

Wednesday, 23 February 2011

"Follow The Money"

Three words altered the course of American presidential politics forever when "Deep Throat" (Hal Holbrook) uttered the phrase "Follow the money" to Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) in one of the finest political dramas ever made - "All The President's Men". Over the years I have found that those three words can be used to solve riddles and answer many complex questions that all start with "I wonder why...or who...or how...or what...happened?" . Throughout every corner of our society, if the issue in question demands answers to sticky or curious situations involving politics, marriage, divorce, sports, business, government, foreign trade, hunger, homelessness, disease, war, peace...you name it - the first thing to do, if you really want to get at the truth, is to simply "follow the money" trail. That almost always leads you to the answers to "Why did that happen? Who decided that? or What the hell just happened?"

Such is the way of the world...for better or worse...and such is the essence of the Movie Business. Why do the handful or so of major studios make and release fewer and fewer films each year? And of those released, why are nearly all of them remakes, sequels or comic book franchise driven? And how can the box office revenue climb higher and higher each year in spite of recessionary times with so many mind-numbingly lame films? Whatever happened to the golden age of moviemaking - for me the mid 60's and the entire 1970's; and for my parents' generation the pre-war years culminating in the incredible film year of 1939? How and why and who decided that "Transformers V" and "Iron Man X" will continue to fuel and dominate the summer box office schedules in the years to come - while quality films like "The King's Speech" and "The Hurt Locker" and "Winters Bone" and "The Fighter" and "The Kids Are Alright" struggle to elbow their way into the limelight and ultimately lead the vanguard at the major award ceremonies honoring the best films of the year?

Just follow the money.

The studios are all owned by major corporations with stockholders to answer to and profit margins to maintain. Tent-pole movie franchises costing studios \$100-300 million to make and at least an additional 30% of that production cost to promote are now the "safe bets" for Hollywood. Those kinds of films attract worldwide audiences and create massive ancillary income streams through cross-marketing tie-ins with the Burger King's and McDonald's of the world and other corporate giants. After all...to the studios, it's all about "Show-Biz"...not "Show-Fun". Hey, don't get me wrong. From time to time I love a little mindless summertime entertainment like those screamin' big budget, special effects-laden blockbusters - but what about the real Storytellers, the renegade indie filmmakers fighting our way through the process to showcase our vision on budgets ranging from \$5,000 to \$3 million and shooting schedules confined to 10 to 30 days? Taking nothing away from artists like James Cameron, who is, no doubt, a genius with his incredible visual breakthroughs with films like "Avatar" - but c'mon - if you gave just about any director \$300 million and 10 years to make a movie...I'd bet it would turn out pretty cool as well.

I write all this as Prologue to encourage rookie filmmakers trying to jumpstart their careers and to alert all you potential indie film investors out there who are pondering the possibilities. The facts of the matter are these: (1) There's never been a better time in history to become a writer, producer or director of feature length indie films - so get after it and don't ever let anyone stop your forward progress or steal your Dream; and (2) There's never been a better time or opportunity for investors of all backgrounds to make money backing creative indie filmmakers. And I'm not just talking about the 'usual suspects' in the local arts and philanthropic circles who are capable of stroking \$100k to million dollar checks. God love 'em...they're fantastic people...but it's also those individuals in a community who never ever get asked to invest in high quality-low budget independent movies and who are more than capable of writing \$5k to 25k checks that can make all the difference when you're cobbling together a viable production budget. It's a Digital world we live in folks - so there's a growing trend and movement unfolding where intelligent investors are teaming up with talented filmmakers who know exactly how to fuse the available digital technology with the right kind of Story that has broad mass appeal and who understands exactly how to market their movie via the countless number of portals that demand more and more content (Netflix, iTunes, Video On Demand, Cable, DVD's, laptops, etc). Indie filmmakers who take advantage of available state and county film incentives (like Florida's) and who carefully explain to savvy investors the revival of the new IRS loophole that allows their backers to write off 100% of their investment in indie films in the same year the investment is made makes for an incredibly viable scenario right from the start. But filmmakers gotta speak up and be multi-dimensional creatures! It's not enough to craft together a wonderful film. You gotta be able to Conceive It...Fund it...Make It (efficiently and for a price)...and then Market & Sell It!

