

Read this article from the *LA Times* about the making of *Whiplash* and answer the questions that follow.

Source – [LA Times](#) – John Horn *January 15, 2014,*

# Doing whatever it takes for a spot at Sundance Film Festival

Directors trying to get their films to the Sundance Film Festival seize on any break they can get to show their films there. “Whiplash” went from a short to a feature in a year to try to make the cut.



There’s a tradition of Sundance Film Festival directors turning their short films into full-length features but few have successfully attempted what Damien Chazelle was trying to do last year. After winning the short film jury award the writer-director was determined to convert his 18-minute film into a full feature for this year’s festival.

Chazelle’s timetable was its own whiplash: to meet deadlines, Chazelle had to shoot and edit the full film in nine weeks — roughly one-third the time needed to put together an average movie. With no time to spare, Chazelle at one point staggered back to his Los Angeles set to keep shooting hours after suffering a concussion in a traffic accident.

# **Whiplash (Chazelle, 2014)**

## How independent films make it to screen



More on how *Whiplash* got made from John Horn's *LA Times* article (questions at the end of the complete article)

### **The role of Sundance in helping independent films make it...**

Sundance is the nation's top festival for movies made outside the studio system. It has helped launch the careers of numerous directors, including Steven Soderbergh and Quentin Tarantino. Distribution deals can top \$10 million, and Academy Award winners like "Little Miss Sunshine" can begin here. It's no surprise then that filmmakers will go to extremes to join the fold.

Inside downtown Los Angeles' Palace Theater, the production was shooting late on a Saturday night, and the crew didn't go home until 4 a.m. Sunday. After filming wrapped and Chazelle raced to cut the movie, editors grabbed naps on couches, sound mixers lunched in hallways, coffee machines churned out endless lattes and almost everybody got sick. "Those were killer days," Chazelle said. "No one was sleeping."

And then, a week before Thanksgiving, Chazelle's phone rang, with Sundance programming director Trevor Groth on the line. Even though Chazelle's quickly assembled version of "Whiplash" was missing its score and submitted late, it had been accepted into Sundance, where it will kick off the festival on Thursday.

### **Sundance as a market for distributors**

Among the audience will be scores of distributors, who will hopefully launch a bidding war for the \$3.3 million "Whiplash." Compared with the sometimes raw quality of many films at Sundance, "Whiplash" stands out as accomplished. The making of "Whiplash" dramatizes the larger world of independent film itself; a tale of why seizing momentum is nearly as important as having a great story to tell, and how the tiniest breaks — in this case, a new investor writing a small check on a hunch — can translate into a huge opportunity.

"This entire movie has been built by amazing people who have given up everything else in their lives to get it made," said Helen Estabrook, one of "Whiplash's" producers.

If Chazelle's original plan had worked, "Whiplash" would have been in theatres by now. The filmmaker played drums for a heartless New Jersey school band teacher, and was inspired by the experience to write a script about an even more autocratic jazz conductor at a conservatory. "My predominant memory of the band was terror," Chazelle said of his teacher. "So it gave rise to this boogeyman character."

### **Short film to feature film**

Estabrook and executive producer Couper Samuelson tried to raise money for the production in early 2012, but a tale about a jazz drumming student from a filmmaker with only one film — an acclaimed, black-and-white musical called "[Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench](#)," which Chazelle started as a Harvard undergraduate — didn't attract a single backer. Unwilling to abandon the project, the producers instead decided to take one scene from the screenplay and turn it into a short, a demonstration not only that Chazelle could direct but also that the story "would play like a thriller," Samuelson said.

With banker Nicholas Britell, a pianist and fellow Harvard alumnus, willing to bankroll three days of filming for \$23,000, Chazelle hired veteran actor [J.K. Simmons](#) as the despotic

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teacher Terence Fletcher, and cast **Johnny Simmons** as drummer Andrew Neyman. Samuelson paid for the short film's drum kit himself, and Estabrook used her own money to soundproof a classroom at a local school as a rehearsal studio. It won the Short Film Award at Sundance 2013, and the feature version of "Whiplash" had new life.

With Chazelle's short film now central to his sales pitch, the movie was sent out again for financing in early 2013, with the seemingly impossible goal of making this year's Sundance. "We just wanted to keep our foot on the gas," Estabrook said.

### **Distributor finance**

Independent financier Bold Films, which had backed the acclaimed crime drama "**Drive**," made the most aggressive bid for "Whiplash" and offered \$3.3 million. Chazelle recast the drummer part with Miles Teller ("**The Spectacular Now**"), and shot the film on digital cameras in 19 days in Los Angeles, and one day in New York. "Cost is no longer this massive obstacle," Samuelson said of the benefits of digital production, which eliminates processing time and film costs. "As long as you have the will, you can get it done."

Chazelle wrapped filming on 11/10/13, and "Whiplash" was shown to Sundance's programmers on 8/11/13. Thanks in part to the reputations of the film's producers (independent film veteran **Jason Blum**, is also a "Whiplash" producer) Sundance programmers were willing to extend their deadlines.

Having been accepted into Sundance meant that Chazelle again had to race to finish "Whiplash" completely, and once again the team worked late into early mornings, sacrificing weekends and holidays to polish the movie to a high gloss. But at least they knew at that point the effort had been worth it. "We just figured," Samuelson said, "that we'll sleep when we're dead."

### **Questions**

#### **Independent and mainstream**

- What details of this film's production suggest that it is an independent film?
- What makes the production of *Whiplash* different from that of a studio (or mainstream) film?

#### **Key production stages of an independent film**

- What were the key stages which led to the production of *Whiplash*?
- What roles did the people play who ensured that *Whiplash* got made?

#### **Risks, advantages and disadvantages of independent film-making**

- What do you think are the risks of independent film production?
- What do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages of being an independent film-maker?