

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

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By Peter Howell

how the filmmakers were affected by their subjects. In *First Kill*, Schrijber investigates the attraction of "legitimate" killing. "Better than any drug," says one former soldier. Schrijber, herself, was a conscript in the Israeli army. "It was 1982, and the Israelis invaded the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla [in Lebanon]. I was totally shocked to see that my side, the good side, committed atrocities. The naïveté of people who still think in opposites was the most important reason for my making *First Kill*." In *War Photographer*, Frei filmed from just behind war photographer James Nachtwey for two years, in Kosovo, Indonesia and Palestine, sharing both his dangerous life and his views on war. Questioned by Nic Fraser of the BBC, who chaired the talk sessions, Frei said, "For me the strength of photography lies in its ability to evoke humanity. So the photographer places himself in the middle of the war to communicate what is happening, which is like trying to negotiate peace."

The engagement of the audience watching Barry Stevens's *Offspring* at the screening I attended was clear from the sympathetic laughter. Made for the CBC's *The Nature of Things*, his film about his search for the man who fathered him through artificial insemination, has a wonderfully light touch; and his elaborately drawn diagrams of family trees and DNA samples have an almost cartoon-like quality. But at the core of the film is his serious and often frustrating search for self-identity. Along the way quite unexpected information emerges: Stevens discovers that he has a 20-year-old daughter from a long-ago affair, the mother having, up to then, believed the father to be someone else. Stevens's persistence, driven by a personal need, has resulted in an exemplary "search documentary."

Meanwhile Docs for Sale ran in the nearby Marriott Hotel, with buyers spending long days watching videos. Prospective purchasers all said they seldom made on-the-spot decisions about buying films, although they liked to have preliminary discussions with sellers. However, for sellers to make direct contact with buyers was difficult, since they only tended to emerge from viewing rooms during the evening's "happy hours." The other major event, The Forum, took place in a former church, known, perhaps optimistically, as the Paradiso. The atmosphere, which was friendly but serious, was rather like a court of law mixed with theatre. The centre of the action was a vast horseshoe table, with the applicants, usually a producer and/or director, sitting at one end, while 30 to 40 commissioning editors sit around the remaining table space. Canada was represented by Toronto-based documentary producer/director Peter Raymont (*The World Is Watching*), who was attempting to obtain additional funding for his latest project, *The World Stopped Watching*.

If you are thinking of making an application to participate in The Forum in Amsterdam, it is wise to attend the year before as an observer to get the feel for this high-wire event. It will not only give you the opportunity to see some of the best in contemporary documentary filmmaking but also meet other filmmakers in the IDFA's friendly De Baali Café, where much of the business is done.

Sundance 2002 wasn't so much a film festival as it was a made-for-television event in the snow-capped mountains of Utah. With its preponderance of made-for-cable movies dressed up as independent art and of Hollywood stars dropping in for sitcom-style cameos (including the suddenly visible Sundance founder Robert Redford), the festival felt like an extension of the mid-season preview for television critics, which coincidentally was underway the same week in Pasadena, California.

When I had previously covered Sundance, during the dot-com boom of early 2000, it looked as if the future of film was off-screen and on-line. The narrow streets of historic Park City were jammed with "entrepreneurs" hawking their digital visions. You could barely slide into a hot tub without some Net freak flashing his URL at you. With the dot-com boom now a bust, Sundance 2002 had a distinctly retro buzz, as well as noticeably fewer crowds and parties. The future of film, it now seems clear, will once again be determined by television, just as it was during the post-war tube invasion of the 1950s.

The main talk at Sundance wasn't about emerging directors or actors, which is what festival-goers usually concern themselves with. Everyone was too busy commenting on how cable firms like HBO, Showtime and InDigEnt Films (an offshoot of the Independent Film Channel) had muscled into creative turf once dominated by such scrappy indie-film players as Miramax and October. The opening-night film, the hate-crime investigation *The Laramie Project*, was made by HBO for television. So was the empowerment drama *Real Women Have Curves*, with America Ferrera and Lupe Ontiveros, which went on to win the Audience Award in the dramatic competition and also acting prizes from the Sundance grand jury. An HBO documentary on South Africa, *Amanda! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, won the Audience Award in its category and also the jury's Freedom of Expression prize.

