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01 OCT 2004

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Tequila: A Journey In Digital Filmmaking And Distribution

So you think you have a hot script that needs to be made into a film? You're in luck. Welcome to the digital revolution. While Hollywood studios have been steadily churning out glossy blockbuster flicks that have budgets upwards of USD\$200 million (the GDP of a not so small country), a growing number of independents are producing quality movies for a mere fraction. In the past, the odds were incredibly stacked against would-be filmmakers when faced with the staggering costs of shooting on film and the lengthy postproduction process. Today, with affordable digital technology and user-friendly PC editing software, a film can be produced for as little as the *tape cost*. Granted, digital video is still nowhere as robust as film and often retains an amateurish "home movie" feel. But, the differences can be overcome with professional lighting techniques, special filters, and heavy color saturation in post. Digital video has opened up overwhelming possibilities in an otherwise closed industry.

Our story began in late 2002 when director, Jonathan Lim, approached me with a rough script about four friends who test the "true" meaning of friendship. Ironically, it was based on a collection of personal life experiences involving his immediate friends. In fact, he hadn't even changed the names of the scripted characters and was hoping to cast them as themselves. Several re-writes later, the 20-minute short somehow grew into an 82-minute feature called *Tequila*. Shot exclusively, on digital video (Sony PD150) and on a shoestring budget, *Tequila* was an altogether different experience from the short films we had previously shot. Making a feature felt like running a marathon; it required extreme discipline, redundant pre-planning, and lots of tough love. One shouldn't take for granted the luxury of doing infinite retakes on DV; focus on getting it right the first time! Our record number of retakes for a single scene was 39. Only Jonathan's tireless passion helped guide the cast and crew through many long nights of filming and an equally long postproduction.

In the spring of 2004, *Tequila* was finally done and we cried. But now we had to figure out what to do with it. As a small independent production, our marketing strategy was limited by our budget. Bypassing traditional film marketing methods, we adopted a guerilla style of film marketing and distribution, using every means from international digital video/Asian film festivals to Internet chat boards to word of mouth. The traditional theatrical release just didn't make sense given that the cost of the film print and theatrical advertising exceeded the film production cost by fourfold. For independent filmmakers, there are currently many new and exciting channels of distribution to have your film to be seen. You just need to be creative, diligent, and resourceful.

Gradually, we approached a few big local distributors in Singapore. Though helpful, they were overwhelmed with the distribution of Hollywood blockbuster titles. Understandably, it didn't make economic sense for them to take on a small independent film. So we decided to do it the hard way and build our own distribution network, knocking door to door and meeting with the retail outlets individually. The process is slow and tedious but rewarding. Thus far, a number of retail outlets such as HMV have agreed to stock the DVD pending approval by the Singapore censorship board (which is another story unto itself). Internationally, we have engaged a number of foreign distributors who will be selling the film in Asian and US territories. Incredibly, a few hundred copies of *Tequila* have already been sold internationally via the *Tequila* website (www.tequilathemovie.com). Says Jonathan Lim, "We didn't know what to expect but found that if your marketing is creative and targeted, people will be interested in your product."

critically acclaimed digital cinema using well known actors such as Liam Neeson, Uma Thurman, and Sigourney Weaver. Similarly, Think Film has produced the celebrated documentary, *Spellbound*, and the period piece, *Bright Young Things*. As independent film producers, we believe the formula for success is simple: good story/acting, strong distribution, and creative marketing. Given the groundbreaking advances in film technology and the dynamic resolve of filmmakers, the future of filmmaking has never been so promising.

Holman Chin is a producer for Crimson Forest Films, which was created in 2002 with an objective of producing high quality films with no creative or financial restrictions. He is also a freelance writer for various publications and projects.

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