

Finding a Place for Small Movies in the Big Picture

By PETER M. NICHOLS

ALTOGETHER it has been a high-profile month for First Run Features, a small New York film and video distributor that has a habit of acting a little too big for its acquisition budget.

Now playing at the Quad Cinema in Manhattan, "Insomnia," a chilly Norwegian psychological thriller released by First Run, has earned top-flight reviews. The film stars Stellan Skarsgård as an investigator implicated in a murder. "The hottest Swedish import since Garbo," John Anderson wrote in *Newsday*.

Downtown at Film Forum, "The Disenchanted," another First Run release, is also doing well after high praise from critics. A French film directed by Benoît Jacquot, it stars Judith Godrèche as a precocious 17-year-old who on a dare from her boyfriend agrees to sleep with the ugliest man she can find. An "uncannily rich evocation of a young woman's turbulent inner life," Stephen Holden wrote in *The New York Times*.

When these movies are through in New York, or perhaps before, they will move on to selected theaters around the country, playing in only one or two at a time to conserve and concentrate promotion money, and then on to video.

Seymour Wishman, First Run's president, has a reputation for knowing just how to handle a small film. "He's not a Miramax or an October Films," said Karen Cooper, director of Film Forum, which books quite a few First Run films. "He doesn't have that kind of buying power or capitalization. But with a very minimal budget, he does a good job of opening a lot of this work nationwide."

Mr. Wishman got into movies in 1985 after a career as a criminal and civil rights lawyer and then as a writer. "I was writing books, which got me out of the law and into being incredibly lonely," he said. About the same time, First Run, which was begun in 1979 and had earned a reputation for getting small films into New York art houses, was in financial difficulty and looking for new leadership. Mr. Wishman loved movies, and at the troubled company he found someone to talk to. "Mainly creditors yelling, 'Where's my money?' — but at least it was people," he said.

At the time, First Run specialized in perhaps not the most exciting documentaries in the world — "earnest, do-good lefty films," Mr. Wishman said. As a first step, he broadened the repertory and turned the tide with two highly successful films, albeit documentaries: "28 Up" (1985), the culmination of Michael Apted's series following a group of Britons from childhood to adulthood, and



FROM NORWAY Stellan Skarsgård in "Insomnia," released recently by First Run Features.

"Sherman's March" (1986), in which Ross McElwee uses Sherman's Civil War route to reflect on his own life and the women in it.

"28 Up" played first at Film Forum. In those days the theater had only two screens. "After three weeks Karen didn't have room for it," Mr. Wishman said, "so we moved it to the Bleecker Street Theater," where it had a long run.

Using these films to keep the company in business, he searched the country for thea-

ters that would book First Run films. "Sherman's March" presented a special problem because it was made in 16 millimeter. "I made a list of theaters that had 16 millimeter and would be willing to play the film," he said. "Sherman's March," he added, eventually played in 100 theaters for periods ranging from a week to nine months.

"We developed a network," Mr. Wishman said. "We played one or two cities at a time, not many at once, because it was too expen-

sive to advertise." First Run films depend on good reviews. "Sometimes they get awards; sometimes they get audiences," he said. This year, "Watermelon Woman," Cheryl Dunne's autobiographical film about lesbian life, was released on video after a national theater run in 100 cities, one or two cities at a time over a year.

First Run got into video in the late 1980's, at first without much success. "We'd get large advances from larger video compa-

nies, but they tended to sell to chains in large numbers," Mr. Wishman said. They didn't know what to do with First Run films, so he moved on to smaller companies. They didn't know, either.

"I was utterly dependent on a sales force that was at best indifferent, if not hostile, to the kind of titles we had," he said. "So I couldn't develop customers I could be independent with." As Mr. Wishman had with theaters, he ended up building a list of 2,000 video stores that he could sell to directly.

"All small distributors are guided by one, person's passions and sensibilities," Ms. Cooper said. Mr. Wishman builds his inventory in categories that interest him: politics, religion, gay and lesbian subjects, the fine arts, to name a few. Most of his titles come from film festivals or from producers who

**At a company like
First Run Features,
success depends on
careful thinking
about how to
promote a movie and
where to play it.**

have become acquainted with his taste for films with a point of view.

"Berlin is a good festival for me," he said. "I occasionally go to Cannes, but film makers there have much larger expectations: and want large advances. I usually have to wait for them to be disappointed."

In 1994 the animator Michael Sporn was looking for a distributor for his award-winning short feature "Whitewash," a devastating story about a young black girl who is taunted by gang of toughs who spray-paint her face white. "First Run had seen the film in festivals and wanted to distribute it, but I, of course, wanted a big company" and held off," said Mr. Sporn.

Offers materialized but Mr. Sporn didn't feel comfortable with any of them. "Since I loved this film, I wanted someone to take care of it," he said. Two years later he called First Run, which immediately took "Whitewash."

The company will release two more Sporn films. "They seem to jump at the chance to release more interesting things," Mr. Sporn said. "As an independent animator, I can't argue with that."