The Showtime beauty-pageant documentary *Miss America*, one of the best-received documentaries at the festival, went straight from the festival to a January 27 broadcast. One of the most popular of the 15 Canadian films at Sundance, John Zaritsky's *Ski Bums*, a humorous Whistler-lifestyle documentary was made for the NFB primarily as a small-screen affair. InDigEnt hit the jackpot with Rebecca Miller's relationship drama *Personal Velocity* and the Lolita-style comedy *Tadpole*, scoring kudos and cash for films made in television-friendly digital video. *Personal Velocity*, the winner of the Grand Jury Prize in the dramatic competition, was bought by United Artists for \$1 million (U.S.); *Tadpole*, the jury's pick for the

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directing prize (it went to InDigEnt co-founder Gary Winick), sparked a bidding war that Miramax won for a Sundance 2002 high of \$5 million – not bad at all for an 87-minute movie shot for \$500,000.

Personal Velocity and *Tadpole* will likely have theatrical releases, as will at least a couple of the HBO films, so it may be too soon to claim that video killed the movie star. And give cable firms credit for supporting the kind of low-budget indie dramas and docs that the studios and Miramax have all but abandoned: in today's multiplex-dominated world, it's hard to find any intelligent material among the \$100-million blockbusters and quickie teen-exploitation flicks. Still, anyone who cares about movies can't help but lament how the artful notion of film for film's sake is vanishing from today's market-driven indie landscape. Festivals like Sundance, where even celluloid itself is fast yielding to digital video, are starting to become little more than prestige venues for television premieres.

This feeling really came home to me, oddly enough, during the screening of a film that actually was made for a planned theatrical release: *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*, a coming-of-age snoozer produced by and starring Jodie Foster. Originally scheduled for Sundance 2001, but delayed by production problems with Todd McFarlane's animated sequences, the movie played like a two-hour episode of the Walt Disney Sunday night television broadcasts of my youth. (Altogether now: "The world is a carousel of color, wonderful, wonderful color.") Foster co-stars in the movie, in the role of a peg-legged nun who hectors a group of rambunctious schoolboy comic freaks, led by the insufferable Kieran Culkin. Foster admitted after the screening that she took the role not because she really wanted it, but because "I was afraid nobody would show up" at the theatres otherwise.

For an actor as good as Foster to have to worry about selling a movie as lightweight as this one made me want to rush out and buy another DVD copy of *Taxi Driver*. The banality of television has infected even those films not made for it. The depressing experience of watching *Dangerous Lives* was relieved later in the evening by the premiere screening of *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, a riotous documentary on the life of legendary Paramount producer Robert Evans. Co-directors Brett Morgen and Nanette Burstein have fashioned a hilarious and honest biopic, narrated by Evans himself, on the man who produced *Chinatown*, *Marathon Man* and *Urban Cowboy*, but who later almost destroyed himself through drugs and scandal.

At first, it seemed somewhat incongruous for a film about a big Hollywood producer to be premiering at indie-boosting Sundance, with the well-tanned Evans flown in from the Coast for the evening. But it was a film about a guy who makes films, not videos. In the context of television-dominated Sundance 2002, it was not only blessed relief, but also downright radical.

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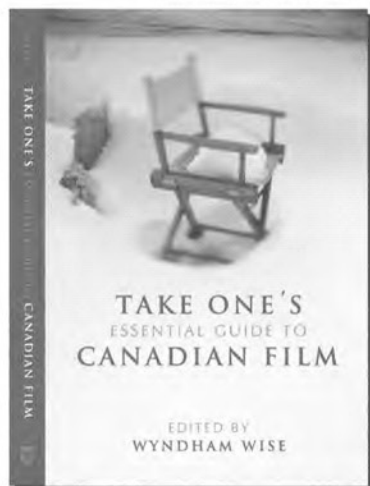
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