



Looking down West Broadway, Philip Trager, ca. 1975

Thanks to the Movies The Birth of the Tribeca Film Festival

2004

Thanks to the movies, New York enjoys a double life. Even as its inhabitants go about their daily lives, they remain aware that their city possesses a mythic counterpart that dwells in the minds of hundreds of millions of people, in every corner of the globe. From the stone and steel of the earthly city has arisen a city of the imagination, a glowing cinematic presence which has contributed, in no small way, to the larger-than-life character of the real place.

The source of this alternate urban reality, this “mythic city,” is not hard to locate. For more than a century, New York has been inextricably bound to the movies, both as a production center and one of the world’s pre-eminent urban settings. Indeed, it is a relationship whose origins trace back to the birth of the film industry itself—which, in America, arose not in Los Angeles but New York. It was here, toward the end of the 19th century, in a handful of workshops and rooftop stages around Union and Madison squares in Manhattan, that the medium’s early pioneers (including Thomas Edison) perfected the essential technology of commercial cinema. It was here that the first

American films were produced, including hundreds of documentary-style shorts (known as “actualities”) that presented the daily life of the city itself. It was largely in New York, too, that the next generation of moviemakers were nurtured—former glove salesmen and theater managers with names like Fox, Mayer, Lasky, Goldwyn, Zukor, Laemmle, Warner, and Cohn, who knew little about cameras and projectors but seemed to understand instinctively what “played” and what didn’t—and who would, in time, transform American filmmaking into a massive bi-coastal enterprise, with production facilities in Southern California but head offices planted firmly around Times Square. It was, finally, still another group of New Yorkers—urbane and sophisticated screenwriters, displaced in Los Angeles—whose dreamy urban fantasies would give rise to the spectacular invented metropolis that dominated Hollywood in the studio era. From *King Kong* to *42nd Street*, *Swing Time* to *Rear Window*, the mythic city they brought into being took on a life of its own, reinforcing New York’s status as the most familiar and compelling urban environment in the modern world.

After World War II, the relationship between the real and the mythic cities grew even more complex, as moviemakers turned the actual fabric of New York into a spectacular filmic setting. Building on the early location-based work in a handful of daring Hollywood projects (*The Naked City*, *12 Angry Men*, *On the Waterfront*), several generations of native-born moviemakers—including Sidney Lumet and Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, and Spike Lee—sought to spin their myths from streets and sidewalks of New York itself. Around their determined efforts a new industry began to take hold, abetted after 1966 by an innovative initiative, the Mayor’s Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting, the first city agency of its kind in the country. As the number of films shot in the city spiraled from the dozens to the scores to the hundreds, and as the transient resources of the early days gave way to massive, state-of-the-art production facilities, New York movies became a genuine force in American film, the source of some of the greatest moments in modern cinema—*Midnight Cowboy*, *Taxi Driver*, *Annie Hall*, *Do the Right Thing*—as well as an powerful engine of industrial growth, pumping hundreds of millions of dollars a year into the city’s economy. By the last decade of the 20th century, it had made image of the city more familiar and pervasive than ever before, and the city itself more of a magnet than it had been in decades.

But never had this rich and complex dynamic—between the real New York and the movie New York, between the city as a mythic setting and the city as a beehive of production—been consciously mobilized to the benefit of the metropolis itself. Never, that is, until the spring of 2002, when in the wake of the most shocking disaster in New York’s history, a remarkable event came together across the streets and blocks of lower Manhattan, seeking to establish itself in the life of the city: the Tribeca Film Festival.

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Perhaps nowhere else in New York can the haunting interplay between the real and cinematic cities be felt more strongly than in the area of lower Manhattan known as Tribeca, whose small-scale blocks meet often (and surprisingly) in angled or T-shaped intersections—distinctly picturesque layouts that feel less like the real Manhattan street grid, with its open-ended vistas and strict rectilinearity, than the artfully composed backlot “New York Street” of Hollywood’s studios. (In part for this reason, these downtown blocks have long been especially popular as shooting locations for film and television.)

