

Dozens of filmmakers who have gone on to considerable acclaim screened early films at IMAGE's Atlanta Film and Video Festival. Deliberately and distinctly non-commercial, the festival has always welcomed video, students works, experimental film, shorts and documentary, with a particular emphasis on works made in the South.

Jamison remembers the day in 1978 when Victor Nuñez called from New York to say the print of his film "Gal Young'un" might not be stock in time for the festival opening the next night. The print made it, but thanks to torrential rain, winds and a tornado watch in Atlanta, only about fifty people were there to enjoy it. Twenty years later, the festival opened with Nuñez's highly successful "Ulee's Gold" and Nuñez and star Peter Fonda brought standing-room-only crowds. Other festival alumni include Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee, Barbara Kopple, Julie Dash, Marlon Figgis and Susan Seidelman, to name just a few.

In 1986, IMAGE moved to the TULLA Arts Complex in Buckhead, where the organization offered filmmaking and editing equipment rental and an 85-seat theatre for screening films. Led by Robin Reidy, executive director from 1984 to 1988, IMAGE continued to develop a national name for itself, spurred by its hosting the National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture conference in 1987.

"We put on a fabulous conference and party that catapulted IMAGE into a new level of national awareness in the media arts community," Reidy remembers.

IMAGE established connections with other arts organizations and hundreds of artists and made its presence felt locally, regionally and nationally in a number of ways — offering the first three video installations ever seen in Atlanta, for instance; hosting guest appearances by the likes of RuPaul and R.E.M.; putting on a New Media Conference and bringing video artist Dana Birnbaum to Atlanta to create a video wall for the Rio Mall.

In the early 1990s, IMAGE fell on lean times. Staff turnover resulted in critical grant deadlines missed; across-the-board NEA funding cuts took their toll. Under the leadership of executive director Anne Hubbell, who arrived in 1994, IMAGE moved to a smaller space in the TULLA center and discontinued the practice of renting equipment, which was expensive to maintain. The organization also focused on turning the film festival from a labor of love into, well, a more lucrative labor of love.

"We needed to do some marketing and earn some income, but we did not want projects that weren't organic to our mission," Hubbell says.

Festival planners began to seek more feature-length and narrative-style films, capitalizing on a general upswing of interest in independent film at the time. They often paired mainstream type pieces with cutting-edge shorts, in a dual effort to cultivate a new audience and remain loyal to IMAGE's original aim. There was a heightened focus on animation programs, which became some of the festival's most popular; documentary and experimental film maintained a strong presence in the program. IMAGE began screening festival films at AMC Phipps Plaza, which lent greater visibility and made the event more accessible. Between 1994 and 1998, festival attendance quadrupled.

This year, the Atlanta Film and Video Festival offers 161 films, including 49 features, and expected attendance is over 10,000 people. On opening night, some will have to be turned away from what has become one of Atlanta's premiere arts events — a far cry from the smelly bathroom in Piedmont Park. Still the event, and IMAGE, have stayed true to their indie roots, says Festival Director Genevieve McGillicuddy.

"The festival today mirrors how IMAGE came about," McGillicuddy says. "It's really a grassroots effort, dedicated first to serving independent filmmakers." Current executive director Brian Newman continues, "The festival follows our founder's intentions — to showcase current indie work, while educating future generations of media artists through screenings and informational panels. That's the beauty of the festival; you can see the latest in digital technology alongside a great piece shot on 16mm film."

Looking back, Jamison, who was present at the creation, says she's proud of IMAGE's growth — but even prouder that she can still recognize the seeds she and her colleagues planted in today's IMAGE as it celebrates its silver anniversary this year.

"We were hoping our vision would carry into the future, but we were also just hoping to survive the next funding cycle," she says. "Sometimes we had three people in the audience, other nights I'm sure we broke all kinds of fire regulations because there would be people crowding in the doorway. But whether or not they came, we would just show something the following week and hope for an audience. We knew they were out there."

