

Thinking Green

by Ryan Prendiville

It takes money to make a film. Even in the best of times this inconvenient reality can be daunting for an aspiring filmmaker to face. “For most people, asking for money is not high on their list of things they like doing,” acknowledged fundraising expert Holly Million, speaking before the crowd at Think Like a Funder, an SFFS Film Arts Forum event held in June.

Million commenced the evening with a bit of advice. “Get to know people. If you come to know a funder and understand what they are looking for, it’s a lot easier to ask them for money.” That simple statement went right to the crux of the matter at hand at an event designed to bring Bay Area filmmakers and film funders into the same big tent.

In this case, the big tent was actually the Mezzanine nightclub, where every other month the SFFS Film Arts Forum transforms the space into a filmmaker jamboree for information-sharing, discussion, networking and professional development. This time the main attraction was the cadre of Bay Area decision-makers representing independent film funders ITVS, the Global Film Initiative and KQED. Each presenter outlined financing opportunities for filmmakers and presented clips of projects they’ve supported.

Moderator Million’s first question of the night, for Santhosh Daniel, director of programs at the Global Film Initiative, got right down to business. “Why do you say no to people when they apply?”

“No project has ever been turned down for a bad idea,” claimed Daniel, whose Global Film Initiative gives out finishing funds to filmmakers in Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East and showcases them in the **Global Lens** film series. More often, he said, the problem is that “there is a disjunction between what they want to do and what they achieve. For instance, we had a proposal that described a simple story about boys from Bolivia trying to find their way back to their hometown; it was a beautiful idea that we wanted to support. But when we talked to the director, he spoke about these larger political themes that we just did not see when we read the script.”

Yet among the filmmakers in the audience, there was a clear tension between the desire to create the film they want, while tailoring it to attract the funding they need. One attendee described a quandary that had many in the audience nodding their heads in empathy. “I feel that when I write my narrative I need to include social commentary,” she said, “because social themes get money. So I end up moving in the direction of saying something like, ‘And now she has a homeless friend so please note that this magical realist film is also about homelessness.’ So how do I fit it in?” Another attendee recounted her struggle to secure funding for a film about suburban affluence, and wondered aloud whether she would have had better luck basing her project on poverty in the third world. In reply, Daniel was circumpect. “All I can say is that, in general, when you have a good story and you try to add in social themes, you end up with a film that neither has a good story or handles social themes well.”

Sue Ellen McCann, executive producer of **Truly CA** and **QUEST** for KQED, reiterated the basic importance of story and subject. Showing a clip from **Mighty Warriors of Comedy**, a film broadcast on **Truly CA**, a documentary series of stories based in California, she highlighted how the picture about an Asian American comedy troupe "came to us when it was supposedly a fine cut. It was a mess. But we could see from looking at the footage that there was a film there." Working with KQED, which is not a funding agency, McCann was able to refer the filmmakers to agencies which provided the resources necessary to finish the film for broadcast.

Communicating a clear concept at all stages of development is a fundamental skill that filmmakers must master, but strategically having an end point in mind for the finished project is equally important in attracting funding. On this note, Cynthia Kane and Erica Deiparine-Sugars highlighted a variety programs offered by ITVS, which funds documentaries and dramas for television and the Web, including the Emmy Award-winning weekly PBS series **Independent Lens**.

Of particular interest to the gathered throng was the LINCS funding initiative, a program through which an independent producer and a public television station form a partnership and receive up to \$100,000 in matching funds, towards the goal of broadcasting a work locally, nationally and abroad. The priority for filmmakers is finding the right station to work with since, according to Deiparine-Sugars, director of LINCS, "The stations look for films for local audiences that have international appeal."

In a surprise announcement, Ellen Schneider, a former producer of PBS's **POV** and executive director of Active Voice, announced a new service designed to provide relationship counseling for filmmakers and funders. The Prenups (theprenups.org), an online resource cosponsored by SFFS, collects questions, ideas and observations so that filmmakers and funders can forge more productive relationships and avoid many of the common obstacles that hold projects back.

Fundraising may be a nerve-wracking experience but the camaraderie and cocktails certainly helped, as did a bit of advice from McCann: "It took me a long time to get used to asking for money. I relaxed when I realized that I was helping people do their jobs. After all, they are in business to give away money."

Following the presentations, the floor was opened for the **Laptop Shop**, a feature of the Forum that gives filmmakers the opportunity to screen their projects, on their laptops, for peer-to-peer review. Not surprisingly, more than a few took the opportunity to pitch the experts.