

The Low Budget Hustle

Three independent film distributors market their wares carefully, innovatively . . . and successfully.

BY LORI HIGA

When the independently produced *Return of the Secaucus 7* was first released last year, it did the kind of business that any 16mm feature (blown up to 35) about a reunion of Sixties activists would do—disastrous. Rather than let it die a quiet death, however, independent distributor Specialty Films pulled *Secaucus* out of circulation, revamped its ad campaign and launched the film a second time. *Secaucus* went on to gross more than \$350,000 in Seattle alone and broke house records at two out of four theaters where it opened in the U.S. Shot on a minuscule budget of \$60,000 by director/writer John Sayles, who'd never looked through a camera before, *Secaucus* is well on its way to earning \$2 million.

Indie film distributors are the unsung heroes of the movie business. They've saved from oblivion many a film like *Secaucus* which lack big budgets, name actors and showbiz hoopla. It is the indie distributor who maintains virtually the only channels for these smaller, forgotten films that still possess the passion, intimacy and attention to matters of heart and mind that the big Hollywood films like *Star Wars* sadly lack.

And the indie distributors control the release of those films made outside studios, often saving them from certain box office death. The majority of indie distributors are small operations living by their wits; like guerilla fighters, they are often forced to employ unconventional tactics simply to survive.

Working out of Seattle, Specialty Films has built a reputation making profitable propositions out of cult films like *King of Hearts* (starring Alan Bates), *Harold & Maude* (Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon) and *Allegro Non Troppo* (a spoof of *Fantasia*). The philosophy at Specialty, says manager Robert Bogue, is "to distribute films that would normally not get seen but deserve to be seen for a particular reason." For example, Bogue says "*King of Hearts* was an anti-war film really, but its sentiments weren't overt. We felt it was more effective that way." But, not all independent films are worth seeing. "Some distributors think they can sell an indie feature film just because it's an indie feature film. But often they're films no one wants to see except the people who made them. There's a lot of junk out there that doesn't deserve to be seen. Our films are marketable. And also have something to say. We are definitely capitalists—our job is to make money for our producers and a profit for ourselves."

Making money often requires an unheard of flexibility in dealmaking. "With a major studio, filmmakers



usually get about 30 percent of the profits after expenses are recouped—that may take a century," Bogue says. "We're usually after a 50-50 split after expenses are met. That's unusual. We don't always get that. We're also willing to take a lower split on a 'special' film."

In the case of *Secaucus*, Specialty agreed to distribute the film in 10 major cities over the course of a year and spend a minimum of \$100,000 on prints, advertising and promotion. "A major studio would never make a commitment like that," Bogue argues. *Secaucus* was considered a tough sell because it lacked name actors, graphic violence, sex and car chases and was concerned with aging Sixties radicals, not exactly a topic teenagers could relate to. "Studios just don't devote that kind of attention to any one film, not even in the special classics division at UA. If a film falls flat on its face after it opens, they'll pull it, cut their losses and move on to the next. They're handling 15-20 films at a time, as opposed to our one or two." Bogue estimated a distributor today needs a minimum of \$250,000 to cover costs of launching a film "wide"—in about 200 theaters. With such astronomical costs, studios often have no other choice but to drop a film after a poor showing. "We work very carefully and thoughtfully on every film we distribute. We don't abandon it just because it doesn't do well at first."

Specialty employs a carefully-orchestrated three-pronged approach to garner box office receipts. This consists of building word of mouth among youthful moviegoers, name familiarity and critical acclaim. "When you've got all those, you've got a massive success on your hands," adds Bogue. The method has worked even with documentaries, considered by Bogue and his contemporaries to be "the kiss of death in movie theatres." Yet Specialty was able to turn a profit on the 90-minute documentary *The Man Who Skied Down Everest*, about a Japanese fellow who did just that. "We made it seem like an event, an exciting prospect with a limit to its availability."

Specialty's next project is *Street Music*, a 90-minute feature about a street musician and a burnt-out social activist whose dying romance parallels the story of the run-down San Fran-

cisco Tenderloin hotel where they live. Screenwriter Jennie Bowen was inspired to write *Street Music* while working for Zoetrope Studios in San Francisco, located across the street from the International Hotel, a residence hotel for Asian immigrants. Scheduled for demolition by its Asian businessmen owners the Hotel became a cause celebre in the Bay Area.

Like Specialty, First Run Features handles indie films for distribution primarily to first-run theaters.

A New York firm, it's another to introduce new concepts to the art of distribution. Established and run by a cooperative of young filmmakers working under the aegis of Frank Spielman, an outspoken, silver-haired veteran of the film booking business, First Run strives to present what it terms "the finest in independently-produced American film." Its roster includes such highly touted films as *Northern Lights* (about turn-of-the-century South Dakota farmers fighting oppressive businessmen), *Best Boy* (a loving portrait of the filmmaker's mentally handicapped uncle), *Alambriata* (a true story from the point-of-view of an illegal Mexican immigrant by *Rich Kids* director Robert Young), *Rosie the Riveter* (on women workers contributing to the war effort) and *The War at Home* (studying the effects of the Vietnam War on the community of Madison, Wisconsin).