Whenever you 'follow the money' there's always a bottom line that tells the story in black and white - and the net results of a well-made film with a super-low budget that finds its core audience...even with no major theatrical release...can astonish even the most conservative investors. The first and most important key is to take a great Story/Script and make a marketable film on a thrifty budget (yes, it's easier said than done...but we did it...and you can too) - and then show your investors how to leverage the state and federal incentives in their favor. You don't need a multimillion dollar budget to turn a great Story into a great Film...and you don't need 'name' stars to make money (though it always helps!). In the final analysis, if the Story is strong enough and the production values are of high quality...name stars can be attracted to your film because they are, after all, ACTORS who love to perform in great roles, even if all they make is 'scale'. Look what Travolta did with "Pulp Fiction"...or Mickey Rourke with "The Wrestler". In any case, with the right material and a well-executed marketing plan investors can realize an excellent return on their money and actually thrive financially by backing worthwhile indie films. And when your investors make a buck, you and your production Team make a buck - and that allows everyone to keep making the kind of movies we want to make in the years to come.

Case in point: The movie we just made here in Sarasota...a Musical to boot...looks and sounds like much more than a million dollars was spent on it. And guess what? It didn't cost that much. To get Beautiful Noise made in the tough economic environment of 2010 it took a combination of up front cash; a kiss from the State of Florida who certified us with a 30% tax credit incentive

that can easily be turned into dollars when post-production wraps; an important assist and guidance from the Sarasota Film Commission; a Cast, Crew and Songwriting Corps who were resolute and passionate about what the film stands for and that have faith in its long-term potential; some deferred compensation and 'back-end %' deals; a tight 16 day shooting schedule in the middle of the hot, humid Florida Hurricane Season; and a huge embrace from Suncoast businesses and individuals who provided no cash but lots of sponsorship of food, lodging, locations and even incredible helicopter shots to create the visual tapestry that has become Beautiful Noise. And while there's still a few critically important weeks of post production remaining, it's easy for anyone to see that the Story and the Acting and especially the Song performances have positioned our little film to be both a crowd pleaser and a profitable venture for those in our midst who are now making financial investments both large and small to fund our international film festival marketing campaign. I am grateful to those patrons who are stepping up - now, when we need them the most - who truly want to see independent film production grow and prosper here on the Suncoast. I have 5 more feature films in various stages of development that could all be made here in southwest Florida...and Beautiful Noise is helping us open doors that once, quite frankly, were closed.

I figured out early on in the process that it was folly to approach local investors before we actually made the movie and had something special to show them. It was extremely difficult to work this way as lots of sacrifices were made by Cast & Crew...but I knew that the local \$ people had heard the song and dance so many times before from others and that not much had ever come to fruition. "Here's another upstart indie producer who says he's gonna make a great movie and everyone's gonna love it and the film festival will showcase it for sure and everyone's gonna make money...yadda, yadda, yadda." So there I was - with no major track record yet in feature films, no stars, and the announcement that the entire movie is being filmed here in Sarasota...which is known around the world as a tropical paradise but not as a mecca for feature film production...yet. "Oh...and yeah...he's also making it into a Musical with mostly original songs. Oh joy! Some guy with a micro-budget and local cast & crew thinks he can make a Musical-Drama that competes with the best of 'em and is filling it with songs written and sung by singers and songwriters nobody's ever heard of...and it's probably gonna make money for sure? Yeah...right. Best of luck Stevie! Wish you well! We'd love to see it happen. We'll take a peek at it when (they meant "if") you make it..." I can't really blame anyone for that point of view. I probably would've felt the same way.

Fast forward to Today.

Beautiful Noise is going to premiere somewhere in Florida this April (hopefully at our own Sarasota Film Festival) and I'll be tucking it under my arm and traveling this year with my stars and co-producers to showcase it at every film festival that accepts us around the world. One way or the other it will be released in theatres and/or across every digital platform mentioned above where people channel their film entertainment right into the comfort of their homes. Actor-Singer/Songwriters named Danielle White, Kimber Cleveland, Chris McCarty & Jay White will no longer fly under the national entertainment radar - as their performances are nothing less than astonishing and will for sure be noticed. Their Supporting Cast and Crew members will further their careers as a result of their work on our film and our collective effort will help Sarasota be

counted among the growing number of markets that embrace and attract both studio and independent film productions alike. And me? I'm just gonna keep writing and creating movies that make people laugh, make 'em cry, and above all - entertain them. So it's all a real Smile any way you look at it.

And then...there's the hit Soundtrack Album...and the Beautiful Noise Live! Concert Tour...and maybe a TV pilot... and a full blown Stage Musical...and the prequel... and the sequel... and...

Okay. Okay...What do you expect from me!?

Like I said, you gotta Dream it, then Make it happen, then you gotta Sell it!
And you gotta Believe!

So - Indie Filmmakers...unite and conquer!

And Indie Film Investors...take a hard look at the possibilities! There's plenty of filmmakers that need and deserve a helping hand in your community. And there's money to be made when you choose wisely.

And for all those interested in learning more about getting 'strategically' involved in Beautiful Noise...here's a shameless plug and invitation to contact me at your earliest convenience. The train's about to leave the station and there's still room to climb aboard! Now's the time...

Steve