

[Read](#) [Watch](#) [Learn](#) [Interact](#) [About](#)

[Login](#) | [Create an Account](#)

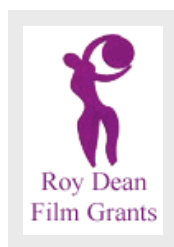
Username: *

Password: *

[Log in](#)

► [Create new account](#)

► [Request new password](#)



Learn About:

[Distribution](#)
[Documentary](#)
[Film Festivals](#)
[Financing](#)
[Legal](#)
[Marketing](#)
[Screenwriting](#)
[Technical](#)

[Interact!](#)

Ads by Google

[Sundance 2009](#)
 Exclusive Interviews
 With Sundance
 Artists. Updated Daily
 - Watch Now!
youtube.com/sundancefil

[Home](#) » [Read](#) » [By Date](#) » [January 2009](#)

The View From the Red Carpet: An Interview with Oscar-Winner Ari Sandel

Independent filmmaker, Ari Sandel, talks about the night he found himself walking the red carpet and the projects he's been working on since then.

January 27th, 2009 | [John McMahon](#)
 Posted in [January 2009](#), [Features](#), [Film Festivals](#)

Ari Sandel was nervous and excited when he arrived at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood on the evening of March 5th, 2006 for the 78th Academy Awards that, for a moment, he forgot to breathe.

His film, *West Bank Story*--a musical-comedy that explores a microcosm of the Israeli--Palestinian conflict through the competition between the fast food stands, Koshers King and Hummus Hut--had just won the award for Best Short Film, Live Action.

"You have to pinch yourself. It's hard to even appreciate the whole thing it's such a sensory overload," Sandel said. "It's not until a few days later that it really starts to set in and you go wow that was real. I took my Mom and the producers went with me. It was a great experience."

From the time a new talent bursts onto the scene and then wins an Academy Award, can seem like an overnight success. But the public often misses the back-story. There are countless hours that go into honing a craft or building a project from the initial seed of an idea to the unveiling of the finished piece.

What initially began as a graduate thesis project at the University of Southern California, blossomed into something much more than just a learning exercise. After \$74,000, a year in production, lots of donated resources, hours of mentorship and 200 film festivals later, there stood Ari Sandel, 32, giving his acceptance speech in front of an audience full of Hollywood's brightest stars and an international television audience of more than a billion people. "Nothing can prepare you for making a speech on television in front of a billion people and 4,000 Hollywood bigwigs," Sandel said.

A few days before the big night, Sandel made a list of all the people he had to thank. He knew he only had about 60 seconds to thank everyone on his growing list of 47 names. He knew he had to make some cuts. He also knew he was a complete unknown so he felt it had to inject



Ari Sandel, picking up his Oscar for his short film, "West Bank Story," in 2006.

Type keywords here...

SEARCH

Subscribe

Sign up to receive The Independent's free newsletter (2 times per month). Note: We never sell or share our list.

Latest Classified Ads

- [Writers & Bloggers for The Independent](#) (*Opportunities & Gigs*) (3 hours 26 min ago)
- [Color Grading up to 2K \(incl RED\) with APPLE COLOR and Blu-Ray Authoring](#) (*Opportunity & Gig Seekers*) (3 days 16 hours ago)
- [Finishing Funds 2009](#) (*Grants & Funds*) (1 week 41 min ago)
- [Crew needed for comedy shoot](#) (*Opportunities & Gigs*) (1 week 3 hours ago)

Most Popular Stories & Blogs

- [The 10 Best Academic Programs for Documentary Filmmakers](#)
- [Funny Women](#)
- [Filmmaker's Journal: So Much for Taking a Break](#)
- [Blogging Hot Docs: Playing the Pre-Sale, Co-Production Game](#)
- [Documentary 2.0: Making Media That Matters](#)

**Become a
Filmmaker**

Write, Shoot, Direct,
Edit Your Own Films.
2 Year Conservatory
Program.
www.NYFA.com

some context. As if that weren't enough, the night before, he gets a call from the Israeli General Consul. "If your film wins tomorrow it will be the first time a movie about the conflict in the Middle East that's pro-peace has ever won," the Consul noted to Sandel. "I hope you'll say something about the fact there are still people in Israel and Palestine who want peace and are hopeful there's a future."

Sandel's agent told him to be funny while his Dad (who comes from Israel) gave him this advice: "You go to the stage, you take the award and say 'I'm now ready for a job' and walk off the stage."

Traditionally, there's been a lot of criticism about blending entertainment with politics, but how can a filmmaker make something like *West Bank Story* and not say anything about its positive message, especially when the media tends to feed alarmist appetites. Sandel, remarkably, kept his emotionally charged delivery concise, balanced and clear. "I made a musical comedy about Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank," he said in his speech. "And it's a movie about peace and about hope. Hope is not hopeless."

He went on to remind the Hollywood hierarchy of the raw passion that drives the independent spirit. "A lot of viewers are watching and asking what are short films," Sandel said. "Well, a lot of them are made by directors who are trying to get noticed. In a lot of ways they represent the little guy because we don't have the big studios behind us, big name actors or the budgets we need. It relies on perseverance and stick-to-it-ness and to hustle and the dedication and loyalty from a cast and crew who are doing it for pennies if not for nothing."

