

Vail Daily

A director's producer

Alex Miller

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VAIL — Veteran producer Ed Pressman said he's happy to be in Vail this week to receive the Mayor's Lifetime Achievement award at the Vail Film Festival. After all, he said, it's not often producers receive such recognition.

"I think producing can be a very proud profession," Pressman said, speaking by phone from his Manhattan office Tuesday. "But it's so often derided."

Pressman, 62, has produced over 70 films in his career, working with directors from Oliver Stone and Brian De Palma to Wolfgang Peterson and David Hare. A contemplative, soft-spoken man, Pressman sounds more like an artist than the stereotypical, bottom-line fixated producer.

"Traditionally, the producer was the money guy, in opposition to the director in this combative relationship," Pressman said. "But my approach has always been more collaborative."

Pressman said he grew up in the 1960s and '70s, when French new wave cinema was in its prime. "The idea that film could change the world, the auteur behind it - that influenced me a great deal," he said. "So the way I approached it was to be a partner with the director, us against the world. I wanted to accomplish a context for the filmmaker to achieve his or her vision."

That philosophy has been realized time and again, as Pressman continues to establish successful partnerships with some of the film industry's most celebrated directors. In his view, it's those relationships that make a successful film, not necessarily a great script.

"My attraction is to the individual, their charisma," he said, adding that he enjoys seeing how the filmmaker inserts his own character into the film.

"The character of Oliver Stone, De Palma, Mamet - they're reflected strongly in the films they make," Pressman said. That strong character, he said, charges the entire process.

"It inspires everyone around them to feel like they're really doing something, not just another job. The director leads the battle, the people are drawn to them and support them in the mission. So yes, more often than not it's the individual, not the script or the book."

Half the battle

Pressman acknowledges that making a great film, while not easy, represents only a portion of what constitutes a success in the industry. Since he began his career in the late '60s, Pressman said he's seen things change in a cyclical fashion.

"In some ways things are very similar," he said. "But in odd ways it keeps going around in circles." For Pressman, the challenge now isn't in getting films produced, but in getting them marketed properly. As someone who's mostly worked as an independent producer (he says about one-third of his films were with studios), Pressman has seen opportunities expand greatly for smaller filmmakers. "When I started, there were very few channels," he said. "Major studios were almost the only way to get funding, and independents hardly existed."

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Now, he says, there are a variety of ways to get films funded and a great many more outlets. The introduction of digital video and editing has also made some films less expensive to make. "The big challenge now is getting them marketed in a way that they get noticed," Pressman said. "There's such competition, and a huge amount of the money goes to promoting the big movies." Pressman cites as an example his "lovely" 2004 film "Undertow," directed by David Gordon Green and released by United Artists. But UA, he said, was going through a corporate transition and didn't give it the backing it needed. The film was only in theaters a few weeks before it disappeared.

The opposite occurred in 2003 with "The Cooler," which Pressman also produced.

"We showed it at Sundance, audiences really liked it and there was competition among the studios for the rights," he said. "Lions Gate committed to us with a good advance plus a promise of promotional support that they delivered on."

With positive reviews and strong backing from Lions Gate, "The Cooler" grossed over \$8 million and garnered an Oscar nomination for Alec Baldwin.

"It was the same with 'American Psycho,'" Pressman said, referring to another film he did with Lions Gate. "It was promoted heavily and the film broke through the morass. Others are not as fortunate." Ask Ed Pressman what his favorites are among the films he's produced and he has a rather long list. "I love the early De Palma films," he begins, before moving onto the works of other directors. "I've got a list, circled my favorites: 'Das Boot,' 'Conan the Barbarian,' 'Plenty,' 'True Stories,' 'Wall Street,' 'Talk Radio,' 'Hoffa,' 'The Crow,' 'American Psycho,' 'The Cooler,' 'Never Die Alone.'"

He concludes with a film just completed called "Beautiful Country," being released this summer by Sony Classics.

"It's a lovely movie," Pressman said. "I think it's marvelous, but it'll be competing with the big summer movies. Sometimes that can work. I think Sony Classics is behind it, but we'll see."