (along with "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," "I'm Not There," "A Mighty Heart" and "Paranoid Park"), it's a movie we are bound to hear much more about this awards season.

Meanwhile, the "Best Film Not Playing at a Theater Near You" award went to an excited Ronald Bronstein, for his little-seen film "Frownland." Marveling at the honor as he stared out at the sea of gathered stars, Mr. Bronstein said: "This was my first film... and I didn't even think of going to the industry."

The evening's most inspiring, and emotional, moments accompanied two of the six special Gotham tributes. "This is precisely where I began as an independent filmmaker ... in those days, 'independent' didn't mean studio," said filmmaker Mira Nair who, along with Mayor Michael Bloomberg, was one of the evening's first honorees. Recalling her early days living in a Harlem tenement, and the day she walked down Broadway crying, as she wondered how she would assemble the needed \$800,000 to finance her first film, "Salaam Bombay!" Ms. Nair credited IFP — the organizing body behind the Gothams — for educating her on how to raise money and finish the film.

The evening's most moving moment, however, involved film critic Roger Ebert. Handed his Gotham by director Sidney Lumet — who himself received a standing ovation — and pre-empted by a video montage that began with an emotional Martin Scorsese, who credited Mr. Ebert with changing his life through organizing a special Toronto Film Festival tribute in the early 1980s, Mr. Ebert took the stage with the help of wife Chaz.

Unable to speak due to an intense battle with cancer that has led to a tracheotomy and the use of a vocal synthesizer (which Ms. Ebert said broke in the hotel room earlier in the day), Chaz spoke for her husband: "People say that Roger likes too many movies. So what?" she said, holding Mr. Ebert's hand as he smiled and looked intently across the audience. Noting that the movies probably saved his life, Ms. Ebert said she was able to keep her husband going with the thought off "who's out there, who's making a movie you might really want to see?"

Amid all the movie stars, the table-side business chats, the awards reporters scribbling down the results, Mr. Ebert's praise of the art form was enough to render the room silent — reminding us all of why these awards matter in the first place.