

THE RIGHT SETTINGS

Making the party scene

Best in a supporting role, Chair-man Mills sets out the crystal and china for film festival's big bashes

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Raise a glass to the Toronto International Film Festival, which kicks off today. You'll be drinking your bebies of choice out of decent glassware instead of cheesy plastic cups, thanks to Chair-man Mills, the go-to supplier of everything — except the red carpet — for festival events.

As well as drapes, linen and table-top accessories, they furnish such arcane items as sign holders for the 32nd annual festival's media office at the Sutton Place Hotel. Should you want a marble dance floor, they have that, too.

The company was founded in 1911 by William J. Mills, who was dubbed the "chair man" after delivering chairs and tables to private homes, clubs and organizations.

Perhaps they should rename it Chair-woman Mills: Mary Crothers bought the business nine years ago. Crothers is president; Marni Berman is senior sales executive.

Both are morning persons, available for interviews at 7 a.m. As if.

Although they have other functions besides the fest, TIFF "is all consuming," Crothers says. "We sold out of our stanchions (metal posts that hold cordon ropes) and velour ropes. I had 400 and had to order 100 more last week from the U.S."

She has put in an order for another 1,000 wine glasses. She estimates that they will go through 50,000 to 70,000 martini and wine glasses.

And all of those glasses are top of the line.

"We did the opening of the Crystal Room at the ROM and people were surprised we had red goblets and crystal," Crothers says. "New York and Miami people said they couldn't believe we had such cutting-edge equipment. We have three kinds of crystal, a dozen kinds of chargers, six patterns of china and six patterns of flatware."

"Mary likes to shop," Berman says. "And Marni is right there with me," Crothers shoots back.

"We are the best single-shop rental company in North America for inventory, quality control and staff," Berman states.

They beef up their regular staff for the fest with part-time student help. "Between the table setters and linen drivers, we have 150 people," says Berman.

"The festival requires late-night work," adds Crothers. "Some times we have an all-night shift. We pick up (glasses, linens, tables, etc.) at 1 a.m. and have to be ready to go in



CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR

Marni Berman, left, and Mary Crothers are the power behind Chair-man Mills, supplier to the city's top parties.

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the morning. We have a 24-hour dish-room staff for washing."

"Mary and I take them home to wash them," cracks Berman.

We wouldn't be surprised.

One of their bigger concerns is burn holes in the linen tablecloths.

"There is still smoking at parties," Crothers sighs. "A lot of stuff is meat-and-potatoes and then we have the Holt's and the ROM over-the-top functions that everyone hears about," adds Crothers.

As well, they get some real razzle dazzle: Chair-man Mills supplied to movie shoots such as *Chicago* and *Cinderella Man*.

"We did 400 chairs for the Jennifer Lopez movie *Shall We Dance?*" Crothers says. But then the film relocated to Winnipeg from Toronto because of SARS.

"That was weird, packing up 400 Chivari fancy, ladderback bamboo chairs," she recalls. "I remember watching the movie and it was, at most, four seconds of chairs," Berman says.

And, yes, they do get invited to hobnob with the stars.

"Marni is too tired (she has a year-old baby) and I'm too old," says Crothers. "Most parties start at 10:30 p.m. and we are here at 7 a.m. We'd be partying until 3 a.m."

Which would only leave them four hours to wash the glassware.