About a year before he made that speech, *West Bank Story* wasn't even gleam in Academy's eye much less an actual Oscar contender. His 21-minute musical comedy about the on-going conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians was creating quite a media buzz in LA, all the way from the snow-covered mountains of Utah. Ari and his 60-member team of friends, family and supporters descended on Park City just days before the 2005 Sundance Film Festival began. With the kind of strategic precision that would have made General Patton proud, the team made certain that everyone from the town barber to the coffee shop waitress knew about *West Bank Story*.

Characterized by the kind of gutsy audacity that made the film so full of joy and life, Ari made use of every promotional technique available. "I brought DVDs to all my screenings and handed them out to who ever asked," Sandel said. "I made posters and put them up all over town. I made jackets, hats and buttons that said 'Kosher King Chosen Restaurant' and others that said 'Hummus Hut.' People wanted to collect the buttons and that started a buzz."

Ari and his team were incredibly organized and knew how to take advantage of the media buzz they were creating. They hired a couple of local kids to dress up in 'Hummus Hut' and 'Kosher King' outfits and handout flyers on Main Street. The media loved the photo opportunity and soon (in fact—the next day) the kids, dressed up in their colorful outfits, on the front pages of the *L.A. Times* Calendar Section and the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The story was also covered on an episode of *Access Hollywood*.

"For a short film," Ari reminisced, "it got a hell of a lot of exposure. When you go to Sundance you want to create as much hype as possible and that's what we did. I really tried to make my short film feel as big

of an event as going to one of the feature films like *Napoleon Dynamite* or *Garden State* or whatever else was there.”

Summer Lopez was an important member of the *West Bank Story* team, because she had experience with Sundance and she is an expert in marketing short films. She worked closely with Ari to insure that his short film had a very big presence. “When we showed up for our screenings half the audience was friends, family and crew so everyone was clapping and cheering,” Sandel recalled. “When agents came to watch they were thinking, ‘God, this movie’s really playing well! Everyone loves it!’”

Sundance is the most important showcase for emerging independent films and *West Bank Story* made a big media splash; however, it was winning the St. Louis Film Festival at the end of 2005 that qualified the film for Academy Award submission. “You have to win an Academy accredited festival: there’s like 80 of them,” Sandel explained. “The Academy will give you the list. Your film has to win a jury-prize not an audience award.”

If creating a short film is a way to introduce your talents to a tough industry, having your short film win an Academy Award magnifies the exposure, garners a great deal of attention and marks you as part of Hollywood’s elite.

Since Ari’s night at the Oscars, he has finished a feature-length documentary with Vince Vaughn called *Vince Vaughn’s Wild West Comedy Show*, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2006 and was released last year by PictureHouse. He is now in the home stretch of finishing the script to a film titled *Brad Cutter Ruined My Life...Again*, set up at Fox Atomic.

Not one to wait around for the next phone call or meeting, Ari is committed to flexing his creative muscles by staying busy. “When you have a project that you’re working on it becomes easier to buckle down and motivate yourself,” he said. “Usually, it’s when you’re in between stuff that it becomes more difficult to keep motivated.”

Sandel’s formula combines comedy with a political consciousness. Like many self-directed creative professionals, the day-to-day discipline can be a challenge. “I talk to a lot of people in the business,” he said. “For writers and directors staying motivated and disciplined to get things done is one of the hardest things.”

Juggling multiple projects at various stages of completion is not easy. Sandel has many irons in the fire. “Sometimes you take on too many projects at once and something suffers. You have to figure out what your breaking point is and try not to exceed that. Between developing stuff you’re attached to, writing your own material, and then reading scripts, going out for jobs and attending pitch meetings...it can all be very time consuming.”

Ari prefers to work with writing partners. It’s a way to define each project better and pace its development. This collaborative approach certainly helped give *West Bank Story* its unique combination of political commentary and social satire (a combination that will probably shape his oeuvre). Originally, the story was about checkpoints and suicide bombers and all the complications that real-world politics can bring. It wasn’t until Ari and his writing partner Kim Ray hit upon the idea of the Kosher King and Hummus Hut that the story began to take an absurdist

direction. The story was then distilled down to our common need for love and food. " When we came up with food and the premise of competing falafel stands, the script began to come to life." The film resonates with viewers and draws its real strength from the wisdom that our commonalities far out-weigh any differences we might have.

See Also:[Q/A: Ryan Gosling](#)[Show Us Your Shorts](#)[Sundance in Primetime](#)[Printer friendly version](#)

Post new comment

Subject:**Comment: ***

- Web page addresses and e-mail addresses turn into links automatically.
- Allowed HTML tags: `` `<a>` `` `` `<cite>` `<code>` `` `` `` `<dl>` `<dt>` `<dd>` `` `<i>` `` `<class>` `<blockquote>` `<h2>` `<h3>` `<h4>`
- Lines and paragraphs break automatically.

[More information about formatting options](#)**CAPTCHA**

This question is for testing whether you are a human visitor and to prevent automated spam submissions.

What color is a red hat?: *

Security question, designed to stop automated spam bots

Copyright © 1978-2009

[Advertise](#) | [Support Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) See all *The Independent's* [RSS feeds](#)