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# Success of *The Matador* Proves Some Risks Are Worth Taking

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By Noah Stroeble

**A**s the North American film festival landscape has become increasingly competitive, with more prestigious events that vie for the attention of filmmakers and audiences alike, SXSW has sought to authenticate its reputation for diversity and quality through fearless programming.

This means providing a platform for films that are often too daring, controversial and/or politically incorrect for other festivals. But more importantly, it means creating a space for films and filmmakers who exist outside the well-worn boundaries of documentary and narrative film conceptions. It becomes even more validating when these outsider films go on to achieve some commercial success as a result of their SXSW exposure.

*The Matador* is one of these films. This richly produced documentary, directed by award-winning photographer-turned-



## SXSW Film 2008 Roundup

With SXSW 2008 now dimly lit in the twilight of memory and SXSW 2009 just a faint glow on the horizon ahead, let's take a look at the trajectories of just a few of the many films from SXSW 2008.

- **Writ Writer**, a documentary feature detailing the story of Fred Cruz, a self-taught jailhouse lawyer who challenged the constitutionality of prison conditions in Texas in the 1960s, will air on *Independent Lens* on PBS; check your local listings for air dates.
- HBO acquired two SXSW World Premiere documentaries. **They Killed Sister Dorothy** details the murder of an American nun working in Brazil and the subsequent effort to bring her killers to justice. It was the winner of the SXSW Documentary Competition and Audience Award at SXSW 2008. **One Minute to Nine** delves into the morally clouded story of a mother of four who is about to be incarcerated for the murder of her husband.
- **The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquela** is in limited theatrical release this fall through Regent. This dramatic feature chronicles the story of a naive but street smart Filipina transsexual prostitute named Raquela who decides to travel in order to find her prince charming.
- Eight narrative features were picked up by IFC Films following SXSW Film 2008. **The Pleasure of Being Robbed**, **Medicine for Melancholy**, **Nights and Weekends**, and **The Wild Man of the Navidad** will receive New York theatrical releases in the fall of 2008, followed by distribution through IFC In Demand. **My Effortless Brilliance**, **Paper Covers Rock**, **Up With Me** and **Southern Gothic**

will be available on IFC In Demand beginning either this fall or in early 2009.

- **Frontrunners** and **Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father** are being distributed in New York theaters this fall by Oscilloscope Pictures, Beastie Boy Adam Yauch's film venture. Both are documentary features. *Frontrunners* follows four teams of candidates running for Student Council President and Vice President at New York's Stuyvesant High School, one of the most selective and prestigious in the nation. *Dear Zachary* documents a filmmaker's attempt to memorialize his murdered friend, whereupon he discovers that the woman who killed him was pregnant with his late friend's son.
- **Third Ward TX**, which screened at SXSW Film 2007, aired on PBS earlier this year and recently screened at the Carver Library in Austin as part of a weekend workshop about the arts and urban development entitled "Real Community is Real Art."

Below: *Dear Zachary*, *Southern Gothic*. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: *They Killed Sister Dorothy*; *One Minute to Nine*; *The Pleasure of Being Robbed*; *Nights and Weekends*; *Third Ward TX*; *Up With Me*; *Frontrunners*; *The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquela*.



filmmaker Stephen Higgins and venerable documentary veteran Nina Gilden Seavey combines a well-polished aesthetic with the gripping story of a young Spaniard's quest to become the greatest bullfighter in the world. A recent review in *Variety* opens by describing *The Matador* as "straight-laced, bloody and gorgeous."

Despite this, *The Matador* faced a great deal of resistance from film festivals. Festival programmers worried about the reaction of their audiences, or their friends and peers, or how programming a film that did not present bullfighting in the loud blather of self-righteous condemnation might reflect upon them personally.

**"SXSW programmers offered a level of support we didn't get from other festivals."**

SXSW was the exception. Seavey summed it up this way: "SXSW programmers offered a level of support we didn't get from other festivals. They gave us a chance, and their open-mindedness with regard to content allowed for an expansion of the form."

Immediately following *The Matador's* premiere at SXSW 2008, interest among distributors who had seen the film at SXSW sparked interest from distributors who hadn't attended. A month later, the film was picked up for domestic distribution by City Lights. It opened in selected theaters at the end of October.

