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Fest that Hollywoodn't

At 10, Miami event still lacks a breakout, but it's bigger than ever

By MARY SUTTER

MIAMI

Because Hollywoodn't." The American Black Film Festival was born a decade ago under that motto, a reaction to the underrepresentation of black talent — in front of and behind the camera — and black subject matter in industry productions.

So Jeff Friday, then with Gotham marketing firm Uniworld, his boss Byron Lewis Sr. and filmmaker Warrington Hudlin ("House Party") conceived and launched an Acapulco retreat for black filmmakers in 1997. They then relocated to Miami after five years in a bid to boost attendance and to drum up more corporate, industry and media interest.



FRIDAY

Back in '97, Friday says, a mere 19 films were submitted, and the ABFF screened 14 of them. This year, for its 10th go-around, the fest waded through 427 submissions across categories, narrowing the field down to 35, including shorts and special screenings. Attendance

has grown from fewer than 1,500 for the last year in Acapulco to a projected 3,000 this year.

But while some filmmakers have gotten early exposure at the ABFF, the festival has yet to break a film out. In fact, it largely emphasizes nontheatrical outlets such as DVD.

"We adopted that philosophy out of necessity more than anything," acknowledges Friday, noting that few independent films get into theaters anyway. Friday, who bought out his ABFF co-founders and runs the festival through his film marketing and distribution company, the Film Life, is hoping to secure a deal with a home entertainment company to release DVDs under the ABFF imprimatur.

"This is a tastemaker audience that can create buzz about films in a targeted way," notes festival director Melanie Sharee.

The quality of the films has improved over the years, adds Jeff Clanagan, presi-

dent and CEO of CodeBlack Entertainment, which has DVD distribution rights to films tapped for ABFF kudos over the past three years. CodeBlack already secured

DVD rights to Lee Daniels' helmer debut, "Shadowboxer," which opens the fest outside of competition, just days before Teton Films releases it to theaters.

"The studios are not necessarily picking up from the ABFF for theatrical distribution," says Clanagan, who is also a fest sponsor. "For an independent filmmaker to make money is through broadcast outlets and DVD."

"We're local, so this a great place to showcase our company," says Doug Schwab, president of South Florida-based Maverick Entertainment,

which specializes in producing and distributing urban titles directly to DVD.

Every year, Schwab sets up in a suite at the festival headquarters' hotel to schmooze with filmmakers already on his label and to meet

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Tip sheet

WHAT: American Black Film Festival

WHEN: July 19-23

WHERE: South Beach, Miami

WHO: Cuba Gooding Jr. will headline; category jurists include Magic Johnson; Epatha Merkerson ("Law & Order"); Elise Neal ("Hustle & Flow"); Alison Palmer-Bourke, director of original programming, Independent Film Channel; and Jackie Glover, director of docus, HBO.

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with newcomers who are encouraged to pitch him and his executives. Either at screenings or via connections with attendees, "we always find films there," Schwab adds.

Although some grouse that socializing and R&R on South Beach take precedence over business, the ABFF's biggest strength may be its networking opportunities.

"There's a common struggle we all have," says Daniels, producer of "Monster's Ball" and "The Woodsman." "I get off on talking to the other filmmakers (of color)."

The festival "is great at connecting the established film and TV creative community with up-and-coming talent," adds HBO's exec VP of affiliate marketing, Olivia Smashum.

HBO was an early supporter of the event, introducing a short film competition in year two. Its involvement has since expanded to a title sponsorship.

Smashum has also helped facilitate a broader presence from HBO's parent company, Time Warner, which this year is sponsoring a "Conversation With"

event featuring Cuba Gooding Jr., star of "Shadowboxer."

As it is every year, the ABFF will feature plenty of outreach for neophytes.

Fox Searchlight, for example, will run a three-day filmmakers workshop; this year, producer Debra Martin Chase ("Princess Diaries") and multi-hyphenates John Singleton and Thomas Carter ("Coach Carter") are each on hand for half-day sessions.

And although BET is not bringing back the pitch-athon it conducted in 2005, its sister network Nickelodeon returns with a writers symposium for the second year.

Outside of newcomer-themed events, the fest will feature the requisite new media panels. One such panel will examine emerging opportunities in digital filmmaking.

"A high percentage of consumers currently buying rich media content on cell phones are African-American and Latino," HBO's Smashum notes.

Meanwhile, the ABFF's gala evening awards show — touted in past years as the "black Oscars" — has been jettisoned in favor of a Sunday brunch open to all fest participants.



NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

PUNCHING IN: *The American Black Film Fest opens with "Shadowboxer," which stars event headliner Cuba Gooding Jr. alongside Mo'Nique and Joseph Gordon-Levitt.*

Competish metes out tough terms

The American Black Film Festival will screen 30 features and docus this year, most of them indie U.S. productions reflecting a wide range of subject matter.

Opening will be Lee Daniels' helming debut, "Shadowboxer," starring Cuba Gooding Jr. and Helen Mirren.

The film preemmed last fall at Toronto — "too soon," says Daniels, whose producing resume includes "Monster's Ball" and "The Woodsman." (ABFF auds will see a more polished version of the pic.)

Besides being premature, the Canadian bow also made "Shadowboxer" ineligible for competitish under the ABFF's rather stringent guidelines.

Just five features are eligible for the ABFF's Grand Jury Prize — to qualify, pics must have a U.S. fest preem and a person of African descent in a lead role.

This year's eligible films include: Sudz Sutherland's "Doomstown," a Canadian production about a man from a poor neighborhood who must choose between revenge and justice; Anthony Lover's examination of sibling ties in "My Brother," in which Vanessa Williams stars as a mother who makes life-altering choices for her two sons; and "Rollin' with the Nines," a British production from Julian Gilbey that follows a hip-hop group's descent into the violent world its members had hoped to escape.



DANIELS

Also competing for Grand Jury honors are Yatasha Womack-directed romantic comedy "The Engagement: My Phamily BBQ," in which a Jewish boy introduces his family to that of his black Baptist fiancée; and J.D.

Cochran's "Paved with Good Intentions," which
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follows the fallout from a murder-suicide provoked by a corporate scandal.

Both pics are also eligible for the Audience Award, which is restricted to U.S. features written, directed or produced by someone of African descent.

Other pics in the category include: Lawrence Page's "Confessions," in which a successful doctor leads a double life; Maurice Jamal's modern take on the prodigal son story whose protag returns to his secret-laden Southern family in "Dirty Laundry"; frosh helmer Russ Parr's drama about four struggling comedians, "The Last Stand"; and Ty Hodges' "Miles From Home," about a homeless teen torn between a life of sex, money and drugs and a chance for something else.

The competitive docu selection of four pics includes Korey Green and Addison Henderson's "The Forgotten City," an exploration of inner-

'HOMIE' WORK: Donald Faison stars in "Homie Spumoni," a comedy that will screen outside competitish.



city problems and politics through the prism of Buffalo, N.Y.; and Byron Hurt's "Beyond Beats and Rhymes," which looks at machismo in rap and hip-hop culture.

Fest sponsor HBO, meanwhile, will feature five finalists for its shorts award.

Outside of competition, the festival will screen some crowdpleasers. Notable is "Homie Spumoni," starring Donald Faison, Joey Fatone,

Whoopi Goldberg and Jamie Lynn Sigler. The comedy, written and directed by Mike Cerrone, features Faison (TV's "Scrubs") as a young black man, adopted and raised by an Italian-American couple, in the midst of coming to terms with his racial heritage and his birth parents.

The fest will wrap with Preston A. Whitmore's hoops-themed "Crossover."

— Mary Sutter