First Run's films typify the wide spectrum of themes and styles that comprise independent films today—from documentaries of a political or historic nature to personality profiles and dramatic features. Though many of First Run's films have won prestigious film festival awards and even an Academy Award (*Best Boy*), engagements in first-run movie houses have eluded them, simply because they're outside the mainstream of Hollywood product. Indie films are usually relegated to the limited, "non-theatrical" market of colleges, museums and art houses. But First Run is one of the few distributors to aim for the commercial market of first-run theaters. It does this in an unconventional way. Traditionally, distributors pick up the tab for prints, advertising and promo, in exchange for a large fee and a cut of the profits. First Run, for a small fee (17-25 per cent), acts as a booker on behalf of

a film's producer who pays for prints and promo himself. With the enormous overhead studios must maintain to distribute films, First Run, like Specialty, has the luxury of not shelving a film if it performs badly. It can and often does try again to release a film until it goes into the black.

In less than two years since its formation, First Run has scored a few distribution successes. Spielman locked *The Wobblies*, a film about the IWW, into a Cambridge, Mass. theater for one week. The film performed so well at the box office that the theater owner ran it for four weeks. *The War At Home* has grossed more than \$100,000 around the country. First Run also broke into the tough New York market with an imaginative strategy—it arranged for 17 of its films to be run over a three-month period at a Greenwich Village theater, thus dividing costs of advertising, promo and theater guarantees 17 ways, with hopes that interest culled by one film would spill over to another in the series. The plan worked to some degree—the films broke attendance records and grossed a total of \$126,000.

First Run's success is due to a grassroots approach to promotion, utilizing local groups and press rather than TV and radio ads to reach viewers. "We have to do that because we can't afford to just throw a picture into a theater like the majors," said Spielman. "We're not looking for great amounts of money so much as we're looking for exposure. We're trying to raise the consciousness of people—let them know it's not a crazy thing to do—to go see these kinds of movies, and to show exhibitors that these films are commercial, and can make money."

San Francisco's Clark Communications is also experimenting with an innovative distribution method. Christened 'Cinema Circuit,' the plan is to distribute to colleges short topical films grouped into feature-length packages. "Women Being" is the premier package, consisting of four award-winning documentaries: *Workplace Hustle* (a didactic docu-drama on sexual harassment, narrated by Ed Asner); *Marathon Woman*, a coolly objective portrait of a 42-year-old Japanese runner; *One Year Among the Many*, an ephemeral but visually stunning memoir of a recently widowed elderly

woman, and *Little Boxes*, with folksinger Malvina Reynolds shot against Daly City's colorful rowhouses. The celebrated documentary *Quilts in Women's Lives*, once part of the package, was eliminated due to allegedly unreasonable demands by its maker.

In business since 1978, indie filmmaker Clark Communications came to national attention in May 1981, when a story on sexual harassment, appearing on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, mentioned its 1979 production *Workplace Hustle*. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. Sexual harassment was a controversial issue spurring lawsuits affecting the pockets of American business. As a result, Clark was inundated with requests for *Workplace* from Fortune 500 companies. It has thus far sold a phenomenal 700 prints in five months. A film like *Workplace* ordinarily takes about 10 years to rent that number of prints. Inspired by the windfall, Clark decided to create a distribution network for indie filmmakers believing there might at last be some money in it for them too. Clark selected college campuses as its first target because colleges hadn't been approached with packages before, said Joseph Vogt, director of special projects, himself a recent college graduate in film.

Many colleges, Vogt pointed out, are losing money on the blockbuster and not-so-blockbuster Hollywood features they screen. "These films are usually paid for out of student activity fees," said Vogt. Schools like UCLA charge a nominal 75¢ or \$1 for admission but seldom are houses packed at these screenings because "everyone's already seen 'em at the theatres or on HBO or something like that."

With Cinema Circuit, Vogt emphasized, "we're giving schools a chance to make money and also offering our services in promotion, which no one else is really doing. Since we're helping to get the press out, the posters, everything to make it come off, I can almost guarantee that if we work with them, we can make money."

The company is arranging to get films screened in "nicer" campus theaters rather than "in gymnasiums or in a room where a movie screen's been set up. That way, they can invite the community, who will maybe pay a buck more than the students do, to get involved with the school and also see the films."

For the present, the fate of Cinema Circuit is uncertain as groundwork is still being laid, but Clark Communications continues to sell *Workplace* at the incredible rate of about 40 prints per month. "Women Being" has been test marketed in the Bay Area to good results, said Vogt, who is hard at work contacting some 300 colleges nationwide. Upcoming packages from the Circuit will focus on subjects like "Natural Highs" (on ballooning, hang gliding, other kinds of "natural" flying), natural healing (specifically, Norman Cousins' laughter therapy) and modern animation. The latter entails a package of slick commercials and rock & roll promo films with computer-generated graphics whose exposure has been limited for economic reasons. As for the future, Clark is attempting to hoe another tough row. "We're trying to get into the theatrical market, too" said Vogt.