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## Funding the Festival Fantasy

*A look at how the DC Shorts, Teaneck and Slamdance film festivals got their start.*

November 25th, 2008 | [Jericho Parms](#)Posted in [November 2008](#), [Features](#), [Film Festivals](#)

Earlier this year, on a self-described “quixotic whim,” Oscar-winner Tilda Swinton rented an old Victorian ballroom named the Ballerina and set out to bring a film festival—complete with a quirky sense of imagination, beanbag chairs, and an unconventional lineup—to the seaside town of Nairn in the North East of Scotland. The Ballerina Ballroom website boasts the fest as “a six out of 10 on the grunge scale,” serving “home-made cakes and fish finger sandwiches,” and offering tickets at £3. Swinton’s “Cinema of Dreams” is full of the off-beat charm and indie-loving sentiment common in new festivals across the globe.



**The DC Shorts Film Festival promises filmmakers the ultimate festival experience.**

Although festivals of longstanding prestige like Cannes and Sundance remain at its regal core, the festival circuit has expanded to encompass a new crop of niche and alternative fests to varying degrees of success. And while Swinton may be a step off the red carpet, most of these festivals are being created not by film professionals but by ordinary people with a passion for independent film. With the advent of new media, the possibility of more affordable filmmaking has, in turn, opened the door for lower-budget festivals to showcase the medium.

This new generation of young festivals—those that have found their legs and hold their own—have discovered the key to survival in an ever-saturated market. They have a few lessons to offer, namely, when it comes to founding and funding a festival, it’s about breaking the norm.

“I was really disgusted with the festival circuit. It was all about parties and money, and it was not really about the films,” says Jon Gann, filmmaker and creative director of the DC Shorts Film Festival. “It was definitely not about filmmakers.”

Gann points to the Ashland Independent Film Festival, held annually in Oregon, for inspiring his decision to jump-start his own fest. “It was about community and about meeting people,” Gann recalls of the well-organized event that took care of the attending filmmakers.

In turn, Gann’s DC Shorts gives attending filmmakers the royal treatment: “We will provide housing and food...we will make sure you get a tour of the city...You’ll see every film you want to see and meet other filmmakers.” Though only on its sixth year, it is this kind of ethos that has given DC Shorts

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a positive reputation among filmmakers and supporters alike.

Many other events have developed in response to the perceived shortcomings of larger festivals. They attempt to restore the festival as a platform for emerging filmmakers while at the same time providing a sense of community.

“We appeal to those within our own community who may not want to travel across the river to see a good film,” says Ellen Rand, executive director of the Teaneck Film Festival. Rand, recognizing the disconnect between the proximity of Teaneck, New Jersey to New York City and access to its cultural film scene, saw an opportunity to serve a community hungry for its own local outlet.

Other festivals have banked on a counter-festival model like Slamdance Film Festival, best known as the festival “by filmmakers for filmmakers,” which coincides with the Sundance Film Festival in Utah each year. Slamdance seeks to provide what they consider to be a more accurate representation of independent filmmaking on the ground level, showcasing new directors with low-budget projects. The festival was founded in 1995, and while other more renegade counter-festival events were pushed out of Park City after a few years, Slamdance has successfully branded itself and gained strategic financial support through sponsorship and grassroots organizing.

When Swinton, like Redford or De Niro before her, decided to create—and finance—an eight-and-a-half day festival, it’s unlikely that she ran into many funding obstacles. For the rest of the aspiring festival founders out there, however, it may prove a bit harder. “It’s extremely tough,” says Rand of the obstacles of funding. “When you have no money, you have to be creative. It requires reaching out to a lot of people.”

Despite the obstacles and with a new wave of resourcefulness, small festivals have sustained low budget operations and creative forms of financing. There must be a willingness to on the part of festival directors to put their ideas on the line by funding from their own pockets. “The first year I wrote a check and we sold a lot of tickets,” says Gann. “The second year, I wrote a check and we got a few sponsors.”

