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Posted on Fri, Aug. 12, 2005

## Indie heat wave

By CHRISTOPHER KELLY  
STAR-TELEGRAM FILM CRITIC

Here's a disquieting cautionary tale for all those would-be filmmakers out there dreaming of becoming the next big indie thing.

You can have an original, attention-grabbing premise. You can win the support of Hollywood bible Variety and grand pooh-bah critic Roger Ebert. You can make a movie that is disarming, intelligent and consistently surprising - indeed, one of the very best things to show at the Sundance Film Festival.

But unless you have a big-name star, or perhaps an MTV-ready hip-hop soundtrack, you're still going to have a hell of a time getting your movie into theaters.

"Pretty much everyone said no," says Andrew Wagner, the writer-director of *The Talent Given Us*, a strange, but immensely likable hybrid of fact and fiction featuring Wagner's own family members playing themselves. "We had been to Sundance, where the audience response and the critical response were both very enthusiastic. The distributors, both large and small, seemed to very much like the film. In some cases, they liked it a great deal. . . . But they just weren't willing to take the risk."

Taking risks, of course, is supposed to be what indie filmmaking is all about. To that end, Wagner has more than held up his end of the bargain. *The Talent Given Us* opens with a long sequence in which we watch Wagner's parents, Judy and Allen, putter around their Upper West Side apartment, doing the things that retirees often do: bicker, work on a crossword puzzle, ready themselves for a doctor's appointment. But *Talent* isn't a documentary, so much as it is a kind of fictional reality program. Judy and Allen decide they want to visit Andrew, who lives in Los Angeles, so they buy a new car and set off on a road trip. Inviting themselves along for the ride are Andrew's adult sisters, Emily and Maggie, who take every opportunity to argue with their parents and question the strength of their marriage.

The result is one-of-a-kind movie that sends the family road-trip genre happily spinning into these self-obsessed, overanalytical times; it's National Lampoon's *Vacation* as re-imagined by Dr. Phil.

Wagner never makes it especially clear how much his family members are playing fictional characters, and how much they're simply being themselves - and that tension keeps us off balance and eager to learn more. Hidden alliances are formed; long-buried secrets are brought to the fore; Allen even begins a flirtation with one of Emily's friends. There isn't much of a conventional plot here, but Wagner is deeply attuned to the quirks and eccentricities of these people. His affection for them pours off the screen.

So what's not to love for an indie distributor? Perhaps the fact that the cast is made up of unknowns or B-listers (Emily Wagner once had a supporting role on *ER*.) Or maybe it's that *The Talent Given Us* - shot on video for \$30,000 and edited by Wagner in his living room - doesn't have the sort of empty slickness that's so often confused for quality in the indie world these days. At Sundance this year, movies like *Hustle & Flow* (a Rocky-style melodrama about a pimp who dreams of becoming a hip-hop star) or *Pretty Persuasion* (a wan *Heathers* imitation starring Evan Rachel Wood) landed the big distribution deals. They're both broadly sketched Hollywood movies masquerading as edgy, hip indies.

"The independent world was, on some level, proving to be as traditional as the larger world of distribution," laments Wagner. "Even in the indie world, it's helpful to have elements [like big stars] that my film just doesn't have."

Wagner's story has a happy ending, of sorts. This spring, he decided to distribute the film himself, starting with the Angelika Film Center in New York City. "I literally walked up to the box office and I said, 'How do I get my film to play here?'" The theater's programmers agreed to watch the movie and they gave it a limited run. Wagner's cause was aided considerably by rave reviews in *The New York Times* and from Ebert. After a successful run in Los Angeles, Wagner's opening the film today in Dallas, Nashville, Seattle and Indianapolis.

*The Talent Given Us* certainly has its rough edges - it meanders confusingly near the end, and the family's bickering occasionally turns a little too screechy. But I can't think of another recent movie that feels so on-the-fly and undeliberated - a genuine throwback to the let's-grab-a-camera-and-explore-our-psyches spirit of indie classics such as *Easy Rider* or *Mean Streets*.

As for the question of whether there's still a place in the increasingly star-driven, high-concept indie scene for movies like *The Talent Given Us* - well, the evidence is discouraging. Just consider some of the most genuinely independent movies in recent years, films made in parents' basements and edited on laptops, that similarly dared to push the form in new directions: Dallas filmmaker Shane Carruth's *Primer* barely grossed \$400,000; Jonathan Caouette's mesmerizing *Tarnation* took in less than \$600,000; David Jacobson's self-distributed *Dahmer* made \$140,000.

"Our selling point was the content of the film," says Wagner, "and sometimes that's not enough to sell a film." Which is to say: It's a sad sign of our topsy-turvy times when quality turns out to be the least important part of the equation.

GRADE: B+

The Talent Given Us

Director: Andrew Wagner

Stars: Judy Wagner, Allen Wagner

Length: 97 min.

Rated: Not rated (sexual content, strong language)

Opens today at the Angelika Film Center in Dallas

INDIE INFUSION

### Opening today:

(See full reviews in Star Time)

**Last Days:** Director Gus Van Sant's fictional meditation about Kurt Cobain is a one of a kind rock biography that simultaneously reckons with and preserves the unsolvable mysteries of the singer's suicide. **Grade A minus**

**The Aristocrats:** The same obscenely dirty joke gets told nearly 100 times, by some of the most famous comedians in the business, in this side-splitting, surprisingly intelligent documentary. **Grade B plus**

**Grizzly Man:** A documentary by German filmmaker Werner Herzog about an eccentric American who communed with grizzlies in the Alaskan wilderness. Scary bears, pretentious filmmaking. **Grade C**

**The Edukators:** A pair of offbeat radicals in modern-day Berlin protest against global capitalism. A jagged plot and committed performances make it a lot less stuffy than it sounds. **Grade B**

### Expanding:

**Murderball::** A documentary about quadriplegic rugby players that's tough, funny and illuminating. It expands today to UA Hulen in Fort Worth. **Grade A**

**November:** Courteney Cox Arquette stars as a woman slowly going crazy, in one of those especially unfortunate cases of a big star trying to earn her Sundance cred. It expands today to UA Hulen in Fort Worth. **Grade C**

**Inside:** Meet Glen Bradford, TCU's printing services manager, who co-stars in *The Beautiful Country*.

-- Christopher Kelly

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