The Southland’s crowded film festival scene

Between mid-April and mid-May, there are at least nine. Some organizers have been prompted to consider moving the dates.

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The influx of film festivals has grown out of several factors endemic to this portion of the calendar, according to festival planners and other observers. During the early spring period, the crush of Oscar movies — which in many instances compete with film festivals' upscale offerings — has eased. The Cannes Film Festival, which draws hard-core cineastes as well as a wide swath of filmmakers and stars, has yet to begin. And maybe most important, Hollywood's season of summer blockbusters, which can monopolize screens and attention spans, has yet to start.

"We looked at the calendar and thought this was a good time — it's after awards season, after Sundance and before Cannes. We also wanted to stay away from summer, because it's not a great time to have a festival when all of the big blockbusters are being released," said Christina Marouda, executive director of the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, which concluded April 25. She too is considering shifting next year's event by a week to avoid festival conflicts.

The explosion in the number of film festivals around the country grew out of a set of specific circumstances during the boom years of the early and middle aughts. Many local chambers of commerce, suddenly aware of a festival's potential to draw tourism, retail activity and general media attention, began seeing these events as a priority, in some cases investing in them directly. With the country experiencing a larger economic prosperity, private sponsorship money flowed freely. That the multiplex and commercial box office had seen a fall-off in the dramas and other prestige films that festivals specialize in only underscored the need and niche for these festivals.

But like any bubble, it was bound to burst. Although other high-profile film festivals around the country have fallen victim to the economic recession, Southern California, ground zero for the film industry, has remained an exception, bucking the trend and even adding festivals. The expansion may be due to the fact that unlike larger festivals like Cannes, most of these local events aren't huge productions. They usually attract fewer than 5,000 filmgoers and take place at one or two movie theaters, typically occupying a couple of screens per day.

Still, the local proliferation of festivals has some organizers worried about standing out.

"There are too many festivals going on right now," said Samuel Farrow, director of the Hola Mexico Film Festival, which will begin screening 150 films from the country on Thursday at the ArcLight Cinemas in Hollywood. "There are a select group of people who watch foreign films with subtitles — but at the same time, this is Hollywood. If there's somewhere in the world that could hold many festivals at the same time, it's L.A. This is the house of film."

Although Farrow may be stressed about the festival overlap, others insist they aren't worried about the competition. Hilary Helstein, executive director of the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival, which showcases movies about Jewish issues and culture, said the event has traditionally been timed to avoid interfering with major religious holidays.
"I think each festival offers something unique, and I don't think we're in danger of losing business," said Helstein, who hopes between 4,000 and 5,000 people will attend this year's festival, which kicks off May 8. "Our strategy is to offer really unique programming and create events that people feel they really get something out of."

Still, Helstein said funding — much of which comes from Jewish organizations, local businesses and private donations — is down. She's been able to pay for many of this year's costs, which include theatre rentals and screening fees, through in-kind donations.

It's a challenging time to stay afloat, says Marouda, whose festival this year paid for travel and accommodations for a handful of filmmakers who travelled from India to Los Angeles.

"When I get calls from people saying, 'We want your advice, we're thinking of starting a festival,' I first ask them if they really are sure they want to do it," said Marouda, who founded the event eight years ago. "You have to make sure you have the right funding, content, and that you have a niche. There has to be a very specific reason why this festival should exist, because people are always inundated with options."

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