

MOVIES

Smiling in the Dark

Our critic sat through 24 films at Sundance—here's what he enjoyed the most

I've been coming to the [Sundance Film Festival](#) since 1986, its second year under the auspices of Robert Redford's Sundance Institute (it began as the U.S. Film Festival). I've been complaining about the festival since around 1996, by which time it had outgrown tiny [Park City](#), Utah, and turned into a media circus, with more emphasis in the press on the frantic Hollywood bidding wars for [movies](#) than the movies themselves. This year this grizzled vet has vowed *not* to complain, however tempting it is. (Let's admit that part of the fun of Sundance is grousing about its myriad hassles, humiliations and general dysfunction: just getting to a screening on time can resemble a wilderness adventure trek, and half the journalists in attendance were tearing their hair off trying to get a computer connection to the outside world. The shared adversities make it as much a sporting event as a cultural one.)

So instead of taking the easy potshots at swag suites and acquisitions execs text-messaging in the middle of screenings, let's try to remember what Sundance was originally supposed to be about: the discovery of new and different independent cinematic voices. Every year at the opening-night movie, Redford gives a variation of the same pep talk: "this festival is for *you*— the filmmakers." (Sometimes that's all too true: when you've emerged from an amateurish stinker in the Dramatic Competition you realize that nobody but the filmmaker—certainly not the audience--is getting anything out of the bargain.)

This year's opening night movie was playwright [Martin McDonagh](#)'s profane genre movie "In Bruges," with the wonderful Brendan Gleeson and an antic Colin Farrell playing two Irish hit men hiding out in the medieval Belgian town awaiting orders for their next job. It was a refreshingly un-P.C. movie for the highly P.C. festival, where socially conscious movies spread like kudzu, but also a very mainstream headliner for a festival that positions itself on the cutting edge. While only half as grisly, and half as funny, as McDonagh's play "The Lieutenant of Inishmore," "In Bruges" was undeniably fun, with a deliciously nasty turn from an almost unrecognizable Ralph Fiennes as a vicious Cockney gangster.

I managed to catch 24 movies—a mere fraction of all that was offered—so any generalizations about whether this was a "good" or "bad" Sundance mean little. One bright new talent clearly emerged from the dramatic competition features: Lance Hammer, the director of the strikingly uncompromising "Ballast," a poetically understated and beautifully shot movie about tragedy and reconciliation in the wintry Mississippi Delta. Using nonprofessional actors, and working without a set script, Hammer follows in the unvarnished footsteps of filmmakers like the Belgian Dardenne brothers ("La Promesse," "L'Enfant"), exploring underclass African-American lives with grit, honesty and eyes wide open to life as it is actually lived, not as the movies have conditioned us to see it. Unlike so many first-time filmmakers on view here, who had little sense of camera placement or tone, Hammer has an instinctive feel for the medium. "Ballast" may not fill the multiplexes, but it's exactly the kind of daring personal filmmaking Sundance was created to showcase.

Hammer's film was one of three fine movies I saw in the Dramatic Competition (I caught seven of the 16). Another equally gritty first efforts was [Courtney Hunt](#)'s gripping "Frozen River," with a superb performance by Melissa Leo as a tough working-class single mom who, to pay her bills, teams up with a young, streetwise Mohawk girl to smuggle illegal aliens across the frozen St. Lawrence River into upstate New York. Hunt's well-told tale—like Hammer's exploration of the rural South—opens up a world we rarely see on screen. The same is true of "Sugar," the new film from the makers of "Half Nelson," Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden. They've gotten hold of a great subject—the experiences of a young Dominican baseball pitcher (nonpro Algenis Perez Soto, a real find) transplanted to Iowa, where he plays for a Kansas City farm team, hoping to make the majors. The filmmaker's draw a fresh, unhackneyed bead on the clash of cultures. Low-key but very much alive, "Sugar" doesn't go where you expect a sports movie to go—it's defiantly un-"Rocky"-ish. The movie left me wanting more from it than it delivers, but what it does offer is pretty irresistible. American movies have been telling tales of the immigrant experience since the days of the silents; "Sugar" makes it feel new again.