Yet it is these distinctive angled, film-set-like collisions that in many ways hold the secret of the district—the key to its character, its history, even its name. Though of relatively recent coinage, the term “Tribeca” (an acronym for “TRIangle BElow CAnal”) evokes not only the wedge-like shape of the district today but its origins, more than two centuries ago, when the streets of the burgeoning waterfront—oriented to the piers and shoreline of the gently angled Hudson River—pushed inland several blocks to collide with the larger, prevailing geometry of the city’s overall street grid, aligned with the axis of Manhattan itself.

Half a century later, around the time of Civil War, as the small artisan’s rowhouses (a few of which can still be spotted around the area, here and there) gave way to larger commercial structures, these two halves of the “triangle” firmly inscribed the area’s split identity.¹ The blocks by the Hudson’s river edge and piers had become home to Washington Market, one of handful of central exchanges on which New York food supply relied. With more than two thousand stalls and shops in all—fruit and vegetables below Chambers Street, butter and eggs above—the sprawling wholesale market purveyed imports from around the country and overseas, its thousands of carts, wagons, and hustling workmen jamming the streets from Monday to Saturday.

Just a block or two east, meanwhile, a different kind of kind of commerce was in full swing, occupying rows of newly built cast-iron and marble-fronted structures around Worth Street. Indeed, in what was known as Worth Village—“the undisputed textile capital of North America,” one man’s said—sixty major companies (including later giants J.P. Stevens and Deering, Milliken) processed most of the output of the entire nation’s cotton mills.



The two commercial halves of the district held on for most of a century, but by the 1960s, both were in rapid decline, as the working piers were moving to distant parts of New York harbor, and the area’s narrow streets proved unsuited for the fleets of semi-trailers now conveying freight around the country. But by then a new population had emerged, heralding a third wave of development: artists, musicians, and a handful of other creative pioneers, living and working (usually without permits) in the upper floors of the area’s old warehouses and loft buildings. By the late 1970s, the area, now known as Tribeca, had taken on a new identity as the southern offshoot of SoHo, whose hundreds of studios and galleries had already made it a globally renowned arts district. With its unusually large loft spaces, slightly out-of-the-way location, and quieter pace, Tribeca found special favor early on with families, and by the late 1980s (slightly before the rest of Manhattan underwent its own baby boom) the sight of its rough-hewn sidewalks filled with strollers and bohemian children gave rise among locals to the affectionately mocking nickname, “Triburbia.”

By now, another presence began to be felt. In 1988, Robert De Niro, perhaps the quintessential New York film actor of his time, joined with his longtime producing partner Jane Rosenthal to transform a former coffee warehouse at Greenwich and Franklin streets into the Tribeca Film Center. Soon much of the New York’s independent film community had gathered on the nearby blocks, becoming so associated with the downtown district that De Niro and Rosenthal, by the late 1990s, were actually toying with the idea of mounting a “Tribeca Film Festival.” But without a pressing need or purpose, the notion remained speculative; as Rosenthal thought at the time, “the last thing the world needs is another film festival.” In any case, there seemed no particular urgency.

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Cover of *Bright Lights, Big City* by Marc Tauss (1984)



Shadows of the World Trade Center falling on Tribeca, 1970s (Courtesy Hal Bromm)

It had always been one of the more surprising qualities of Tribeca that its fine-grained streets and charmingly scaled buildings stood, quite literally, in the shadow of two of the tallest office towers in the world. Rising at the end of a downtown vista, or quietly looming above the cornice of a 19th century brick warehouse, the twin silvery monoliths of the World Trade Center were a constant yet largely unacknowledged presence in the neighborhood: a convenient landmark when proffering directions; an occasional reminder that despite its insular, almost village-like character, the community sat at the foot of one of the world's biggest business districts. But despite their startling proximity—just a block or two from the district's southern edge—the towers seemed somehow to stand at arm's length from Tribeca, at a slight remove from the daily life of the place.

