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THE PLAIN DEALER

SHOP TALK

Indie films, with lots of extras, finding their way into mailboxes

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Fruit of the month. Book of the month. Flower of the month.

Indie DVD of the month?

Yes, the "of the month" club isn't just for Florida grapefruits or Steven King's latest anymore.

Film Movement, a New York-based movie distributor, has come up with a way of selling DVDs, and exposing mainstream America to options beyond the multiplex.

For \$159.20 -- that's \$13.27 per month, just \$13.27 per month -- you get a critically lauded independent or foreign film sent to your mailbox. Each release is chosen by a panel of curators from some of the world's top movie institutions, including The American Film Institute, the South by Southwest Film Festival, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and Roger Ebert's Overlooked Film Festival.

"We wanted to create access to quality films for all consumers, so everybody could participate in them, not just people with access to the art houses in New York or L.A.," says Film Movement president Stuart Litman.

Film Movement was started by producer Larry Meistrich ("Sling Blade," "You Can Count on Me") in January 2003, when he got tired of reading New York Times reviews for films that never made it to his New Jersey neighborhood theater. He started buying the rights to movies such as "Manito," a 2002 Sundance winner, and distributing them to theaters in major markets.

But Meistrich didn't stop there. For those not in driving distance of a good art house -- or who just wanted to stay home on a Saturday night -- he launched the DVD of the month club.

Since its inception, Film Movement has released one movie per month to theaters and on DVD. Past releases include "The Last Party," a Philip Seymour Hoffman

documentary about the 2000 presidential campaign; the Slovenian hit "Spare Parts" and two films starring Sandra Oh.

February's pick is the German film "The Forest for the Trees," a Sundance and Cologne festival winner about an ambitious young country teacher trying to make it in the big city. New acquisitions include the controversial Singaporean film, "Be With Me," which received rave reviews at Cannes and Toronto, and the Japanese film "Who's Camus Anyway," which screened at Cannes.

Unlike Blockbuster.com or Netflix.com, subscribers are buying, not renting these films. They do sell films individually, for \$29.95, but "that's not really the business we're in," says Litman.

Litman declines to say how many subscribers Film Movement has, but says they ship between 7,000 and 10,000 DVDs each month.

Film Movement isn't just selling DVDs. They're also selling the feel of a film festival -- albeit one in the comfort of your home. Each DVD comes with a synopsis, trailers, reviews, list of awards, biographical information, photos and discussion guides.

Soon, says Litman, they plan to add an interactive section on their Web site that will include live chats with directors and discussion boards. He's even hoping to start a national Film Movement night during which subscribers will be encouraged to watch the film at the same time, then log on to talk about it.

Try doing that with a fruit of the month club.

To become a Film Movement member, log onto www.filmmovement.com.

Have information on a store or sale you would like us to include in Shop Talk? E-mail the address below or send a fax to 216-999-6269, attn.: Laura DeMarco. To reach this Plain Dealer columnist: ldemarco@plaind.com, 216-999-4577.