

Filmmakers Alliance honors Mike Figgis with Vision Award at Directors Guild

by Elaine Ash

MIKE FIGGIS TOLD STORIES from the podium about his secret desire to head-butt development execs during note-taking. Stellan Skarsgård fired hilarious verbal potshots at award-recipient Figgis from the stage, as the fiercely-indie crowd crowded. The Filmmakers Alliance's first-ever Vision Awards at the Directors Guild thrown attracted a righteously cool gathering of avante-gardistes from Faye Dunaway and Julian Sands to Richard Lewis and Roma Maffia.

Guests screened a presentation of short films, then worked the flowing open bars and buffet tables at a gala after-party. Most refreshing was the lack of Tinseltown-tourists and poseurs. Instead, the event featured grassroots F.A. filmmakers who won respect from the star-faction with their stellar, 90-minute screening of original works. Figgis commented, "A group of people with a collective approach, and the desire to make good films has created an alternative to the studio system. They will make money along the way, but it's not the point. First and foremost, they care about creative expression."

After presenting Figgis his award, President Jacques Thelemaque, along with co-founder Diane Gaidry-Thelemaque explained: "Everyone in Filmmakers Alliance aspires to make a living in film, while cultivating distinctive work that we're passionate about. Mike Figgis is an emblem of that, and we're proud to honor him." (www.filmmakersalliance.com Hotline: 310-281-6093)

Mike Figgis' Acceptan

IT'S SO STRANGE to be given an award. You spend your life going into every meeting preparing your fists for a conflict when you're making films. Filmmaking is really a history of the fights that you should have had. You sit round a big, fancy table that is the center for meetings in a studio. And because it's so big, you have to have a lot of people around it, otherwise it looks understaffed. That's why there're so many executives. I just worked that out. Tip number one for the studio is to move into the new century with smaller tables. Four people, that would be fine.

But the thing is, they're paying you shitloads of money. So your brain says, "I'm getting paid, I should at least pretend that what they're saying is fascinating." So you develop a brain-dead style of reacting and make funny little animal noises, "Hmmm, that's interesting, yeah." And some guy gives you notes about character arc and story development and things like that.

And one time I just floated away like you sometimes do on an off day, and had an out-of-body experience. I floated above the table to one side... And you see yourself nodding like a chicken at a sideshow as this person is giving you notes about character arc and performance in the third act. And you see this wonderful image of you coming out of your own body and you lean forward and you head-butt this guy, and then go back into your body... It never happens, of course, it's just a fantasy, but that's been my career thus far.

A number of times I've previewed films and people have been crying, "It's wonderful." And the word "Oscar" always comes out as a strangled note. As if this is the

thing we should aspire to. more than anything else in the world, this Oscar. A relative of mine used to have a very old, sex-mad poodle named Oscar. It used to have three-day shagging festivals. So anytime anyone says "Oscar" to me, I want to tell them, "Watch out before it humps your leg." The idea of anything named Oscar making me feel proud is such a weird sensation.

We were doing this film called *Mr. Jones* [Richard Gere, Lena Olin] and cutting it had been a nightmare. There'd been an ongoing fight with the producer, Ray Stark. It used to be I thought that if I said that name, people with guns would come telling me I'd never make another film again. It's not as if I said anything bad about him, I said the truth. So I made the film for a couple of years, reshoots, 12 writers down the pike. And he had great phrases that helped me as a filmmaker. "It's not the film you're making now that's important, it's the film you'll make tomorrow." And, "Have you seen the trailer?"



Mike Figgis, right, with Jacques Thelemaque, president and founder of Filmmakers Alliance.

Take a look at it, it'll give you an idea of the film you're supposed to be making." "Keep your mouth shut." That was said a lot.

Anyway, I'd be beaver away, cutting on the old system where you took celluloid, slashed it to pieces and stuck it together with tape. It was a good system, although there's a better one now. I'd arrived at what I thought

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June 28th, 2000

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was a cool film and one of the producers came over and he sobbed and said the word "Oscar" a few times. And he said he was going to call my agent right there, God bless him, and he did, and said "Oscar" to him. And I got back to Los Angeles from London and previewed the film with everybody, including Ray Stark. And it was this weird thing where you go in really cheerful and suddenly, you look around for eye contact and you just can't find an eye to contact with.

So the sequence is you go to the elevator together, that's the other torturous thing, and go up to the big room with that big table and it's a full house. And Ray comes in and says, "It's a piece of shit, a piece of fucking shit." And that's the end of my story. And here we are, tonight. I'm accepting my Vision Award.

You'll notice that I dressed specially for the occasion. I'm wearing sneakers, youthful in appearance, but slightly different. And the tie features Mickey Mouse. I just wanted to point out that this guy started off as an independent but now he works for the man. And that's it, really, before I burst into tears. I just want to thank everybody.

And I think this group of filmmakers is incredible. I endorse them by being here, that's why I wanted to come. And I think, as an example, they are perfect. They are the way forward. I think filmmaking is still a wonderful thing to do. Of all the art forms, it's a phenomenal achievement. I do think that when films get it right, it's incredible. It's worth struggling for and going through all of the shit and everything else. And there's an easier way of doing it, i.e. you don't have to go through that system. The one thing I do stress and am intrigued by, in the next four to five years, is an attack on distribution. Because there's no point to making a brilliant film in this way if the people that should see it don't get to see it in the way that you want. It used to be, up until recently, that it was an overwhelming task to deal with. 35mm projectors and cinemas, that's lots of bricks and mortar and lots of money. But that's not the case anymore. And we're not sure how it's going to fall, but it's clearly going to fall in a way that's more manageable for us. Thank you. **MM**



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