The Spectrum section is often looked at as an "also-ran" segment for those movies that didn't make the competition cut, but often you'll find better movies there than in the more high-profile divisions. Such was the case with the deceptively unassuming "Mamma's Man," a funny, poignant study of a shlubby young married man (Matt Boren) who returns to the nest and can't bring himself to leave. The writer-director Azazel Jacobs is the son of legendary New York underground filmmaker Ken Jacobs and artist Flo Jacobs, both of whom appear as the protagonist's parents. Their cavernous, cluttered downtown Manhattan loft (where the filmmaker actually grew up) is a character in its own right: a kind of boho Rube Goldberg-like womb in which the young, troubled protagonist—a boy/man on the verge of a nervous breakdown—reverts to his childhood, leafing through old comic books and seeking out the high-school lover who got away. "Mamma's Man" sneaks up on you--small in scale, constructed from deeply personal material—you'd never guess how deeply it cuts into a universal experience: the terror of becoming an adult.

Much more twisted terrors await the rich, decadent figures in [Tom Kalin](#)'s "Savage Grace," which was featured in the noncompetitive Premiere section, reserved for more experienced filmmakers. Kalin's first film since "Swoon," it's based on the true, grisly story of volatile, narcissistic socialite Barbara Daly Baekeland (Julianne Moore), wife of the heir to the Bakelite plastics fortune, Brooks Baekeland (Stephen Dillane), and her unhealthily intense relationship with her beautiful, unstable

homosexual son, Tony (brilliantly played by Eddie Redmayne). Kalin and screenwriter Howard Rodman, working from the book by Natalie Robins and Steven M.L. Aronson, transport us from New York high society in the 1940s to Paris in the '50s, Mallorca in the '60s and London in the '70s, a sensual and decadent grand tour that culminates in a shocking act of murder. Queasily fascinating, coolly compassionate, "Savage Grace" is a mesmerizing portrait of love run wildly, tragically amok. (It's scheduled to open in the early summer.)

These were the crème of the dramatic crop I got to see; as always, there were loads of good documentaries on view. In the Periscope section of next week's NEWSWEEK, I write about three of the best: "Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired," a revelatory look at the trial of the director which resulted in his flight to France. No mere rehash, it tells behind-courtroom-doors stories that change the way you'll think about the case. "Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)" is a moving, lyrical, 23-years-in-the-making epic of a Laotian family uprooted to the U.S in the aftermath of the Vietnam War—an impressive and original fusion of the political and the personal. "Man on Wire" shows, step by thrilling step, how Philippe Petit pulled off his astonishing tightrope walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 1974. No doc—and no fictional film—was more purely entertaining.

Mention should also be made of the stirring, angry "Trouble the Water," which uses the home movies of Hurricane Katrina survivor Kimberly Roberts—who was still filming in her attic as the water was rising on her home—to cast a fresh eye on the natural and governmental disaster that we all watched on our TV screens. (The pregnant Roberts came to Sundance with the movie, and gave birth in Park City just days after its premiere.) The world documentary section unveiled Isaac Julian's "Derek," a lovely but inevitably melancholy tribute to the iconoclastic gay filmmaker Derek Jarman ("Sebastien," "Caravaggio") who died of AIDS in the early '90s. Written by his "muse," Tilda Swinton, who appears in the film, "Derek" was a reminder of what real independent filmmaking looks like, and an evocative trip down memory lane.

One wonderful documentary that everyone will get to see when it opens in April (I'll write further about it then) is "Young @ Heart," which chronicles the trials, tribulations and joys of a remarkable chorus of senior citizens who perform covers of songs by the likes of Sonic Youth, James Brown, the Clash and Coldplay. A crowd-pleaser in the best sense, this alternately hilarious and heartbreaking movie will send you out of the theater with a new lease on life.