



GAL YOUNG UN a film by Victor Nunez

## Fran Spielman

INTERVIEWED

Interviewed by Eric Breitbart and Lawrence Sapadin

Q: How was First Run Features set up?

FS: First Run Features was set up by four groups of filmmakers — Maxl Cohen and Joel Gold (Joe and Maxl), Stewart Bird and Deborah Shaffer (*The Wobblies*), and John Hanson (*Northern Lights*) — who wanted to get theatrical distribution. New Front Films is involved too — we have a service arrangement with them — since John Hanson had already formed an alliance with them before FRF was set up.

Q: Why did they come to you? Could you tell us something about your background?

FS: I started 35 years ago, with a company called Classic Pictures, which was owned by Max J. Rosenberg. From there Harold Wiesenthal and I set up our own company, called Arlan Pictures. Then I went to work for Continental Distributing, which was Walter Reade, and then I went to Cinema 5. From Cinema 5 I went to New Yorker Films.

I was the general sales manager for my own company, of course, but I went to cinema 5 as a cashier, which gave me access to all the distributors around the country since I was the one who would hound them for money. Then Mr. Rugoff

asked me to be general sales manager. I had certain territories that I handled directly, and we also had sub-distributors around the country, but all the deals had to be approved by the home office in New York. That was 1975 through '78.

Q: How has distribution changed over the years?

FS: I don't know that it has changed. I have never worked for a major — ever. I've always worked for an Independent — sometimes a large Independent, but an Independent nonetheless. Most of the time I was involved with foreign films.

Q: Why do foreign films seem to do better than American Independents?

FS: There used to be what we called an "art track", which really doesn't exist any more. There was an audience who went to those theaters for foreign films.

Q: Do you think it's more difficult to sell foreign films now than it was in the early '60's?

FS: Yes, I think so. One reason is that the art theater owners probably realized that there was a lot more money in commer-

9

## FRAN SPIELMAN

cial films that were intelligent — films like *Turning Point* or *Annie Hall* — and a lot of them turned away from the "art track". At one time, if you opened a foreign film in New York, you would have 17 or 18 theaters in the area to go to afterwards.

Q: Now what would you have?

FS: Take a look in the paper. You don't have it. There used to be a formula: one theater in the Village, one on the Upper West Side, one on the Upper East Side, one in Queens, one or two in Nassau County, two in Brooklyn, three or four in Jersey — you can't get that any more.

Q: Given the difficulty of marketing independent films, what was it that attracted you?

FS: Well, I was ready to retire. In fact, I am retired. I'm only a consultant at this company. To be honest, I was never interested in documentaries myself — but after I saw a couple of these films, my eyes were opened to some things for the first time. I liked what they were doing. They asked me, and I said, "Let's try it." I do think theaters should be playing documentaries, and independent features, but it's going to be a hard pull.

Q: How do you "sell" the films to exhibitors? Is a personal relationship important?

FS: Yes. It is a question of people knowing you for a long time — knowing whether you are ethical or not, and not beating them over the head. My deals are pretty easy ones to make. In selling a foreign film, I could go in and demand \$25,000 guarantees and things like that. I'm not anxious to do that. I want to get access to a theater where one or two successful runs will open that theater up.

It's been a hard pull, but it's been working. I had to pressure a theater (through friendship, of course) to take a locked booking — a seven-day play — and I found out that the picture played for three weeks, not one. The exhibitor said he didn't expect it to do that well. I had the same thing happen at another theater with another film. I told both the owners that they should know me better, that I don't sell junk. This way, it makes it easier to go in with the next picture.

Q: Is the decline in the number of Hollywood films going to make it easier to sell independents?

FS: I understand there's going to be a shortage of films, probably sometime in the spring. Certainly, they will be more receptive. Of course, it will be much easier if I can say that a film did \$12,000 in one city and \$15,000 in another. Exhibitors would much rather do that than play a repeat of an old Hollywood film, or double up, but it's going to be another hard year before we really convince the theaters.

Q: Do you try to develop press contacts to get effective coverage?

FS: I don't. The arrangement at FRF is different. Every producer who comes in still maintains control of his or her film. Not control of the playdates, because that's what they supposedly pay me for — my expertise in that field. But they can spend as much as they want on co-op advertising, which they usually share with the exhibitor. They get a copy of every date, and they don't have a right to reject it after I take it. Outside of that, we are exactly like a distributor. We do the billing, we ship the prints, we make the settlements, collect the money and turn it over to the producers.



IMPOSTORS, a film by Mark Rappaport

10

## FRAN SPIELMAN

Q: Who are the people to whom you book the films? How many of them are there?

