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INDIE FILM ALIVE, WELL

Kerry Lengel, The Arizona Republic

With the advent of such oxymoronic entities as Warner Independent Pictures, cynics might say independent film has been co-opted to death.

No way, says Chris Lamont, executive director of the Phoenix Film Festival.

"A lot of those companies are distributors, and they're not always developing films on their own," he says. "The definition of independent film is movies that are made outside the major studio system with a director's vision as the focus."

Even as Hollywood has blurred the line between big-budget blockbusters and underground art, low-budget independent film continues to grow. As more aspiring auteurs take a shot at becoming the next Quentin Tarantino, festivals keep sprouting to give them a home.

The 6-year-old Phoenix festival is one of them, catering to film freaks who are willing to sit through 12 hours of screenings a day, hoping to find that hidden gem.

The filmfest crowd doesn't just want to be entertained, it's interested in every aspect of the film world. That explains two of this year's showcase features that take independent film as their subject -- from very different points of view.

"Movies about movies play really, really well at film festivals because the people who go to festivals love films and the processes of making films, and they know how hard it is to make independent movies," Lamont says.

One of the titles is *My Big Fat Independent Movie*, which gives indie flicks the Scary Movie treatment. The Coen brothers meet the Farrelly brothers, maybe.

"I like to say it's a love letter to independent film in the form of a fart joke," says co-writer and co-producer Chris Gore, who will be in town to talk to the audience after Saturday's screening.

Gore developed the 2005 comedy, also available on DVD, because he thought the cliches of indie movies were overdue for a good spoofing.

"One was violence and how it's used in independent films," he says. "So many filmmakers want to rip off Quentin Tarantino, and it's a bunch of guys in a room pointing guns at each other and swearing profusely."

Of course, Gore, the founder of the Web site *filmthreat.com* and author of *The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide*, is also a huge fan of independent film, and he knows just how hard it is to break into the business.

"I ... had written several screenplays, and a couple of them almost sold," he says. "So, like a lot of frustrated filmmakers, I thought, 'You know, the next script I write, I'm just going to make it -- that way I'll be a produced screenwriter.' And that's why a lot of people turn to the independent film world, so they have an opportunity to actually see a film through to completion."

It's just that simple and just that difficult, as festival audiences will see in the world-premiere comedy *Nice Guys*. With a cast that includes David Faustino (*Bud Bundy on Married ... With Children*) and Jason Mewes (the first half of Kevin Smith's "Jay and Silent Bob" duo), it's a zany marijuana movie, but it's also a behind-the-scenes look at Hollywood in which a group of would-be players schemes to steal a suitcase of government-grown pot to finance its film.

It's a world that director Joe Eckardt knows well. He spent years as a production assistant in New York, then moved to Los Angeles and became a celebrity assistant to such actors as Nicolas Cage and Val Kilmer. It was a glorified gofer job he was able to parlay into a budding directing career.

"With Cuba Gooding Jr., I was doing contract negotiations, so the studio looked at me differently than a regular assistant," he says. "So that let me create these great relationships."

Nice Guys, Eckardt's third film, was shot on a \$100,000 budget, with most of the actors settling for the \$75-a-day Screen Actors Guild minimum. That's common practice in independent movies, he says, adding that actors sign on not to make a buck but to have fun or to help a friend. For example, comedian Andy Dick made a cameo in *Nice Guys*, then called actor-producer Danny Trejo two weeks later,

asking him to return the favor.

"Sure I'd do it. That's what it's about," says Trejo, a scar-faced ex-boxer who usually gets thug roles in movies such as *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*.

"Studio movies are about money, and the low-budgets are trying to make a little money, but mostly (it's about) favors," he says.

"You do movies because you love to work."

Phoenix Film Festival

When: Today through next Thursday.

Where: Harkins Scottsdale 101, 7000 E. Mayo Blvd. (southwestern corner of Scottsdale Road and Loop 101), Phoenix.

Admission: \$10 for individual screenings; packages range from \$30 Flex Pass, good for four films, to \$425 VIP Patron Pass; discounts for students and seniors.

Details:  (602) 955-6444 or phoenixfilmfestival.com.

CAPTION: Chris Gore's *My Big Fat Independent Movie* gives the genre's cliches a good, overdue spoofing. CAPTION: *Nice Guys* stars (from left) Jason Mewes, Corin Nemec and David Faustino. Most of the cast did Joe Eckardt's film for the \$75-a-day minimum.

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