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By Steve Mason
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King of the Micros?

Gary Rubin at First Independent Pictures has a very busy month. His upstart company is rolling out three movies in four weeks. That would be a daunting feat for a major distributor, but he's performing the feat with a small staff working long hours. FIP isn't a huge operation, but Rubin makes up for that with years of experience in the specialty film world and a real handle on the dynamics of "micro-distribution".

First Independent opened both Mini's *First Time* and David Mamet's *Edmond* last Friday (7/14), and the company significantly expands the subtle post-9/11 drama *The Great New Wonderful* this Friday (7/21).

Ten years ago, Rubin was at October Films as the company really took off. Emily Watson earned a Best Actress nomination for her work in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, and Mike Leigh's innovative *Secrets and Lies* earned five Oscar nods including Best Picture. When October was gobbled up by Universal, he segued to Live Entertainment which later became Artisan. Rubin helped to strategize the release of films like Darren Aronofsky's *Pi* in 1998 and box office sensation *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999. Then consolidation struck again.

When Lionsgate acquired Artisan, Rubin could have stayed, but he opted to strike out on his own, founding First Independent Pictures about two and a half years ago. Prior to this very busy summer of '06, FIP released five films, including Doug Liman's *Mail Order Wife* and the critically-acclaimed doc *New York Doll*.

Arthur "Killer" Kane is profiled in Greg Whiteley's *New York Doll*, a finalist for the doc award at Sundance. Kane is a recovering alcoholic and converted Mormon who was given a chance to reunite with the legendary rock band after 30 years. "It's just a good movie," says Rubin. "If you're a music fan, it's a really good movie." With limited P&A (Prints and Advertising), it topped \$200,000 domestic.

This is a challenging time for boutique distributors according to Rubin. Companies like his must be smarter than ever because of significant changes in the industry. Rubin believes that the marketplace began to change when *The Sopranos* debuted on HBO in 1999. "Suddenly, every cable channel had to have original programming," says Rubin. "We can no longer get a significant pay TV output deal, so we have to watch the P&A very closely." Then, NetFlix came along and forced Blockbuster to change its business model. Blockbuster eliminated its late fees and "they received as much as 25% of its revenue from late fees." Finally, Rubin asserts that there are just more films in release than there used to be. He says that the industry used to produce 500 films per year, but now that figure has risen to 600. Films can now be shot on video and edited on a home computer making it easier to make a movie.

"This is the worst period for independent film since 1980," he says.

Additionally, the release window for these films in "microdistribution" has gotten smaller. "I'm afraid of October," Rubin says. This used to be an excellent month to launch a limited release, but last year the larger studio specialty distributors swamped arthouses with Capote (Sony Pictures Classics), The Squid and The Whale (IDP Films) and Good Night, and Good Luck (Warner Independent Pictures). He says the window for his movies is now mid-March through August.

Of his current titles, Rubin is most excited about Edmond written by David Mamet and directed by horror master Stuart Gordon ("Re-Animator"). With a cast including Oscar nominees William H. Macy and Joe Mantegna along with Julia Stiles, Mena Suvari, Denise Richards and Bai Ling, Edmond generated \$10,000 per screen last weekend (7/14-16) opening at The Quad and The Lincoln Plaza in New York City.

Rubin is more than the distributor on this project. He co-produced Edmond and put the first money into the project. He loved Mamet's dark script and liked the idea of re-teaming him with Stuart Gordon, who directed the original Chicago production of Sexual Perversity in Chicago. The buzz for Edmond started at Telluride, where it was positioned as one of the most important films at the festival. Then both New York press screenings were 100% full. Rubin's intention was to open only at The Quad, but the Lincoln Plaza called the week before the opening to request a print.

"It's a polarizing film," he says. "There are people who love the film and people who like the film but are shaken up by it. Then there are people who are just shaken up by it." It will be critical to see how it holds up this weekend in New York. Next Friday (7/28), it is sure to open huge in Chicago with Windy City natives Mamet, Gordon, Macy and Mantegna.

Mini's First Time from writer/director Nick Guthe had a modest debut last Friday (7/14). With a cast including Oscar nominees Alec Baldwin and Jeff Goldblum, Carrie-Anne Moss from The Matrix and Thirteen writer/star Nikki Reed, this black comedy scored a \$3,100 per screen average at seven locations on its opening weekend including \$5,500 at The Arclight in Hollywood.

Rubin characterizes The Great New Wonderful as a "solid single" that he's hoping to "stretch into a double". He first saw the film at the 2005 Tribeca Film Festival and chased it for six months. When a deal with a larger distributor failed to materialize, he was able to finalize an agreement.

The Great New Wonderful has won some critical raves. New York Magazine calls it "The first great 9/11 film." This subtle meditation on life in New York one year after the 9/11 tragedy has an all-star cast including Olympia Dukakis, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Tony Shaloub, Edie Falco, Jim Gaffigan and Stephen Colbert. Based on a script by Sam Catlin, it is directed sensitively by Danny Lerner in spite of his previous feature film resume, which includes Dude, Where's My Car? and Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle.

First Independent opened this film at five locations in New York City, one in Boston and two in Washington, D.C. on June 23rd averaging just under \$5,000 perscreen. In retrospect, Rubin thinks five locations in NYC was a little aggressive, but the film still generated \$13,000 on that first weekend at The Angelika. In Boston, it scored \$11,000 on the opening weekend at Kendall Square. This weekend (7/21), the film

expands to LA, and FIP is hoping to ride positive reviews to solid numbers in Dallas, Chicago and Portland in coming weeks. \$200,000 domestic is achievable prior to the DVD release on September 11.

Much of the country will have to wait to see Edmond, Mini's First Time and The Great New Wonderful on DVD, but these are unique projects with original points-of-view. With the dearth of intelligent films for grown-ups during the summer months, First Independent, along with other "micro-distribution" players like Palm, Magnolia, Shadow, Regent and Balcony, are salvation for cinephiles. If you're lucky enough to be in a town with an aggressive independent arthouse, count your blessings and support these titles.

In this challenging marketplace, only the players who operate smartly will survive. Expect Gary Rubin and First Independent Pictures to thrive.