FS: When we do a mailing, we send out 416 letters. That doesn't mean 419 screens; it might be two or three times that. But these are the people I've dealt with over the years, circuits and independents. Most of the real work, though, is done on the phone.

Q: What sort of financial arrangements do you make?

FS: We work on a small distribution fee, a percentage of the gross film rental — not the box office. My deals with exhibitors are usually 35% to 50% deals — sometimes it can be as low as 25% — which is the producer's share. We get our fee from that.

Q: Do you take the house "nut" into consideration?

FS: Sure, when we make a 90/10 deal; and you have to know what the "nut" is to know exactly what percentage to ask for — what the size of the house is, where it's located, things like that.

Q: Do distributors and exhibitors give you a harder time because of the kind of films you handle?

FS: It's not a question of films, but of personalities at that point. My job is to keep both First Run Features and the exhibitor in business. If I force him out of business, I'm not going to have an outlet any more. If I make a 35% or 50% deal and the exhibitor is really hurt, I will adjust downward — but I won't take less than 25%. I should also say that in the past year I've found that my exhibitors have been more than fair with me.

Q: Is it particularly difficult to open a film in New York?

FS: Very difficult. The usual cost for a pre-opening and opening week would be, conservatively, \$15 to \$20,000. Basic coverage. No big ads.

Q: Why is it important to open in New York?

FS: Because an awful lot of people outside of New York want New York reviews; but it doesn't have to be so.

Q: *Northern Lights* opened around the country first, didn't it?

FS: Yes, but in most cases a New York opening would be tremendously helpful. Regardless of where a film played and what business you did, you would still have those advertising costs for opening in New York.

Q: Is there any way to get around that?

FS: This is what we're doing at the Art Theater starting March 1st. We set it up so that independents could come in for a reasonable amount of money. It's set up in a calendar format. Each filmmaker pays a proportionate share of all costs, depending upon the number of days the film plays. We can get a theater for a minimal risk that way. Instead of a strict 90/10 arrangement, which we would get uptown, we will be getting a floor, so the producer would be getting something back from his or her investment no matter what — unless, of course, nobody comes to the theater.

We are pointing up 50,000 calendars. They'll be in all the Cinema 5 theaters, and posted up around town in strategic locations — not wildcat posterage, but universities and places like that. We expect that every one of the filmmakers who has a specialized audience for his or her film, like labor, or history, to get behind those groups and do their own mailings in addition to the calendar. Of course, if anyone wants to spend more money for newspaper ads — terrific!

I feel very proud of having accomplished this. It's what I want to do — give a group of producers much more exposure than they would have if they did it on their own.

Q: Is there anything you feel filmmakers should know about making feature films?

FS: Sure, but I don't think you can convince a filmmaker not to make a film the way he or she wants to make it. We don't accept every film that we see. If it's something we think is unmarketable commercially, we tell them that. I am a moviegoer. I know what I like. I've been wrong, but I've also been right. I don't care whether the sky is a little too blue or the grass a little too green. I know what I would go to see, as an ordinary moviegoer.

Q: What about trailers, do you use them?

FS: We can. We try to encourage it. Filmmakers usually don't think about it, but I bring it to their attention. Then again, a lot of our films are in 16mm, and most 16mm films don't have trailers.

Q: What about doing a blow-up to 35mm?

FS: I will not convince anyone to blow up a film until the commercial potential has been tried and proved to be worth at least the \$20,000 it would cost. It is helpful, though, because a lot of the places we might play at don't have facilities for showing 16mm.

Q: What about European festivals? Do they help?

FS: Outside of the Cannes Festival, I don't think so. *Alambasta* and *Northern Lights* did well at Cannes, and it helped, particularly for foreign sales. But in this country, people don't really know the festivals outside of Cannes.

Q: Some people feel that the New York critics don't have the framework to judge a non-Hollywood film. Do you think that's true?

FS: I don't think so. A critic might forego a screening of an independent film as against a Hollywood film if they had a full calendar, but I don't think they have any prejudice against them.

Q: What effect do you see the new technologies — cable, videodisc, and television in general — having on feature films, particularly by independents?

FS: We've had cable for quite some time. We've had television for quite some time. There's a way to get your theatrical outlet first, and still make your cable deals. Of course, there are other instances where a film which doesn't do that well theatrically could sell to cable.

Q: Are you or any of your filmmakers involved with cable sales?

FS: We are now going into it, but our basic business is theatrical. We think that's where it should be. We think that every person who doesn't have a cable set should have the chance to see a particular movie in a theatre. That's the problem now, but we're starting to get results.

Q: Some people say that theatrical distribution is dying out. What do you think?

FS: I don't believe it. I don't think there's anything that will help the motion picture industry as much as a good movie. People want to go out. They don't want to stay home. They'll go to the movies if there's a good picture.

11