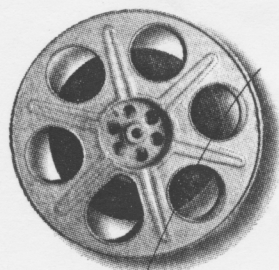


San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 1998



In the Discovery Zone

Sundance Film
Festival, opening
tomorrow, is where
filmmakers go
to get famous

By Mick LaSalle
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The profound human comedy known as the Sundance Film Festival opens tomorrow in Park City, Utah. For the next 11 days, careers will be made and self-conceptions will be validated — or annihilated.

Any other film festival is the story of its movies. Sundance is something else, a cultural locus. Fifty years ago, young people dreamed of becoming movie stars, and 20 years ago they strapped on guitars and posed in front of the mirror. Today, the dream of instant success and glory is wrapped up in the idea of making a hit independent film. Sundance, part real and part myth, has become the Schwab's drugstore of the '90s.

Go to Park City a person who has made a movie — and come back a person whose career is making movies. That's the goal.

San Francisco video artist Lynn Hershman Leeson hopes to find distribution for her sci-fi film, "Conceiving Ada," about Lord Byron's daughter, Ada Lovelace (Tilda Swinton). Kim Wood hopes to secure financing to turn her eight-minute documentary short, "Advice to Adventurous Girls," into a feature.

Two Bay Area documentarians have films in competition. Ellen Bruno's "Sacrifice" sounds devastating. It's about poor, ignorant Burmese girls who go to Thailand hoping to make a living and end up in the sex trade. To get the footage, Bruno had to pose as a tourist and dodge the Thai mafia, police and military.

Vicky Funari's documentary "Paulina" was 10 years in the making, but its passion and energy are fresh. It tells the story of a Mexican housekeeper, blending real-life and re-enactment footage with dazzling virtuosity.

Last year, two complaints emanated from Sundance — complaints that when put together sound like a Borscht Belt one-liner: The screening facilities were lousy. And the movies weren't worth seeing, anyway.

This year, the seats in Park City's showplace, the Egyptian theater, have been replaced. (They used to be set so close together that anyone taller than, say, 4 feet 6 couldn't sit back.) There's also a new 1,200-seat theater.

The lineup of films also looks like an improvement over last year's downbeat assortment, many of which went on to do sorry box office.

In this year's Dramatic Competition, at least half the films could be called "women's pictures," in that they're either romances or feature women in the lead role. You heard it here first: Expect the return to prominence of former Brat Packer Ally Sheedy. In a movie called "High Art," she plays a photographer who has a lesbian affair.

The accessible genres of comedy and science fiction are also included in this year's dramatic lineup. Plus there's an animated film, "I Married a Strange Person," from director Bill Plympton.

The Documentary Competition features some of the biggest names in the field going head to head. Ken Burns ("The Civil War") has a film about Frank Lloyd Wright. Barbara Kopple ("American Dream") has a movie about Woody Allen's tour with his jazz band. Penelope Spheeris is offering the third installment in her "Decline of Western Civilization" series.

The Shorts competition includes several entries from the Bay Area, including Tom E. Brown's funny-yet-spooky Ed Wood homage, "Don't Run, Johnny," about a guy who finds out he's HIV positive.

The filmmakers chosen for Sundance got the good news only a few days before Thanksgiving. Since then, most have been scrambling to get their films finished. Benson Lee, who made a picture called "Miss Monday," will actually be carrying his movie with him to Park City.

Every one of these filmmakers has a story, and the stories are usual-

ly good. The director of the sci-fi film "Pi," Darren Aronofsky, financed his picture by soliciting friends and acquaintances for \$100 donations. ("We expected a 60 percent return. It was more like 30 percent," he says.) Emanuele Crialese, the Italian-born director of "Once We Were Strangers," raised money in a way that sounds downright poetic: He sold his grandmother's earrings.

The Dramatic Competition filmmakers come mostly from film schools, and most are around 30 years old, but they're not all cut from the same cloth. Saul Rubinek ("Jerry and Tom"), 49, is an actor. Benson Lee majored in international business at New York University.

Most of them are nervous about the next 11 days, not only about their film's reception and the business pressure but also about the speeches they'll have to make before screenings. "Then again, I'm a loud Jewish guy from Brooklyn," says Aronofsky. "I can get by."

To calm their jitters, most concentrate on the artistic end and try not to worry about business.

"I don't know what to expect, so I don't know what to be nervous about," says Bay Area filmmaker Jona Frank, whose 13-minute documentary, "Catholic School," is screening in the Shorts Competition.

"I just want people to enjoy the movie, and I want to see some worth in my work."

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamás Productions