

Fandor Streams Indie Video: Sundance Meets Netflix

By Anne Thompson

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Finally, the promise of streaming movies has become a practical reality, from Amazon to Netflix. But as multiple indie sites come and go (from Jaman and Mubi to Spout), on the eve of SXSW, a new indie site launches Wednesday, Fandor, that promises a better subscription indie streaming service via its website and Facebook. For \$10 a month, you can browse, sample, clip and stream its library of 2500 films, from Fritz Lang and Maya Deren classics to Alex Cox and Derek Jarman indies or Sundance docs. (Shorts are in the mix too, especially as a mobile app comes online.)

The site is pretty good; like Netflix, you can start lining up a queue of films, check their featured filmmakers and content, or simply tap into what happens to be playing on the home page, which offers a calendar of playing times.

San Francisco-area-based co-founders Jonathan Marlow and Dan Aronson have seen their share of start-ups and online ventures. They have lined up ex-Facebook executive Chris Kelly and indie producer and indieWIRE blogger Ted Hope for their board of directors. At SXSW they will throw a nightly party on the Fogo de Chao roof deck and host a booth (213).

Aronson has been a technologist for 20 years; his wife used to run an arthouse theater. Having raised small kids they know how many parents want to go out to see indie flicks but can't. "I came to the 2 + 2 realization that when you can deliver Transformers for the same price as Dogtooth it changes the economics of the world," says Aronson, who was connected to Marlow by San Francisco exhibitor and Telluride co-director Gary Meyer. "The whole world of indie films is ripe to be fixed by streaming. I realized that maybe this market was not that nichey."

Marlow, who is a veteran festival programmer, was excited that Aronson's technological expertise could allow Fandor to accomplish some things that had not been possible at Amazon, GreenCine and Vudu, among other places. Also, the two men figured that the time was finally right to do what some sites had tried to do too early; in other words, they could learn from others' mistakes. Rather than trying to become the essential Facebook for film, the two men realized, they opted to partner with Facebook and tap into its enormous numbers of indie movie fans and use it as a mechanism for discovery, much as Zynga made casual gaming appeal to the Facebook user base.

Kelly was key to integrating Fandor with Facebook and its 600 million members. Rolling out Wednesday, any Facebook user can register on Fandor with their Facebook ID and watch any movies in the catalog for free. "The way people discover indie movies is not pushed by the studio machine," says Aronson. "It's all social word of mouth. Facebook brings social sharing tools out to different kinds of business, and should be able to do it for indie movies."

Marlow, with help from Hope, is focused on finding the best films out there. (The men made a conscious decision not to embrace TV, which is already well-served by Hulu, Netflix and Amazon.) He's not making pacts with the studios but rather with suppliers like Kino Lorber and the Cinema Guild. Marlow believes in curation, "marrying what we see at film festivals like Telluride with what we believe audiences will have an interest in."

Fandor is more sophisticated than the genre tree offered by Netflix or Blockbuster Video: comedy, drama, classics. It dives into deeper areas of genre to help people find things. "Movies live in multiple places, such as seafaring and swashbucklers, or dysfunctional families," says Marlow.

Also rolling out Wednesday at the Fandor launch is a partnership for Boxee's 1.6 million subscribers, as well as BlipSnips, which offers users the ability to nip a clip from any film and share that selected scene on Facebook. For those who like to

share their favorite nude scenes or the baby carriage on the steps in Battleship Potemkin, this could be a powerful recommendation tool.

Aronson self-funded the start-up with a few outside investors and a small staff of eight. "We're not talking meta-funding just yet," he says. "We know how to do things cheaply and take advantage of Netflix driving down the cost of streaming."

The Fandor participatory business model (for features and shorts) returns half a film's revenue back to filmmaker. Any film accepted in the library gets a percentage of revenue even if no one sees it, although filmmakers or rights-holders are also paid by an attention-based model. "Indie films represent a multi-billion dollar market, but neither the filmmakers nor the fans who love their work are thriving," says Hope, founder of the Truly Free Film movement. "Fandor connects audience and creators directly, providing tools for each to engage deeply with the other in new ways. Fandor's model encourages discovery and financially rewards the films consumed most, giving many more filmmakers a chance to thrive."