

## WOODSTOCK FILM FEST

TRAILBLAZER AWARD: JAMES SCHAMUS

PROGRESSIVE EXEC  
IN PROF'S CLOTHES*Focus CEO has worn many hats, which gives him a unique perspective on the specialty biz*

By DAVID HAFETZ

**J**ames Schamus — a fast-talking New Yorker with a weakness for bow ties and bookish round glasses — is frequently described as an intellectual, even an egghead. It's an image he often encourages, such as when he pontificated about the 11 horror flick "Seed of Chucky" in an interview as raising "gender-identification issues" and posing a "smart critique of dominant mores."

He moonlights as a professor at Columbia U., where he teaches film theory and feels at home dissecting the work of long-dead but still abstract Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer. A minimalist, veteran screenwriter and award-winning producer, Focus Features CEO Schamus doesn't do it all, but he comes close. (Once, he even tried his hand at soundtracks, penning an Oscar-nominated song for "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," a film he also co-wrote and produced.)

Since placing his doctoral thesis on the back burner two decades ago to dive into the nascent independent film movement,

Schamus, 49, has played key roles in writing, financing and producing some of the more memorable recent American films, which is why he will receive the Woodstock Film Festival's Trailblazer Award. The laurel recognizes his diverse skills and contributions to cinema, including his work on all of director Ang Lee's features, from "Wedding Banquet" to "Ice Storm" to "Brokeback Mountain."

Although he's spent much of his career helping create and fund risky films that otherwise might not have been greenlighted — "Brokeback" being a case in point — the playful Schamus demurs when asked if he considers his work trailblazing.

"It depends," he says, "on how you define 'trail' and 'blaze.'"

Meira Blaustein, Woodstock Festival's co-founder and executive director, is more effusive about Schamus' work. "These are very high-quality projects that really do add to our work," says Blaustein, adding that Schamus embodies a unique blend of writer, producer, studio exec and Ivy League prof.

"That's a lot for one person, and it really

## TIP SHEET

**What:** 9th annual Woodstock Film Fest

**When:** Wednesday thru Oct. 5

**Where:** Venues include (in Woodstock) Tinker Street Cinema, Bearsville Theater, Town Hall, Community Center, Ulupa Studios; (in Rhinebeck) Uprate Films 2 & 3; (in Rosendale) Rosendale Theater

## SELECT HIGHLIGHTS

**Opening night:** "Pride and Glory" (Gavin O'Connor); "Happy-Go-Lucky" (Mike Leigh); "Flash of Genius" (Marc Abraham)

**Closing night:** "Zack and Miri Make a Porno" (Kevin Smith); "The Great Buck Howard" (Sean McElroy)

**Centerpiece films:** "Wendy and Lucy" (Katie Pecharoff); "The Secret of the Grain" (Jodelle F. Kechiche)

**Panelists include:** Music in Film; A Conversation With James Schamus; Amazing Women in Film; Movies That Matter; Today's Documentaries

**Tipper:** Meira Blaustein, BFF exec director and co-founder



"Medium Cool"

**LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT:**  
**HASKELL WEXLER**

Politics still  
a hot topic  
for a 'Cool'  
filmmaker

By ADDIE MORFOOT

**D**espite his reputation as one of the living legends of cinematography who came of age during the dawn of the New Hollywood of the late '60s, Haskell Wexler is equally renowned as a documentarian and cinema verite pioneer who wears his politics on his sleeve.

And while his directorial feature debut, "Medium Cool," remains his most influential pic, Wexler's recollections about that landmark work reveal how present, and timeless, the film is within the context of the current cultural climate.

"The overall thing that was happening in the country at that time was that the people who represented us were out of touch about the war, employment and poverty," Wexler says. "They were ignoring issues, so I knew there would be some conflict between the authorities and what they called the 'hippies.'"

Combining fiction with reality, the pic was shot in sequence amid the turbulence of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. He wrote the script for "Cool" in three weeks and then immediately shot and directed it.

Forty years later, the 86-year-old ardent liberal admits there are definitely some similarities between today's heady election turmoil and that of late '60s.



Wexler

See PROGRESSIVE page A14

See WEXLER page A17

## WOODSTOCK FILM FEST

MAVERICK AWARD: KEVIN SMITH

## MR. SMITH GOES TO WOODSTOCK

By ANTHONY D'ALESSANDRO

While his *Suzanne* peers such as Steven Soderbergh and Bryan Singer have shed their arthouse skin for tentpole fare, Kevin Smith — the Woodstock Film Fest's sixth annual Maverick Award honoree — remains faithful to more modestly budgeted forms of provocation.

"I shoot talky movies which are inexpensive," says Smith. "There's a lot more freedom [with a low budget], and the potential for return is greater on homevideo."

"He created a new genre of filmmaking with his humor," says Woodstock Film Fest co-founder Meira Blaustein. "He does it with a reverence and a reverence to society and humanity."

Typically, controversy always finds Smith — a rep that began with MPAA tiffs over *Clerks* to Catholic groups' gripes over 1999's *Dogma*.

His latest romp, at least on the surface, should prove to be different. Set outside his New Jersey "view awkward," *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* — made for \$24 million —

centers on two friends who fall in love with each other after making an X-rated pic. Smith submitted *Porno* three times to the MPAA and went through an appeals process before earning an R rating in lieu of NC-17.

Despite sticking to his guns and churning out fare with a pricing lower than the average cost of a studio classic title (\$49 million), Smith hasn't considered himself an indie filmmaker since he shelved out \$27,000 to make *Clerks* in 1994, specifically since he's mostly had the Weinstein brothers picking up the tab.

