



Spencer Nakasako's Refugee



Will Kwan's Don't Toe the Line or Toe Your Own Line

reasons, Daniel Gordon's *The Game of Their Lives* (U.K.) tells the rousing Cinderella story of North Korea's surprising run at the 1966 World Cup.

While the films themselves were strong, events this year were mysteriously scaled back, which limited networking and camaraderie. Festival sponsorship was down, inexplicable in a city with over half a million Asians, Canada's wealthiest demographic. The workshops offered the obligatory panel of seasoned directors (Fleming, Pak et al.) to impart wisdom to beginners

on how to get a film made. Another workshop brought industry gatekeepers (Telefilm, Showcase, NFB, Canadian Film Centre and Seville Pictures) face to face with filmmakers but failed to address the central question: How does an Asian Canadian get his film shown to the public? The speakers, all of them white, neglected to differentiate between films made in Asia and films made by Asian Canadians. What was the point?

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Background image: Daniel Gordon's *The Game of Their Lives*

Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott



## Sundance Film Festival

(1/15–25/04)

By Peter Howell

A funny thing happened at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. People actually noticed Canada.

This is no small thing at Sundance, which was created 20 years ago by Robert Redford to promote and nurture films from that insecure superpower called the United States of America. Going to Sundance to promote Canadian film is a bit like going to the Super Bowl to promote the CFL. And Sundance 2004 didn't just notice Canada, it also handed out laurels to America's northern neighbour. Canadian films won two top awards at the annual celebration of cinema independence in this ski-town high in Utah's Wasatch Mountains.

*The Corporation*, a critical and scathingly funny look at business history by British Columbia filmmakers Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, took the Audience Award World Cinema:

Documentary. The movie was also a runner-up audience-prize winner at the most recent Toronto International Film Festival. *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, by Quebec's Jean-François Pouliot, won the Audience Award World Cinema: Dramatic. Like *The Corporation*, the film takes a broadside at questionable business practices. *Seducing Doctor Lewis* is about the humorous efforts of a small Quebec town to persuade a big-city doctor to take up residence, to prevent the closing of an essential factory. The film premiered at Cannes last year.

The double wins for Canada represented the best showing for Canadians at Sundance, in a year that also saw a record number of Canadian movies screening in Park City's festival theatres. There were nine Canuck features and 10 shorts at Sundance 2004, a haul that included Guy Maddin's wacky Depression-era satire *The Saddest Music In The World* and Bruce LaBruce's censor-baiting hard-core sex comedy, *The Raspberry Reich*. Our reputation as a country with a perverse sense of humour was well maintained. More important, we were seen as a player in the international film community, and not just a branch-plant extension of Hollywood. If this seems like an overstatement, consider that the official press guide to Sundance 2004 listed the names of the 37 countries represented at the festival. The list included Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Fiji and Luxembourg, not exactly the first names that spring to mind when people think of film. Yet Canada didn't make the list, undoubtedly through some oversight, but a very telling one, nonetheless. So not only is Canada viewed as the 51st state in the eyes of many

Americans, the country was also the unacknowledged 38th participating nation at Sundance.

But that was the situation at the start of the festival. It didn't take long for word to get out that the Canadians were not just players, but also partiers. Telefilm Canada made its presence known by opening up the Canadian Lounge on the fourth floor of the Marriott Hotel, the festival headquarters. A first for Telefilm at Sundance, the lounge became a popular drop-in centre for more than just the large contingent of Canuck filmmakers and journalists who made the trek to Utah. There were also hot-ticket parties on Main Street celebrating *The Corporation*, *The Saddest Music in The World* and Iqbal Rashid's *Touch of Pink*, the latter a gay clash-of-cultures comedy that went over well with Sundance audiences. Another popular Canadian romance was *A Silent Love* by first-time filmmaker Federico Hidalgo, a former Concordia University film professor. It's about a shy Montreal film professor, played by Noel Burton, who travels to Mexico to marry a woman he met on the Internet.

Other Canadian content at Sundance included the G.B. Yate's noir thriller *Seven Times Lucky*, starring *New Waterford Girl's* Liane Balaban as an Artful Dodger named Fiona who teams with an older grifter, played by American character actor Kevin Pollak. It's a tougher role than Balaban has had previously, and a more mysterious one, and she ranks it after *New Waterford Girl's* Mooney Pottie for her favourite screen character to date. There was even some Canadian content among the American films screening in the main feature competition, which is open only to U.S. filmmakers. Kingston rocker-turned-actor Hugh Dillon co-starred as the love interest opposite Vera Farmiga in New Yorker Debra Granik's drug drama

*Down to the Bone*. Farmiga, a ringer for a young Faye Dunaway, won an acting award at the close of the festival, and you have to wonder how Dillon might have fared before the judges had he been American and not Canadian.

But you could make the same speculation about the entire festival, which still maintains its narrow-minded American slant, despite having significantly opened up to the rest of the world in the past few years. The top prize winner at Sundance 2004 was the almost incomprehensible sci-fi tale *Primer*, made by South Carolina filmmaker Shane Carruth "for about the price of a used car." It's about four techno-geeks who accidentally invent a time machine, but their dialogue is so thick with jargon, it would be very easy to miss that important plot point. It's guaranteed to be in and out of movie theatres faster than it takes the time gizmo to warm up. The movie won the Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic plus the \$20,000 Alfred P. Sloan Prize, the latter given for excellence in science and technology cinema.

Other Sundance 2004 winners included *Dig!*, a chronicle by Ondi Timoner about a long rivalry between two musicians. It took the Grand Jury Prize: Documentary, for a film that Timoner completed the same week she gave birth to her son, Joaquim. *Maria Full of Grace*, Joshua Marston's harrowing story about drug "mules" who ferry heroin inside their bodies, took the Audience Award: Dramatic. *Born into Brothels*, Ross Kauffman's and Zana Briski's investigation into the poverty of Calcutta's notorious Red Light district, took the Audience Award: Documentary. *Super Size Me*, Morgan Spurlock's hilarious first-person assault on America's addiction to fast food, won the Directing Award for excellence in directing documentary features. But the most impressive showing at Sundance 2004 was by Canada, the one nation that wasn't even officially recognized at this year's Park City festivities. Had there been a prize for Best Improvement by a Country, the Canucks would have won it hands down.



Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*



Joshua Marston's *Maria Full of Grace*

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