## The Atlanta Film & Video Festival: A Survivor

by Linda Dubler

Every place that I have lived in Atlanta — with the happy exception of my current home — is gone. The light-filled, genteelly decrepit apartment at Pershing Point, where my neighbors were all art students or carefully coiffed old ladies, was torn down and replaced by an office tower. The dingy dump near Piedmont Park, with its avocado carpets and turquoise Formica counters, made way for condos. The house in Midtown where it got so cold the water in the toilet tank froze has been leveled.

Brother Juniper's, a quasi-health-food restaurant where I interviewed the purportedly demonic filmmaker Kenneth Anger, who was gentlemanly and fastidious, is long gone and so are most of the folks who remember Anger's outrages. The IMAGE offices and screening room on Peachtree Street, where RuPaul made occasional appearances (sans wig and heels) and premiered some god-awful videos that he made with a group called the Now Explosion for Cable Atlanta, have been torn down. By the time it was demolished, the screening room where Les Blank burned a toaster oven full of garlic to create small-o-vision for his screening of GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS had returned to its vaguely musty, spooky state. The nightclub where punk rocker Richard Hell played, following the regional premiere of SMITHEREENS at the 1993 Atlanta Independent Film & Video Festival, might still be there on Spring Street, but it's not called 688 and in any case, that era is over.

The people who say that Southerners treasure the past have never been to Atlanta. Stand too long on a piece of ground, and you could find yourself in a Trianamin Square-style showdown with a bulldozer. But despite the fact that the wrecking ball seems our city's unofficial mascot, intangibles do endure here. We have a sense of legacy that the civil rights movement engendered. We have a fading, but still visible utopian streak (anyone remember The Atlanta Project?). It's even said that we have ideals.

I've taken my time getting to the heart of this message because context is key. The Atlanta Film and Video Festival (the independent part of the name became implicit some time ago) is twenty-five years old. That it exists — and that it has stayed true to its ideals — is cause for celebration. The Festival has survived, and in the process it has weathered enormous changes.

When the group of young film and video makers who founded IMAGE decided to sponsor a yearly independent festival, they saw Hollywood as their Goliath. Their Davids were the artisans of independent cinema and guerrilla video whose aesthetic was handmade. Hallucinatory or vérité, animated or documentary, their work was defiantly non-commercial. Independent was a political and/or artistic stance, not a financial statement. It was synonymous with freedom of subject and style. The men and women who claimed the term "independent" made personal work — work that, as much as a painting or book or play, bore the mark of its maker.

As it turns out, their enemy wasn't only Goliath, the all-powerful giant. Smooth-talking DeLilah had her hand in too. The media industry has seductively transformed itself in a way unthinkable twenty-five years ago, and the result has been an unprecedented blend of co-option and opportunity for film and video makers. Consider how MTV absorbed the techniques and sensibilities of the avant-garde and used them as advertising to sell lifestyle to kids. Or how SEX, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPE launched an industry buying spree for independent features, giving birth to real markets for independents on the one hand, and to the independent feature/Hollywood calling card on the other. Remember when Sundance was a mission? Its mission remains, but it vies for attention with star power, industry politics and deal making. Hype has given up the Year of the Independents at the Oscars. Tarantino and his spawn, the Blair Witch Phenomenon and the Rebirth of Short Film on the Web. Who could have envisioned the day when independent film companies would be divisions of Hollywood studios and when "An American Family" would morph into "Survivor," "Boot Camp" and the rest of Reality TV? The proliferation of television channels, moving pictures on the Web, new computer technologies for animation, editing and image-making all mean work, careers and pay checks for film and video makers.

But this omnipresent, omnivorous media universe has a way of blurring the edges, of easing concessions, of turning art into commerce. Of course the Movies have always been a business, but the whole idea behind independence was to bypass the focus groups and the market research and the target audience. For twenty-five years, the Atlanta Film and Video Festival has been a beacon for artists and audiences stirred by the promise of uncompromised creation. Independents no longer labor in obscurity, but the Festival and its clear vision are more important than ever.