



For All Seasons — Karen Lustgarten

Sundance Film Fest: The Best Show-Ski-Schmooze Scene

If you can't get Hollywood movers and shakers to return your calls, go to the Sundance Film Festival. They're all there en masse and they're all accessible. Tinsel Town seems empty at the end of January because the honchos head to Park City, overbooked in its 16th year with 6,000 filmmakers, execs, agents, guests and press.

There's something about the fresh air and friendly ambiance that's so appealing: a small, picturesque mountain town with a charming Main Street ...congested with industry earthquake refugees on cellular phones casually dressed in serious ski clothes networking with colleagues on the lifts, in the shops and eateries and at the endless private parties. It feels like an upscale college town during the first week of classes with Z Place (festival headquarters) as the student union.

It's also a 10-day ego extravaganza for mostly young, resourceful, experimental indie filmmakers with entries in and out of competition. They're in the spotlight; their features and shorts get full festival "buzz" (positive and negative) that doesn't happen back home.

This year 32 films, 16 dramatic and 16 docs (of about 450 submissions), made the Feature Film Competition and were scouted by an assortment of agents and execs such as Columbia's **Stephanie Allain** (she discovered **John Singleton**), ITC's **Paul Almond**, Trimark president **Mark Amin**, director **Ivan Rietman's** rep **Nelson Woss**.

Although talent is already signed by festival time, dealmaking for distribution and future projects is active. Miramax did a distribution deal for "Clerks" (won Filmmakers Trophy), a feature made by convenience store clerk **Kevin Smith** with a \$27,500 credit card budget. Samuel Goldwyn's **Howard Cohen** picked up "Go Fish" for release, a quirky lesbian movie. Cinemax has acquired rights to air more than 45 festival films since '87.

My personal favorite was the documentary "Freedom on My Mind," an in-depth and compassionate chronicle of the Mississippi Voter Registration Project in the 1960s by **Marilyn Mulford** and **Connie Field**. It won the Grand Jury Prize and the Berkeley-based filmmakers are on to other projects.

Some Sundance discoveries returned. Brothers **Ethan and Joel Coen**, who gained recognition with their aware-winning "Blood Simple," premiered their latest (out of competition) "Hudsucker Proxy." Producer **Larry Bender**, launched with his "Reservoir Dogs" and now working on "Pulp Fiction," made an appearance, **Alison Anders** ("Gas Food Lodging") is a judge this year and screens her "Mi Vida Loca." **Steven Soderberg**, a runaway success after his '89 festival hit "sex, lies and videotape" returned to observe.

Plenty of celebs here: **Andy McDowell**, starring in the opening night film "Four Weddings and a Funeral" attended **Robert Redford's** press luncheon held at the impressive Sundance Institute. Although Redford keeps a low profile throughout the 10 days, he came down from the mountain to present **Gena Rowlands** with the Piper Heidsieck Tribute to Independent Vision.

Actor **Seymour Cassel** also paid her a tribute after returning from the slopes. Spotted on Main were **Hugh Grant** (co-star in "Four Weddings" and in "Sirens"), **Danny DeVito**, **Elle MacPherson**, **Peter Yarrow** (of Peter, Paul and Mary—his daughter **Bethany's** documentary "Awethu!" is in competition), to name a few.

So who says you can't combine business with pleasure? Unfortunately, the biggest festival challenge is getting into screenings. By the first day, much is sold out and after the first few days, even the films with bad buzz are booked. "It's become the most important American film festival," said one writer, "not because the quality of the films are so great, but because of the attention they get. You can't beat it anywhere."

Beverly Hills

SEASONS

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