

FESTIVAL



The Sundance Film Festival

By Geoff Pevere

When people impugn the outlaw credibility of the Sundance Film Festival – which they tend to do strenuously and often – they overlook a salient fact of the nearly 20-year-old event's origins: founded by sun-kissed movie star Robert Redford, and named after a studly gunslinger he once played in the hip-as-hell Hollywood western, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Sundance is only faux-outlaw from the spurs up anyway. If you can get past this and accept the presence of all manner of outlaw-diluting corporate media and studio interests at Sundance – while watching movies sponsored partly by Mercedes-Benz and AT&T, I wore a press badge clipped to an *Entertainment Weekly*-branded strap – you can start to experience and appreciate the event on its own rhinestone-cowboy terms.

In the same way that the festival's ski-slope-nestled host village of Park City, Utah, is itself a cake-ornament facsimile of immaculate rusticity, Sundance is not so much about the authentic outlaw spirit as its packaged simulation. As with everything else in America, it's the myth that counts, or the way it chafes against reality, and the myth of Sundance – that it's the premiere North American showcase for independently produced filmed images – is what keeps it interesting. If this were truly an independent film festival, the fact is most of us corporate media flacks on expense accounts simply would not be here.

All that said and done then, whatever you want to say about the "indie" pretensions of the Sundance Film Festival, there's no question that, programming-wise, it walks what it talks. At least it did in 2001. If there was a recurring theme in evidence at the event this past January, it was the struggle to challenge norms, redefine limits and stake new ground. As a reality in an industrial-commercial economy, independence may be little more than a self-justifying romantic posture, an impossible



delusion. As a formal and dramatic concern on the other hand, independence can be the stuff of stirring spectator sport.

Take Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*, perhaps the most boldly original (and commercially reckless) work in this year's festival. A series of baldly philosophical conversational exchanges on the subjects of consciousness, individuality and being, the movie takes the form of a digitally animated dream loop from which the young, lank-haired protagonist cannot wake up: it's *Groundhog Day* for the post-grad slacker set. But it wasn't just the movie's formal innovations or hard-boiled egghead concerns that gave it such resonance as a beacon of independent-minded moviemaking, but the fact it was made by a filmmaker who himself carries such symbolic freight within the contemporary American independent filmmaking community. As a regionally based filmmaker (from Austin, Texas, where *Waking Life* was made), Linklater has ridden the skittish bronco of "independence" from the margins of 1991's *Slacker* to quasi-studio productions like 1995's *Before Sunrise* and 1998's *The Newton Boys*, and with *Waking Life* has galloped right back into the bramble. Not only does the movie resemble nothing so much as a more formally daring *Slacker* with an existential agenda, it stood as a rousing certification of what – here in Sundance country – one might call the outlaw spirit. Because, in the American movie business, surely nothing fixes you quite as firmly outside of the law than the wilful determination not to make a hit.

While there were few movies to rival *Waking Life* in its galvanizing, shoot-first-think-later non-commercialism, Sundance featured many movies that reflected Linklater's edge-surfing spirit. At least in content. Thematically, the festival displayed a conspicuous fascination with issues of duality and reinvention, an extension of *Waking Life's* formal and intellectual frontierism – between animation and live action; between slumber

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and consciousness – if on a consistently less adventurous scale. Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (starring a blonde and confused Guy Pearce) echoed *Waking Life*'s consciousness-loop structure in its ingeniously noirish first-person account of a short-term-memory-deficient young man's desperate attempts to investigate the rape and murder of his wife, while numerous other movies addressed the jarring effects of people suddenly thrust beyond the parameters normal life by sudden acts of violence: *Lift*, DeMane Davis and Khari Streeter's story of an elegant African-American retail booster (a.k.a. shoplifter); Todd

Field's *In the Bedroom*, about a marriage shattered by the murder – in a nasty domestic dispute – of their only son; *Series 7*, Daniel Minahan's insightful reality-TV parody in which contestants are armed to the teeth and sent stalking each other for prize money; and Michael Cuesta's *L.I.E.* (a metaphorically flush acronym for Long Island Expressway), which follows a teenage boy's radical disengagement from the orbit of middle-class comfort following the expressway-related death of his mother.

Even more frequent at Sundance 2001 was the spectacle of norm-shattering duality, the paradoxically potent status of people who defy convention just by contradicting it. Henry Bean's *The Believer* tells the fact-based story of the Jewish intellectual neo-Nazi Daniel Balint; the crowd-pleasing *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, based on John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's off-Broadway musical hit, is the story of an East German glam rocker with a surgically foreshortened "angry inch" between his legs. Indeed, forms of sexually determined outlawry were rife at Sundance 2001: Kate Davis's *Southern Comfort* is a documentary portrait of a female-to-male transsexual with ovarian cancer; Tom Shepard's *Scout's Honor* depicts the struggle to overcome anti-gay forces in the Boy Scouts of America; while *Trembling before G-d*, by Sandi Simcha DuBowski, probes the phenomenon of homosexuality in orthodox Jewry.

Easily the most popular of the four Canadian movies screened at the festival – the others were Denis Villeneuve's *Maelström*, Alanis Obomsawin's *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* and Noam Gonick's *Hey, Happy!* – Léa Pool's sturdily assembled and emotionally captivating adaptation of Susan Swan's novel *The Wives of Bath*, called *Lost and Delirious*, also treads on the marginal terrain of transgressive uncertainty: it's the story of one

teenage girl's near-operative breakdown when she is rejected by a fellow student at a leafy boarding school.

For sheer feel-good confirmation of the indie spirit, Sundance offered nothing more infectiously bracing than two documentaries about underclass urban subcultural vitality: Stacy Peralto's *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, about skateboarding's most innovative and influential teenage crew, and Doug Pray's *Scratch*, about the history and musical vitality of hands-on-vinyl hip-hop or "turntableism." As exuberant testimonials to the unstoppable organic accidents that breed new forms of boundary defying art and expression, *Dogtown and Z-Boys* and *Scratch* could not have asked for a more apt coming-out context than Sundance, where nothing plays better than the rejuvenating romance – nostalgic or otherwise – of outlaw artistry.

Out here on what once passed for the frontier, in the context of a movie festival named after a real outlaw made most famous by a golden-haired movie star, the issue is not selling out. It's the integrity of what you sold in the first place. ●

**Left to right: Noam Ginick's *Hey Happy!*;
Léa Pool's *Lost and Delirious*;
Below: John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch***

