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Spotlights

Tribeca's Triumph

By Annelise Sorensen May 1, 2006



Tom Cruise flashing his million-dollar smile on the big screen may not have been what you bargained for at the Tribeca Film Festival. After all, the grassroots festival, spearheaded by Robert De Niro to revitalize lower Manhattan after 9/11, is still a relative newbie on the film festival circuit. But Cruise is here to kick off the US premiere of *Mission: Impossible III* following a well-oiled publicity crisscrossing of New York by "land, air, and sea". And new-daddy Tom is just one star among many others at the festival, where each premiere – and its attendant celebs – eclipse the next on a nightly basis.

The TFF has accomplished its own "mission impossible" since its debut in 2002, when Tribeca (the "Triangle below Canal") and lower Manhattan were still under the pall – and dark cloud, literally – of the World Trade Center attacks. This year, screening attendance is reaching a quarter million – not bad for a neighborhood where rats once outnumbered residents in some stricken areas. The remarkable range of films – plus musical concerts, street fairs, panel talks, parties, and drive-in screenings – is a testament to just how far the festival has come.

United 93 at The Ziegfield

"You can't not be touched by it, honestly," said Robert De Niro about the film *United 93*. He was right.

The paparazzi are jostling for space along the red carpet when I arrive at the Ziegfield Theatre on opening night. The families walk in first – parents, grandparents, and siblings wearing pins and carrying photos of their loved ones who perished on the flight. The celebrities follow, leaving flashbulb fireworks in their wake: Dominic Dunne, peering through his owlish eyeglasses; Tom Selleck, hunky in his jeans; Melvin Van Peebles ("Don't call me Mario", he jokes to the crowd who are yelling out his son's name); Joan Allen, looking sexy and impressively fat-free; Tony Bennett, Keith Carradine, and others.

Inside it's a different story, as the crowd solemnly files in and takes their seats. The Ziegfield's movie-palace grandeur – plush red carpeting and gold trim – matches the hushed mood. I'm seated in the balcony, near the families, all of whom have been flown in for the premiere. De Niro and festival co-founder Jane Rosenthal deliver opening remarks and then ask the family members to rise, which they do, nearly 100 of them, as a group. The swell of applause doesn't subside for several minutes. The night – and the film – belongs to them.

The film

Who among us hasn't imagined what we would have done aboard *United 93*? Director Paul Greengrass (*The Bourne Supremacy*, *Bloody Sunday*) puts us on the plane that didn't make its target on 9/11 because the passengers fought back. The visceral impact of the documentary-style drama lies in what Greengrass didn't do; the truth-seeking director gives full reign to reality, eschewing any embellishments or disaster-movie clichés. Many of the roles were played by real pilots, stewardesses, and air traffic controllers, and the horror onboard unfolds in approximate real time. In the best neo-realist tradition, you literally forget the presence of the camera. The film opens with a hijacker murmuring prayers in a hotel room, and then cuts to Newark airport coming to life on that clear day. Greengrass spends ample time on the normal details of the morning, and it's the ordinary boarding procedures – the pilots wheeling their bags onto the plane, one passenger plumping a pillow and another biting into an apple – that trigger the sickening clarity: they were people, like you and I. For the prescient audience, this early part of the film is as heartrending as the terrible "pull it down, pull down!" crash to earth.

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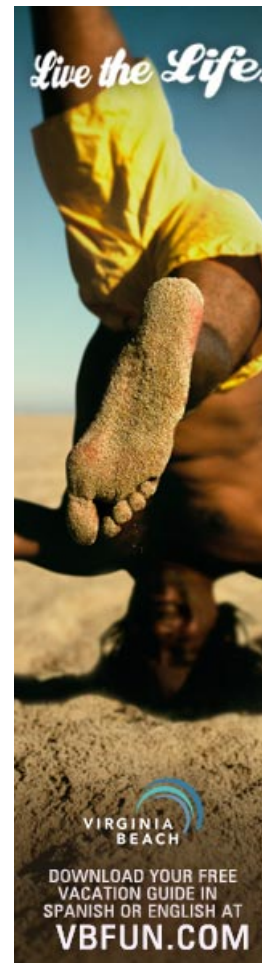
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Watching *United 93* in the Ziegfield – and knowing that the final goodbye calls on screen were made to the people seated around me – was among the most intense filmic experiences I've had. As the plane spiraled to its demise and the screen faded to black, there was sobbing and crying in the upper tier, the sounds of grief filling the massive theatre.