Smith contends that the recent move toward R-rated comedies made it possible for him to make *Porno*. However, it can be argued that the helmer paved the way for lowly filmmakers like Judd Apatow.

Even Apatow regular and *Porno* star Seth Rogen credits Smith's lucky hunter as an inspiration for "Superbad" in *Porno's* press notes.

"I guess I was ahead of the curve when mixing raunchy wit with sentimentality. However, I didn't do it to blaze a trail," Smith says. "It just made sense to write stories that sounded like the ones my friends and I would tell."



Smith



"Zack and Miri Make a Porno"

## IT AIN'T HEAVY: WOODSTOCK REVISITED

On a typical day this past summer, James Schamus would wake up in his custom-made, eco-friendly house in upstate New York, take a quick dip in the pond and then drive down the road to resume working on his latest collaboration with Ang Lee, *Taking Woodstock*.

It seems a fitting routine for getting in the mood for a film about that high-water mark of the counterculture, the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival. The film, written by Schamus and based on Elliot Tiber's memoir, tells the story of a Greenwich Village interior designer who, while helping his parents run their Catskills motel, played a pivotal role in bringing the 1969 event to life. When the concert's organizers lost their permit in another town, Tiber offered his family's motel as a base, while his neighbor, Max Yasgur, offered up his farm.

"It's a great story," says Schamus. The Focus Features CEO adds that the film does not attempt to be the definitive tale of Woodstock, which drew about 500,000 people to hear artists like Jimi Hendrix, Santana and the Who. That project, he says, would be "too vast" for him and Lee, "like trying to film *War and Peace*" — or rather, *Peace and Power*. "Instead, they fell down to a smaller story as way to enter the Woodstock legend.

Shooting on *Taking Woodstock*, starring Demetri Martin as Tiber and Eugene Levy as Yasgur, is set to wrap in October. Just as Schamus treks over to the real Woodstock to accept the Trailblazer Award at the ninth annual Woodstock Film Festival.

The production — with its casting call open to neo-hippies and college students and its request for old Volkswagens and other vintage cars — has stirred local memories. According to Schamus, there are really three Woodstocks today. "It's a very good film festival," he says. "It's also a place with cool stuff and interesting pottery stores. And then there's Woodstock the concept."

That concept — the lower-power values that Woodstock still symbolizes — isn't just a relic of the past, Schamus says. He sees a continuity of the '60s spirit in the organic farms of today's Hudson Valley and in the people who still live in the area.

For Schamus and Lee, *Taking Woodstock* brings a hiatus from heavier works like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Last, Best Offer*.

"After six suicidally depressing movies in a row," he says, "we both thought this would be a good idea."

—David Karger

## PROGRESSIVE

Continued from page A11

puts him among the best," Blaustein says. "He's also nice and friendly."

Together, Lee and Schamus have worked on 10 films together, including the upcoming *Taking Woodstock*. Schamus says he and Lee complement each other. Through ups and downs, they have continued collaborating, inspired partly, Schamus says, by their mutual commitment to "not fall in a rut."

"The whole point is to not do something people have done before," Schamus explains.

As a producer faced with tough sells, he has consistently wrangled financing by courting international investors and selling rights abroad. He's been known to pay close attention to contract details and even devised the marketing campaign for *Crouching Tiger*.

Blaustein says Schamus' combination of artistry with business skills sets him apart. "You could say that one is a refuge from the terrors of the other," says Schamus, but he adds that, instead, he finds creativity and business to be "symbiotically entwined."

He sees his own career as a tale of survival. Some movies have worked, others haven't. "I'm still standing," he says, with a touch of both self-deprecation and pride.

And although Schamus allowed that Ph.D. to slip for more than a decade, he never let it fade to black: In 2003, Schamus finally earned his doctorate in English from Berkeley; this fall, his long-delayed Dreyer dissertation got published, surprising even his mother.

And on the subject of trailblazing — which at past festivals has gone to the likes of Jonathan Seling of IFC Entertainment and Ted Sarandos of Netflix — the quick-witted academic can't resist a parting pun.

"I'm really much more of a footpath herder," he says.

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## WEXLER

*Continued from page A15*

"We have to know that the general media is not challenging basic things that our government has done," Wexler laments. "No one is saying that we were lied to."

With more than 50 films under his belt as a cinematographer, including "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Coming Home," as well as five Oscar nominations and two wins for "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "Bound for Glory," it's no wonder Wexler is Woodstock's inaugural Lifetime Achievement recipient.

It's the fourth such honor for Wexler, following similar plaudists from the American Society of Cinematographers, the Intl. Documentary Assn. and the Camerimage Intl. Fest of the Art of Cinematography.

Despite the career recognition, Wexler does not entertain thoughts of slowing down.

"I feel it is an obligation not to retire but to be engaged," Wexler says. "I think to not be

engaged is to forfeit your humanity."

For Wexler, that engagement has meant zeroing in on projects that allow him to express his sociopolitical concerns while practicing his art. "At this point, I am sort of obliged to work on documentaries because (studios) don't hire old guys," he explains. "Also, you are closer to the filmmaking process."

In the wake of such works as "The Bus," "Interviews With My Lai Veterans," "Brazil: A Report on Torture" and "Introduction to the Enemy," Wexler most recently took on the dangerous implications of sleep deprivation in the film biz with "Who Needs Sleep?" a doc he directed that debuted at the 2006 Sundance Film Fest.

Wexler, who has been attending the Woodstock fest since its inception in 2000, says he feels a certain undeniable connection to the place and the people.

"Something good resonated with me when it came to that festival because of where they are located and their interest in film," he says. "They encourage rebels who tell stories artfully and honestly."