Ryan Kampe, of the newly emerging sales and production company, Visit Films, saw the film at SXSW 2008 and is representing the film in foreign sales, an endeavor he began at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

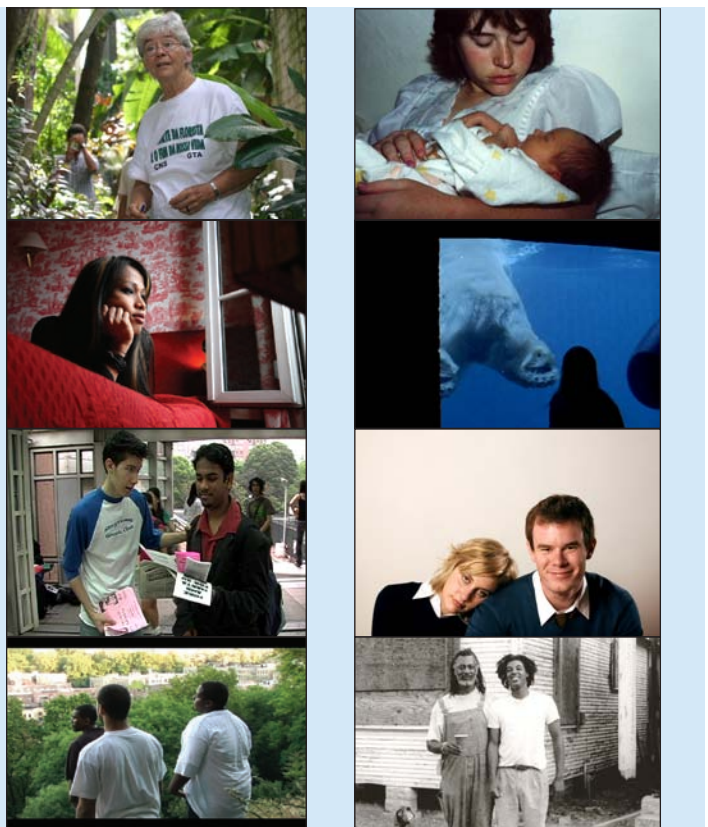
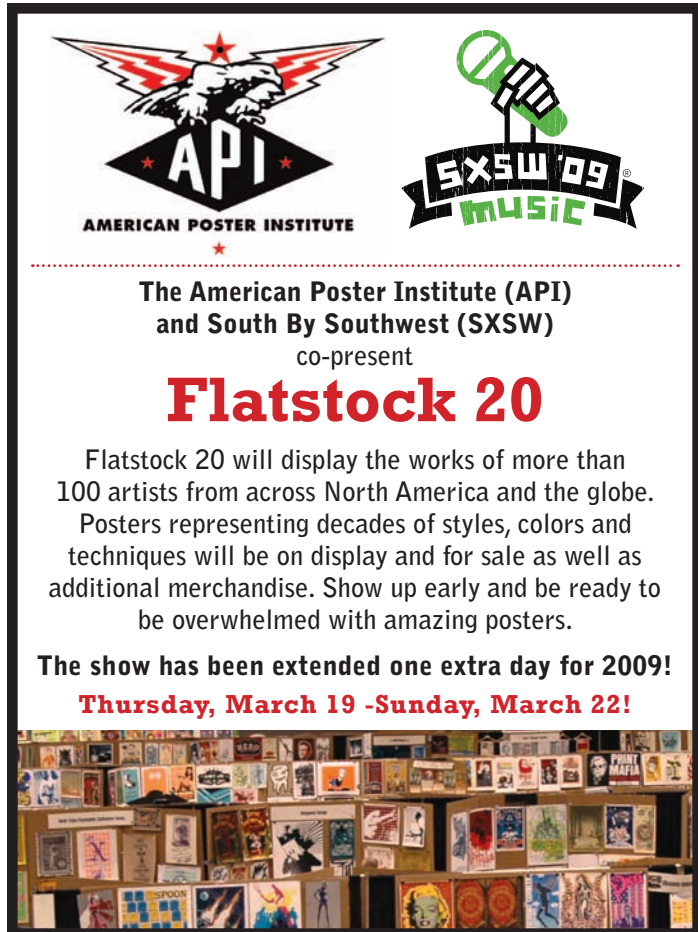
"SXSW was practically one of the only festivals we got into," Seavey says, "and though film festivals aren't really a reflection of what the commercial market will bear, our commercial success is directly tied to our premiere at SXSW." ■



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