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FRAME TALES

The International Documentary Assn.'s 20th annual award ceremony honors experienced auteurs and novice directors

By Eric Hiss

Director Ross Kauffman had no intention of going to India. After 10 years of editing documentaries, he was successfully making the transition to camera work in New York. Then he saw the images captured by his future directing partner, Zana Briski, that would become the catalyst for ThinkFilm's award-winning documentary "Born Into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids."

"Within 10 minutes of viewing the first tape, I knew I was going to Calcutta," Kauffman says.

Such is the power of documentary filmmaking. The genre is one capable of changing viewpoints and transporting audiences to new worlds — whether through the incendiary perspective of a film like Lions Gate's "Fahrenheit 9/11" or the intimate, revelatory storytelling of a project like "Brothels."

Now in its 22nd year, the International Documentary Assn. serves as the front line for such filmmakers, giving experienced auteurs and novice directors equal footing to present their work at the world's state-of-the-art venues. The organization also honors its own 2,700 members with the IDA Awards, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

The event will take place tonight at the Directors Guild of America Theatre in Los Angeles.

The feature-length docs vying for the organization's top prizes include not only "Fahrenheit" and "Brothels," but also Magnolia Pictures' "Control Room," Zeitgeist Films' "The Corporation" and IFC Films' "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster."

"Our awards are special because I don't know of any other organization that allows a forum where nonfiction filmmakers can be reviewed by their peers," IDA executive director Sandra Ruch says. "Our mission is to support the efforts of film and videomakers around world, increasing the public's appreciation for the art of the documentary."

Ruch says the IDA plays a distinct, complementary role to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' growing efforts to recognize the contributions of documentary filmmakers. "Because they are the motion picture Academy, they stipulate a theatrical rollout before a (nomination), and they require that it has never appeared on TV," Ruch says. "We just want to encourage the best filmmaking, so our only requirement is that the finished project be no more than a year old."

Making the IDA Awards short list is no simple feat. Diane Estelle Vicari, IDA vp and chair of the awards and features committees, says the organization's committees screened more than 275 documentaries, evaluating them on the basis of concept, editing, photography and storytelling ability. "It's very intense but fair — a wonderful process," Vicari says. "You get to travel the whole world watching these films."

Of the nominees, a number contain political themes — with "Fahrenheit" and "Control" serving as obvious examples. "Home of the Brave," by filmmaker Paola di Florio and producer Nancy Dickerson, reaches back to the turbulent 1960s, chronicling the tragic journey of the only white woman slain in the civil rights movement.



FEATURE ATTRACTIONS

From top, IFC Films' "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster," Lions Gate's "Fahrenheit 9/11" and Zeitgeist Films' "The Corporation" are nominated for the IDA's top honor.

"This project riled me," di Florio says. "That made it all the more special when we were nominated for the IDA Award, considering the films we're up against."

While some nominated films deal with weighty social issues, others offer something as idiosyncratic as the inner turmoil of a heavy metal band. "Metallica" offers an insider's look at the unraveling and subsequent reunification of the renowned musical group.

Co-director Joe Berlinger calls the production a happy accident. "We were hired by the record label to do a two-week promotional video shoot," he says. "(Co-director Bruce Sinofsky) and I didn't anticipate shooting two years of psychotherapy." The resulting production has played in festivals in 15 countries around the world. "To be nominated by the IDA is like icing on the cake," Berlinger says.

The rising popularity of documentaries can be gauged by the fact that there are 16 documentaries now in theatrical release domestically, with seven ringing up more than a \$1 million in ticket sales. "It was never like this before," Vicari says. "Up until four years ago, it was very hard for a documentary to get a theatrical release, but (Michael Moore's 2002 release "Bowling for Columbine") blew all the doors open." ■