Until, of course, one shimmering blue morning in early September, 2001. If the events of that terrible day seared the hearts of people at the farthest reaches of the globe, they fell like a hammer on Tribeca and Battery Park City, the two residential communities nearest the disaster. "Watching three thousand people disappear before your eyes is not something you'll ever forget," a community leader named Madelyn Wils observed. In the days and weeks afterward, the repercussions of what De Niro called "an unbelievably devastating experience" continued to widen, not only in terms of emotional trauma but as a blunt economic reality. After several months in which the district was literally cordoned off from outsiders, few visitors or tourists were choosing to patronize the area's shops or restaurants. Businesses closest to the Trade Center site, meanwhile, were attempting to deal an even more immediate problem: the sudden disappearance of nearly half their customer base.

It was in these desperate circumstances that De Niro and Rosenthal (together with her husband, Craig Hatkoff) decided in January 2002 to advance their old idea of a film festival. The purpose was now clear: "to help the economic development of lower Manhattan," Rosenthal declared forthrightly, before adding, more poignantly, "and to give our neighborhood a new memory." A new film festival is typically two years or more in the making; Rosenthal and her team had less than four months. Crucial support arrived from another link to the area's rich history: the American Express Corporation, which in 1858 had built an imposing brick-and-stone headquarters at the corner of Hudson and Jay Streets, and had remained located in—and committed to—lower Manhattan ever since.



Nelson Mandela greeting the audience in front of New York's City Hall for the opening ceremony for the Tribeca Film Festival, while Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Robert De Niro, Hugh Grant, and Whoopi Goldberg look on.

Even among the most jaded New Yorkers, the luminaries assembled on the steps of City Hall on May 9th, 2002 to inaugurate the first annual Tribeca Film Festival represented a breathtaking assemblage of global power, influence, and talent: Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Governor George Pataki, former President Bill Clinton, former South African President Nelson Mandela, and a cross-section of some of the film world's most celebrated figures, from Whoopi Goldberg to Francis Ford Coppola to Robert De Niro. "I have in my time been accused as an actor of being a bit lightweight," Hugh Grant admitted to the group, "and I can assure you I have never felt more lightweight than I do standing on this platform, in this company." President Mandela, meanwhile, slyly assured the audience that although his own family had recently pronounced him a "has-been," his appearance on the dais was proof that "despite what they say, there are some people who still feel that I can perform some function." Observing that film is "one medium that almost literally transports us into the world of others," he reminded his listeners that "the collective sorrow of a community often brings out the strength and resilience of human beings."

All across lower Manhattan, meanwhile, hundreds of colorful banners for the event had gone up, bringing a festive note to the streets for the first time in more than half a year. But what kind of festival would it be? Given the extraordinary circumstances and dramatically compressed time-frame of its creation, many of the obvious role models—the glittering global spectacle of Cannes, the insider marketplace of Sundance, the elite *cinéaste* showcase of the New York Film Festival—seemed perhaps not quite right to fit the bill. Instead, Rosenthal and her team decided to let a thousand flowers bloom, allowing the festival to absorb and reflect the character of the city itself: public-spirited, pluralistic, diverse, quirky, a week-long celebration whose multiple constituencies—

filmmakers, moviegoers, local businesses, residents, even children—could all feel the event had been designed for their benefit.

To be sure, the centerpiece of the effort was film itself. In five days, the festival presented thirty-six world premieres, fifty-two documentaries, 102 shorts—155 films in all. There were coveted awards for independent features, documentary subjects, short films, and student work, as well as glamorous openings for big-budget movies such as *About a Boy* and *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*. The film screenings included several restored classics—a special interest of the director Martin Scorsese, whose legendary presence hovered over the entire event like a beneficent spirit. If the festival's geographic diversity was remarkable—films in twenty-two languages, from forty countries on six continents—so was its intellectual breadth, evident especially in the extraordinary panel discussions that, drawing on the boundless wealth of film talent in New York, quickly became one of the event's most distinctive features.

