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Once It Was Direct to Video, Now It's Direct to the Web

By JOHN ANDERSON

IT was a late night in Seattle. It was probably raining. Scilla Andreen was still haunting the offices of her as-yet-to-be-started Internet movie company, IndieFlix, when the phone rang. It was - no surprise - a young filmmaker.

"He thought we were a local production company," said Ms. Andreen, 43, a filmmaker herself, as well as an Emmy-nominated costume designer. "Or a distribution company that might buy his film."

What the young fellow had found in his efforts to support his movie - which he'd financed by selling his late grandmother's ring - wasn't a distribution company, not in the traditional sense, but instead, the latest wrinkle in the dissemination of independent film.

As cheaper technology and a seemingly inexhaustible hipness quotient have led to more filmmakers and films being produced, theatrical distribution has become more expensive, the outlets more cautious, and the returns on investments more dubious. The Internet has absorbed some of the spillover, although the bigger success stories - notably, the political films of Robert Greenwald ("[Uncovered: The War on Iraq](#)," "[Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism](#)"), or "[Faster](#)," a highly lucrative motorcycle documentary narrated by [Ewan McGregor](#) - have been niche movies with a core audience.

So what about more general fare with no stars, budgets or hope? That's where IndieFlix, founded by Ms. Andreen and her business partner, the filmmaker Gian-Carlo Scanduzzi, comes in. Directors submit their films, which are then posted on the Web site (www.indieflix.com). When users log on and click to buy the films that capture their interest, IndieFlix burns them onto a DVD and ships them out. The price for a feature-length film is \$9.95.

Ms. Andreen's motto: "Own a movie for less than a movie ticket."

At a time when audiences are ebbing, piracy is threatening profits and at-home downloading takes gas mileage out of the movie-going equation, a company that helps filmmakers and audiences find each other on the Internet may be as natural a step in the evolution of cinema as portable DVD players or reserved seats. It may also be as close to a no-risk deal as filmmakers are likely to find: all they need provide is proof that the rights to their film have been cleared, and a master to be copied. And unlike traditional or even online distribution deals, the filmmakers retain all the rights.

IndieFlix represents "a platform to present their work to an audience that under normal circumstances wouldn't be available to them," said the actress [Whoopi Goldberg](#), who is on the company's advisory board. "As one who works inside and outside the system, I've come to understand the distribution is a key component. And from a purely economical standpoint, if there's a way for folks to participate" it would be "a win-win for everybody involved." But Peter Broderick, president of the Los Angeles-based Paradigm Consulting and a longtime adviser to distributors and filmmakers, cautioned that price really doesn't have much to do, he said, with the attraction of buyers to on-line indie films.

"It's apples and oranges," he said. "If you have a film that has a core audience, it doesn't matter if it's \$9.95 or \$29.95. If your movie is about something that matters to people, they'll buy it. Just as you can't compare [Tom Cruise](#) and 'War of the Worlds' to what somebody buys online."

And to many filmmakers, success online will always be a very far cry from success in the theaters. "That's our art - and we think it needs to be bigger than life, on the screen, the group experience in the dark," said Ms. Andreen. "All filmmakers want that."

"That's the weird thing about filmmakers," she added. "It just repeats itself. It doesn't evolve. So we just said, 'It's time to evolve.' "

She speaks from experience. "First and foremost, we're filmmakers," she said. "Carlo has made more movies than I have." They have made two films together, including the feature ["Outpatient."](#) and several shorts. The "game" as she calls it, is the same "whether you're making art or schlock."

They made what they called "artful" movies that got good reviews, and several awards, and grand jury prizes "and we had distribution offers from Artisan and Lions Gate and various other name companies and realized that the terms were so horrible. They wanted the rights for 20 years; we got them down to 7." She said that the terms were so ridiculous "you'd have to make \$10 million before you begin to see a penny, and then they still wanted you to go out and do this grassroots campaign and marketing and publicity for our own movies, even after we had to do all that other stuff. And that was a good deal."

They opted instead to raise the money themselves, on the Web. They were following the model of Bob Berney - the man who orchestrated the unorthodox distribution strategies of ["My Big Fat Greek Wedding,"](#) ["Memento"](#) and ["The Last Temptation of Christ."](#) Now at Picturehouse, Mr. Berney approves of their innovation. "Considering how difficult it is to do it on your own, either theatrically or on DVD, it's a good idea," he said. "If you're at that stage where you haven't gotten any interest - and no one believes you when you say, 'If only people had a chance to see my film, they'd love it ... If only people knew ...' - IndieFlix is like 'No more excuses.' "

It also takes the shelf-space argument out of retail DVD sales, he said, because the major retailers only have room for very little other than the blockbusters.

"But the other question," he said, of IndieFlix, "is: how are people going to hear about it?"

A recent weekend found Ms. Andreen in an Indian casino in Temecula, Calif., at the Temecula Valley International Film & Music Festival, where IndieFlix was awarding cash prizes - something the company had also done on Long Island at last summer's at the Stony Brook Film Festival at the State University - to the audience-choice award winners. A thousand dollars for a feature, \$500 for the documentary, \$250 for shorts.

"It's not a lot," Mr. Scandiuzzi acknowledged. "We can't do very much. I mean, I know that TriBeCa is doing something like that, and much bigger, but they have millions of dollars from American Express. It's more about the gesture."

That gesture, however, can count for a lot. IndieFlix may be the movie director's version of the Last Chance Saloon. "We might be the last stop on the track," said Ms. Andreen, "but our goal is that eventually filmmakers will go out with their little mini-DVD cams and make a movie for practically nothing, specifically to sell it on Indieflix because it costs them nothing. And we give them the publicity tools, the marketing tools and we make it for them, and deliver it in a timely manner."

"We feel every film has an audience" she added.

"I have reached a point in my life where my main focus has shifted to wanting to give something back to the community. I'm not rolling in dough. I'm not famous. And I have so many kids" - six, including 6-year-old twins - "that I don't exactly have a lot of spare time. As filmmakers, Carlo and I had become so frustrated with the limitations of standard distribution and disheartened with the way it squelches creativity. So, after much thought and careful planning, we started IndieFlix and suddenly it felt like the shackles came off."

"It's also good," she added, "to see other companies sprouting up that offer a similar deal. It validates what we are doing and how quickly the world is changing."

John Anderson is co-author of the forthcoming "I Wake Up Screening: What to Do When You've Made That Movie."