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## Tricks of the Trade

### Video-on-demand offers greater access to independent films

By CAROL CLING  
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Not playing at a theater near you.

Yet that film festival favorite or world premiere may be as close as your flat-screen TV, your computer monitor, even your iPhone.

At a time when independent films have a tough time playing (and staying) at local multiplexes, a variety of video-on-demand programs -- on the Internet and/or cable TV -- have sprung up to fill the gap.

As a result, there's a wider world of movies available to audiences than ever before. Just not in movie theaters.

The irony isn't lost on industry veterans, who have seen independent films disappear from theaters even as independent filmmakers have capitalized on the digital revolution.

"It's never been easier -- or less expensive -- to make a movie," observes Mark Lipsky, president of Gigantic Digital Cinema, which streams new first-run independent and foreign-language movies on its Web site ([www.giganticdigital.com](http://www.giganticdigital.com)). "But it's never been more difficult to find the audience for them."

In part, that's because truly independent films -- movies made outside the Hollywood studio system, with miniscule budgets and without name stars and filmmakers -- are a tougher sell at the multiplex.

Independent filmmakers spend years making their movies and showing them at film festivals, but even if they manage to get a theatrical booking, "they're on and off (screens) so quickly nobody knows they were there," Lipsky says.

"The system really has broken down," agrees Eamonn Bowles, president of Magnolia Pictures, which distributes its movies through video-on-demand as well as in theaters.

"We're pretty agnostic about how the film gets to people," he says. "Basically, we're letting the consumer kind of tell us how the film should be consumed."

For Magnolia, that means some movies appear on video-on-demand even before they reach theaters. (That is, if they reach theaters at all.)

Besides, showing a movie on cable TV or through online services (from Amazon to Netflix to Hulu) gives the featured movies "a geographical footprint that's wider than any theatrical release," Bowles says. "If you live in Las Vegas or Lincoln (Neb.) and you read The New York Times, bang -- you can push a button and be part of the conversation," rather than wait months for the title to turn up on DVD. "It's a much more efficient way to take advantage of the film while it's *au courant*."

And for distributors who specialize in independent titles, "you have to be in all the places where people want to choose to see you," says Bob Alexander, president of IndiePix, which distributes art-house, foreign and documentary titles via its "Download-to-Own" and on-demand technology at [www.indiepixfilms.com](http://www.indiepixfilms.com).

These days, those places can be anywhere.

At least for viewers like Torben Scholer of Henderson, who sells medical equipment -- and, as a result, has an unpredictable, on-the-run schedule that doesn't exactly mesh with theater showtimes.

"Basically, there are no more (limits) on where you can watch what," Scholer says -- while watching a movie on his iPhone as he waited for a homebound flight at the Reno airport.

And while it's cheaper to watch online than pay for a movie ticket, that's not the primary consideration, Scholer maintains.

"It's more about the convenience," he says. "It's not having to be on somebody else's schedule."

Or, as IndiePix's Alexander puts it, "It's going to be there tonight -- when would you like to watch it?"

As for what audiences can watch online or via video-on-demand, the lineup ranges from world premieres to film festival favorites to past favorites with current relevance.

"It's as if your smartest, most film-literate friend was curating your Netflix queue," explains John Sloss, founder of Cinetic Rights Management -- which just launched FilmBuff Movies on Demand, which presents a variety of titles through video-on-demand. (Coming attractions range from the original 1978 "The Inglorious Bastards," which inspired Quentin Tarantino's current "Inglourious Basterds," to Nicolas Cage's new "Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans," directed by Werner Herzog, which was a hit on the fall festival circuit.)

The recently launched "Really" Independent Film Channel ([www.ReallyIFC.com](http://www.ReallyIFC.com)) showcases a new "Producer's Pick" selection weekly and is building a library of shorts and features "you probably didn't get to see" at the festivals where they debuted, notes Joe Nicholson, founder of ReallyIFC's Internet home, DFD-TV.com.

The film festival connection also plays an important role at IndiePix, where "we work with, and through, the film festival process," Alexander says, citing the review process movies undergo as festival screening panels, and awards juries, choose standouts from thousands of contenders.

"If you get into several festivals, and if you win," he says, "we don't have to worry" about a movie's quality and appeal.

At Gigantic Digital, "we determine which (titles) are best," Lipsky notes. "We're doing the curating. We're looking at everything that's out there and using decades of experience -- as a distributor, in my case -- so if a film is playing on Gigantic Digital, you know it's meaningful."

And even if you're watching a movie on the Internet, it doesn't mean you're watching it on your computer monitor, Lipsky points out.

"Any new TV that you buy, as of last summer," has an HDMI connection that makes it easy to connect your computer to your big-screen TV, he explains. "It's no different than hooking up your VCR and DVD to your TV. It's just plug and play."

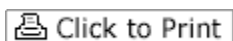
Whether audiences watch these attractions via video-on-demand or on the Internet, audience interest in foreign and independent films "hasn't gone away," Sloss says. Which is why, "every day, we wake up and try to figure out how to get the movies we love to that audience."

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