The after-party at the Four Seasons restaurant

Tickets to the after-party were as easy to come by as weekend reservations at Nobu. But with a few connections (and some flirting at the door), I am soon helping myself to lobster alongside Josh Lucas, and passing Gabriel Byrne on the way to the filet mignon carving station. In the sumptuous main room, I sip Sauvignon Blanc and mingle with friends around the central reflecting pool shaded by cherry blossoms (fake – I checked). Caterers sweep through with trays of *petits fours*. At a corner table, Julia Stiles and Joan Allen converse animatedly; nearby, Paul Greengrass, unmistakable for his mane of shoulder-length hair, speaks to a circle of family members. And in one of those rare moments of fiction encroaching on reality, I spot the film's hijackers chatting amiably and having a laugh with a couple of passengers in the cast.

From Vanity Fair to the Village

The TFF's head-spinning menu of events takes me from the A-list to aging punk rockers. I arrive at the appropriately named Vanity Fair party just in time to catch the gowned and black-tied guests stepping out of their tinted SUVs. Floodlights illuminate the regal columns of the Manhattan Federal Courthouse on Pearl Street, where David Bowie and Iman, Ed Burns and Christy Turlington, Barbara Walters, David Duchovny, Tom Brokaw, and Mickey Rourke, among others, make their way up the broad sweep of stairs (the same that Martha Stewart climbed to her trial). Next stop is the East Village, where Marky Ramone – shaggy hair and dark shades – and C.J. Ramone present the new Ramones rockumentary *Too Tough To Die*.

What to watch?

Faced with over 200 features, shorts, and docs from around the world, I asked filmmakers for direction. Sasie Sealy, a 2005 winner for her short *Dance Mania Fantastic*, told me her strategy is to "catch the films that probably won't get a mainstream release." Nearly every film at the TFF is a premiere which means it's your chance to see the next big hit – or flop – ahead of anyone else. More importantly is that you get to view a film before the critical chatter invades your consciousness – you can sit back in the darkened theatre without hearing Ebert's two-thumbs verdict in your ears.

My motives in choosing my first screening are rather simple: Ralph Fiennes on the big screen. I follow the rush-hour snake of tail lights and shuddering exhaust pipes on Seventh Avenue to Tribeca Cinemas, which sits at the mouth of the grimy Holland Tunnel. The cold light of day exposes Tribeca's gritty, urban side – it's after the sun sets, as I find out a few nights later, that the neighborhood really comes into its own, especially during festival week. Set in an unnamed country brutalized by a buffoonish dictator, the political satire *Land of the Blind* opens with a mad, scarred Fiennes ("Joe") pecking at a typewriter. Gripping and confounding in equal measures, the Robert Evans-directed thriller chronicles Joe's descent from saluting soldier to political exile, lambasting media manipulation (see critical chatter, above) and abuse of power along the way – and includes perhaps the most macabre use of a ballpoint pen ever shown on film.

Tribeca by night

Over the weekend, Tribeca is in full swing. I start out at the homey tavern Puffy's, one of Tribeca's few original watering holes. "The film crews like coming here," the bartender tells me. For dinner, I gnaw on crispy duck leg at the loungey trattoria Giorgione 508. Afterwards, I pass by the scotch-swilling suits spilling out of Tribeca Grill. How has the festival changed Tribeca? "It keeps us busy," says the manager. "Out-of-town visitors come here and think that De Niro is in the kitchen flipping burgers." At night's end, I peek into Bubble Lounge, where the leggy, Manolo Blahnik brigade drape themselves over the low couches. I think I'll go back to Puffy's.

Tribeca Film Festival

Through May 7

www.tribecafilmfestival.org

The Rough Guides catalog includes an expanding array of reference titles. Check out these film-related titles: [Rough Guide to Cult Movies](#), [Rough Guide to The Da Vinci Code](#), [Rough Guide to Comedy Movies](#), and the [Rough Guide to Gangster Movies](#).

Editor and writer AnneLise Sorensen grew up in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the US, and has travel-written (and wine-tasted) her way through Spain, Denmark, India, California.



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