There are also the traditional sources of funding that can sustain a festival at its core, like relying on ticket sales, charging entry fees, and obtaining grants. In 2007, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Festival Grants Program distributed \$450,000 to 20 film festivals, ranging from the larger festivals like New York and Telluride, to independent and alternative festivals like Ann Arbor and Woodstock, to small niche festivals such as the African Diaspora or Outfest. Yet, many highly sought out grants are tough to secure, and requirements—like those of The Academy whose grants are only available to festivals held for at least five years—often bar new festivals from qualification, leaving directors to seek more innovative sources of funding.

For all that Gann vows to offer filmmakers attending DC Shorts—more or less a key to the city—he first learned how to capitalize on whatever resources are available. “It’s hard to get actual cash, especially in this economic downturn,” he says. His solution: employ a degree of strategy in seeking assistance. “Find sponsors that can contribute in other ways.” Cultural institutions like libraries, universities, and arts foundations, while they may not always have money to contribute, are a viable source of support, perhaps offering access to member databases or sharing press and publicity efforts to aid an event.

“We operate on a shoestring, literally,” says Rand of her operating budget for The Teaneck Film Festival, which began in 2005 as an idea from community residents. The festival is backed by The Puffin Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to continue “the dialogue between art and the lives of ordinary people,” by providing grants to projects that might be otherwise excluded from mainstream opportunities. “As a project of The Puffin



Foundation, we are able to raise funds through them,” explains Rand, emphasizing the fact that any way that festival directors can get an organization involved is an opportunity to save money. In just three years, the festival has carved out its reputation. “We’ve grown tremendously in a short time,” says Rand. “As an all-volunteer group, the support we’ve received from the local businesses and the community is something we’re proud of.”

When it comes to seeking community support through small businesses, a little can go a long way. Whether it is donations of food from a nearby restaurant or event space for parties, even the smallest contributions offer local businesses an opportunity to publicize their name. “People want to work with film festivals,” says Gann. “There is a certain prestige about it.” The association with film festival events helps communities by offering economic impact to the hosting neighborhood. Highlighting the symbiotic nature of sponsorship is a viable point of leveraging support. Slamdance effectively notes on its site a commitment to “tailoring sponsorships to fit a company’s specific marketing goals.” The site further states, “At Slamdance, sponsors are much more than brand associations—they are fully integrated partners in Slamdance events and supporters of emerging artists,” effectively billing a sense of creative participation.

In the past couple of years more and more people—filmmakers and audiences, Oscar-winners and amateur buffs—seem disappointed in the fiercely hyped anticipation of the annual cinematic gatherings that draw celebrities and industry big wigs to red carpets or pristine ski slopes. Instead, they are turning to smaller festivals for a sense of hope and renewed emphasis on filmmakers, their films, and the community. It is by no means a small feat, but like Swinton, who boldly set out to transform the Ballerina Ballroom into a “Cinema of Dreams,” real people with a bit of steadfast heart and creativity are increasingly turning their grand ambitions of founding a festival into reality.

#### **Related Links:**

The Puffin Foundation: [www.puffinfoundation.org](http://www.puffinfoundation.org)  
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Festival Grants Program:  
[www.oscars.org/grants/filmfestival/index.html](http://www.oscars.org/grants/filmfestival/index.html)

Ballerina Ballroom Cinema of Dreams:  
[www.spanglefish.com/ballerinaballroom/](http://www.spanglefish.com/ballerinaballroom/)  
DC Shorts Film Festival: [www.dshorts.com](http://www.dshorts.com)  
Ashland Independent Film Festival: [www.ashlandfilm.org](http://www.ashlandfilm.org)  
Slamdance Film Festival: [www.slamdance.com](http://www.slamdance.com)  
Teaneck Film Festival: [www.teaneckfilmfestival.org](http://www.teaneckfilmfestival.org)

International Film Festival Summit: December 7-9 in Las Vegas  
[www.filmfestivalsummit.com](http://www.filmfestivalsummit.com)

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On November 29th, 2008 Anonymous says:

The article was a nice behind the scenes glimpse of fest folk. I would like to share my video experience about 2 exceptional festivals and the folks behind them. <http://www.hometeamproductions.tv/bonus.html>