

ShowTime

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Small movies, *big* Shooting Gallery Film Series to showcase *dreams* the best of the fests BY LEWIS BEALE

Larry Meistrich had a dream: To put together a nationwide showcase for critically acclaimed festival films that, for one reason or another, never received theatrical distribution.

Like "Judy Berlin," winner of the directing award at last year's Sundance Film Festival.

An offbeat tale about the effect of a solar eclipse on several inhabitants of a Long Island town, the film stars Barbara Barrie, Bob Dishy, Madeline Kahn (in her last performance), Julie Kavner and Edie ("The Sopranos") Falco as the title character (see interview at left). It's small, quirky, very personal and shot in black and white.

Which is why, despite a certain amount of star power, "Judy Berlin" never made it to your local multiplex. And why it's part of the inaugural, six-part Shooting Gallery Film Series that begins Friday.

"We want a deeper breadth of choice for the consumer who does not have access to the top-tier

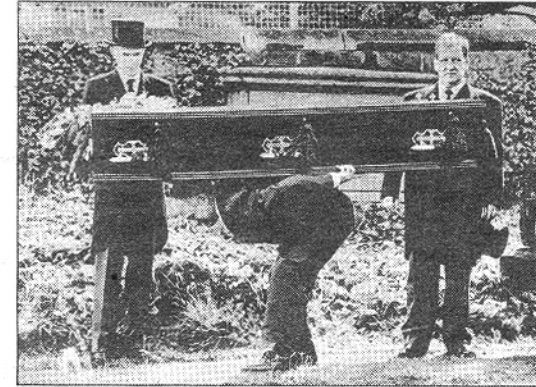
film festivals around the world," says Meistrich, one of the driving forces behind the series, which will unspool simultaneously in 17 major cities.

"These are well-reviewed critically, very point-of-view driven. It's the kind of stuff that previous to this has only been seen in the festival circuit."

As founder of the TriBeCa-based Shooting Gallery, Meistrich has been involved in the production of more than 100 films, commercials and music videos, including "Sling Blade," "Henry Fool" and "Laws of Gravity." The Shooting Gallery's latest feature, "You Can Count on Me," recently won the Grand Jury Prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

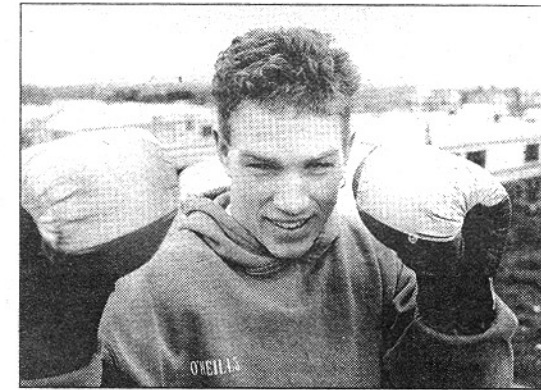
"There are too many films being made," says Meistrich of the current indie scene. "I think something like 1,500 films were submitted to Sundance this year. The true innovator is getting lost. Part of what's going on with the success of 'The Blair Witch Project' is that the bar is now set so high with the mainstream independent companies. These films will not make \$20 million."

Nor were they necessarily meant to. "Southpaw" is a documentary about an Irish boxer, a member of a Gypsy-like culture known as "travelers," who makes it to the Olympics. "Such a Long Journey" is a seething family drama set during the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. And "Orphans" is a film about four Scottish siblings and how they deal with their mother's death.



RARE SHOWINGS

The inaugural Shooting Gallery Film Series of unreleased independent films will include Peter Mullan's "Orphans" (above); Liam McGrath's "Southpaw," with Francis Barrett (right), and Eric Mendelsohn's "Judy Berlin," with Edie Falco (below).



THE CRITICS' CHOICES

All of these features played in major festivals like Venice, Sundance and Toronto. But despite critical kudos and even the occasional award, none managed to pick up a distributor. Which is where Meistrich came in.

"We went to a lot of the big critics and asked them what films they were championing [out of the various festivals]," he says.

Meistrich wants the festival to be more than just a showcase for good movies. The series will also

feature a series of club nights, at which members who sign up in advance will be able to see an exclusive preview of the films, then participate in postscreening discussions with critics, industry experts, even people involved in the production of the work itself.

And in an effort to get these movies to as broad a range of filmgoers as possible, the series has attempted to book theaters not known for showing offbeat or

independent films. Hence the New York venue: the State Theater at 45th and Broadway, in the heart of Times Square.

"I don't believe the audience for these films is maxed out," says Meistrich. "People just aren't marketed correctly. You need to get out there in a broad enough sense. Is below 14th St. maxed out? Yes. But is there a lack of quality cinema in Baltimore or Indianapolis? Yes.

"A lot of people love these movies," he says, "but they have no idea how to seek them out. We're trying to say that a guy who works at Goldman, Sachs, or a construction worker, would like these movies." ♦

The Shooting Gallery Film Series runs from Feb. 25 to May 5. In New York, films will be shown at the State Theater, 1540 Broadway at 45th St. For more information, call 1-877-905-FILM, or log on to the series' Web site <http://movies.yahoo.com/sgfilmseries>.