

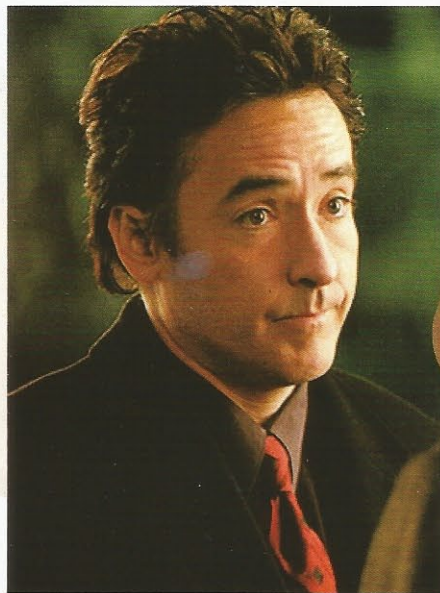
BEING INDEPENDENT

In recent years, the major motion picture industry has left a void in the variety of genres offered because, more often than not, the decision to make certain movies instead of others is rooted in the economics of Hollywood, in the effort to find the definite blockbuster. Thus, the independent film as an art form has, by consequence, come into its own. By Faisal Al-Juburi



Amidst the superheroes, romantic leads, and comic sidekicks in movie theatres across the world, we will soon see a shattered American man struggle to tell his two young daughters that their mother died in the war in Iraq. We will see him take a road trip to an amusement park as he attempts to cope, as he pieces together the perfect way to make them aware of this decidedly un-perfect ending. And, ultimately, we will see the independent film's star, John Cusack – known for his roles in *Say Anything*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and *High Fidelity* – and those behind *Grace is Gone*, the 2007 Sundance Audience Award-winner for best drama, offer an olive branch to the public, recognizing that, while some go to the cinema for pure escapism, others go to see a piece of themselves, to be reminded that they are, in fact, not alone in facing this daunting world on a daily basis.

Fostered by organizations such as Robert Redford's Sundance Film Institute and its annual film festival, the independent portion of the film industry holds up a mirror to our everyday lives, with the intent of being a catalyst for change. The films strip away any sense of fantasy that big budgets provide and are instead grounded firmly in reality, exposing the raw emotions that lie immediately beneath our oftentimes-polished veneers. And, while the movies were once seen merely as a means to make it to Hollywood, as was the case when Hilary Swank won the 1999 Oscar for her critically acclaimed performance in *Boys Don't Cry*, today we see many established stars like Cusack using independent films as vehicles for artistic integrity, as tools in their sometimes never-ending quest to have an impact on their surroundings, to make an everlasting difference, to maximize their positions as artists in the spotlight. At the end of the day, actors of any caliber



are, in fact, artists, and they ultimately have both the power and the hunger to encapsulate a certain period or place, to do justice to any situation at hand. The list of recent independent – yet mainstream – films seems endless at first glance, and these films have been instrumental in making the whole sub-industry appeal to a wide modern-day audience. Last year's surprise recipient of the Academy Award for Best Picture, *Crash*, showcases Sandra Bullock, Don Cheadle, Matt Dillon, and Ryan Phillippe in roles that uncover the darkness of human nature, the prejudices that threaten to overcome our world society. *Babel*, starring Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, and Gael Garcia Bernal and the recent winner of the Golden Globe for Best Drama, illustrates the necessity for communication and the fact that, even though the six billion of us who comprise the Earth's population occupy such a vast territory, we are all connected to each other in sometimes-profound ways. And, the 2006 "little movie that could," *Little Miss Sunshine*, highlights the talents of Toni Collette, Greg Kinnear, and Steve Carrell with a storyline that ultimately emphasizes the beauty and necessity of the family support structure.

With the aforementioned

as only a mere handful of examples, it is increasingly obvious that some actors feel a sense of duty to the general population because of their visibility, knowing that they have the opportunity to serve as a voice for those who have been silenced, sometimes by fear, sometimes by circumstances beyond their control. And, while there are those performers who are outspoken about their beliefs in their everyday lives, others employ their chosen profession as a means through which to express their social politics. Bullock surprised her fan base with her determination and desire to make the masses aware of our collective – and oftentimes destructive – ignorance. Pitt willingly shed his matinee idol image with the hopes that we, as a whole, would entertain the notion that we are all a part of the brotherhood of humanity, regardless of religion or race. Collette used her rising star to show that lower income families need not forgo family values in the struggle for survival. And, perhaps most importantly to those of us who strive to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality, fiction and nonfiction, Cusack believed it was his responsibility as both an artist and an American to represent the devastation that the war on terror has caused on American soil, a devastation that cannot necessarily be seen but that can most definitely be felt. And, while some would state that the main motivation for Hollywood royalty to take on these films is the Oscar gold with which they oftentimes convey, it is potentially best argued that these persons are the storytellers of our era, the ones who have the distinct ability to ensure that the current generation, as well as those to come, will be made aware of the highs and lows, successes and struggles, which we face today. For,

it is through witnessing past and present mistakes that we make future progress. With meatier roles and timely and relevant subject matter, there is most definitely an element of professional fulfillment found through the decision to tackle roles in small, art-house pictures. But the greater fulfillment may very well lie in the opportunity to pave the way toward a simpler time, one dictated by logic rather than convoluted notions of what the world and its inhabitants should be. The above is not to say that independent filmmaking is synonymous with serious and quality fare, that they alone instigate change in the world and that lighter and even mediocre material cannot be found. Nor is it to suggest that Hollywood in all of its glory does not create worthwhile pieces by visionary directors. But, the recent widespread appeal of the independent film for both actors and audiences lies with the meatier material, with the directors and writers who have something of great cultural, political, and social significance to declare – albeit in a format that may not necessarily lead to big box office revenue. And, from Collette to Cusack, Phillippe to Pitt, embracing this world may very well be, for them, when filmmaking truly turns to art and a form of self-expression, when they assume their position as a representative of the people. ■

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