On Saturday, May 11th, the whirl of screenings, panels and receptions came to a climax with a full-day family street fair—transforming a seven-block stretch of Greenwich Street into kaleidoscope of color, music, and food, drawing crowds from across the city—and with a free public concert later that evening in Battery Park, overlooking the harbor, featuring David Bowie and Sheryl Crow.

Before the event, Rosenthal had cautiously predicted that as many as thirty thousand people might attend the first year's programs. In fact, 150,000 people turned out for the event, bringing more than ten million dollars in revenue into the community. Thirty thousand tickets were sold, ninety thousand restaurant meals served, nearly four thousand hotel nights booked. But for all the much-needed income, it was the festival's intangible benefit that may have proved most crucial for the community, and for the city itself. As New York's first major new cultural initiative in the aftermath of 9/11, the Tribeca Film Festival was a stunning demonstration that the city would not only heal and rebuild, but continue to grow in new and unexpected ways.



55 Wall Street, ca. 1931

Looking back, one event could stand as a symbol for the entire enterprise, suggestive not only of the contribution the festival has already made to the city's life, but of the equally significant role it might now look forward to.

For the festival's inaugural gala on the evening of May 9th, 2002, more than a thousand people—movie stars and industry executives, civic leaders and corporate sponsors—filled the immense central hall of the Regent Hotel at 55 Wall Street. By an uncanny coincidence, the majestic room selected for the festival's christening had been built, a century and a half earlier, as a symbol of New York's rebirth after *another* terrible disaster for the city: the Great Fire of 1835, which in its consecutive three days of destruction had leveled more than a third of the city's business district, 674 buildings in all. The most shocking loss had been a large structure at the heart of the city's commercial life, the Merchant's Exchange, on Wall Street, which was reduced to a smoking wreck. Yet to the astonishment of observers, within a few months of the conflagration, a new and grander Merchant's Exchange, built of massive fireproof blocks of granite, had begun to rise from the ruins, definitive proof to the world that New York would not only endure but prevail over the devastation wreaked upon it.

And the story hardly ended there. Over the next century and a half, that same stone building at 55 Wall would not only survive but, repeatedly expanded and transformed, would go on to enjoy multiple lives and contribute at each turn to the life of the city—as an early home to the New York Stock Exchange, as the United States Custom House, as the headquarters of the First National City Bank (ancestor of today's Citibank), as a stylish boutique hotel—only to come full circle, at the start of the 21st century, as the soaring reception space where many of the city's creative leaders now gathered to show their determination to overcome another great blow. Looking to the future, it might be the Tribeca Film Festival's ultimate legacy to be regarded in much the same way: less as a beacon of resilience during a single dark moment in history, than as a sturdy, ongoing, and beloved resource for a great and vibrant city.

ⁱ An alternate history holds that the name "TriBeCa" was used first in the late 1970s to identify a single wedge-shaped block on Lispenard Street, between Broadway to Church Street, whose residents, having converted their formerly industrial buildings to live-work studios, sought to have the "artist in residence" (AIR) provisions of the city's zoning law, recently enacted for SoHo just to the north, be extended a block south to what they referred to as the "TRiangle BElow CAnal."

ⁱⁱ Marc Tausk's mixed-media image for the cover of Jay McInerney's 1984 novel *Bright Lights, Big City* embodied a spirit of downtown "cool" for an entire generation. For young people who had begun to live in the area (and for whom The Odcon restaurant, at the time one of the few local establishments open at night, provided a kind of second home) the image dreamily captured the way in which the shimmering yet remote nighttime presence of the twin towers made the district's small-scale, almost deserted nighttime streets seem at once like the edge and the center of the world.

From *Swann Auction catalogue*: Tausk used a combination of methods for the image; he photographed on site in lower Manhattan, using a friend whom he felt served as the model for the main character, Jamie. He then shot "the warm glowing facade of the Odcon, and the icily lit World Trade Center" and reassembled these elements using a series of collage, airbrush, and dye techniques to blend the images together into a perfect "stage" setting that would forever capture the essence of the novel and New York in the '80s.⁴