

Entertainment WEEKLY

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Cold Comfort

From the wintry, cell phone-packed hills of Park City, Utah, Lisa Schwarzbaum picks the best of the rest of the fest

ABOUT THREE DAYS INTO THE 1998 Sundance Film Festival, he began appearing everywhere: a mysterious, short, Ben Stiller look-alike, 30ish, with an aggressive set of the jaw. He wore a black, knitted condom of a hat like a dare ("I'm so important, I can look like a dork"). And he talked talked *talked* into a cell phone as if he held the future of independent filmmaking at his ear.

At a movie theater, waiting for the lights to dim, he nattered, even while greeting actual human beings seated nearby. At Starbucks, oblivious to the snow-booted customers sipping skinny lattes all around him, he blabbed. For all I know, he was brokering deals, placing bets, urgently whispering "*Don't forget to pick up dry cleaning!*" as a memo to himself on his home answering machine. But if he had hushed up for even a minute, my ubiquitous, anonymous mascot of Sundance '98 might have noticed this: That the artistry of the documentaries in competition proved, once again, that docu (note to marketers: for more sex appeal,

why not call them "nonfiction films"?) are our last truly independent movie-art form, and our most powerful; that a good short film can linger in the mind far longer than a wifty feature about callow lovelies in love; and that, as always in such a high-intensity setting, some of the best films sit quietly outside of competition, available for discovery by anyone willing to get off the phone.

■ **DOCUMENTARIES** *Slam* was a strong drama, yes—actor-poet Saul Williams practically vibrated with intensity, and the sound of soliloquies spilling from behind prison walls was a thrill. But even poetry slams in the slammer paled beside the power of **The Farm**, a compassionate film by Jonathan Stack and Liz Garbus about the maximum-security prison in Angola, La., that won the Grand Jury Prize for documentary (sharing honors with the funny, horrifying **Frat House**). Years of gaining the trust of inmates—most crucially, earning the support of one of the prison's longtime residents, *Ango-lite* magazine editor Wilbert Rideau—are

rewarded with vivid portraits of six men at various crossroads in prison existence, including beginning a life sentence, coming up for parole, waiting on death row, and dying in jail. Matching passion with rigorous filmmaking standards, Stack and Garbus have made an important document, and a great movie.

Indeed, with the bar set so high, documentaries about famous people—among them Barbara Kopple's savvy portrait of Woody Allen on a neurotic tour of Europe with his New Orleans jazz band (and Soon-Yi Previn) in **Wild Man Blues**, and a made-for-PBS-pledge-drive middlebrow biography of the larger-than-life architect in **Frank Lloyd Wright** by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick—were less compelling (and less artistically exciting) than personal documentaries about unfamous people. To make **Paulina**, about the matter-of-factly brutal younger years of a Mexican housekeeper in a wealthy Mexico City home, Vicky Funari effectively wove scenes of the real, resilient middle-aged woman with dreamlike dramatized scenes from a nightmarish childhood. And in **Baby, It's You**, about the last-ditch efforts she and her husband made to conceive a child in their late 40s, filmmaker Anne Makepeace leavened what might otherwise have been too much intimate information with humor, skepticism, and a flinty grace. (Less successful was **Some Nudity Required**, Odette Springer's cliché-ridden psychoanalysis of why she ended up working in the schlocky, breast-baring world of B movies.)

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamas Productions



■ **SHORTS** Fifteen minutes were enough for Scottish director Lynne Ramsay to assemble disjointed shots of kids' legs, a woman's hand, and a man's pint of beer into an exquisitely detailed, engrossing drama of broken marriage and the bewilderment of children in **Gasman**—easily one of the best films, of any length, on the docket this year. In 11 minutes, Steve Box (from the Aardman Animations gang behind Wallace and Gromit), created a weird, nostalgic world of early cinema in **Stage Fright**. Elizabeth Schub took just 12 minutes to make a vibrant, full-color snapshot of a young Cuban on the verge of

won an award for **Human Remains**, a dark and sardonic compilation of faux "home movies" from some of history's worst dictators—Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao—but he took a windy half hour to do so, partly because of the unsubtle footage of ashes being raked that brackets each monster's scrapbook.

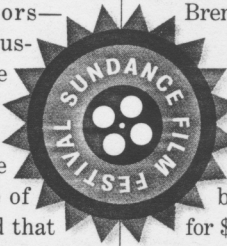
■ **OUTSIDE OF COMPETITION** Why wasn't **Gods and Monsters** up for an award? If it

would have been a shoo-in for honors: It's got *Death in Venice* depth and great performances by Ian McKellen and Brendan Fraser.

And speaking of unanswered questions, why was the thin Australian comedy **The Castle** bought by Miramax for \$6 million while Pad- dy Breathnach's much sharper, drollier Irish-hitman comedy, **I Went Down**, languished unhyped? Why did Vincent Gallo get all the flashbulbs for **Buf-falo 66**, while **One**, Tony Barbi- eri's tauter story of young-man misery, went relatively unher- alded? Why haven't we seen more of the extraordinary British actress Samantha Morton, who (in the Emily Watson school of fearlessness) is so riveting as a young woman spiraling into promiscuity following her mother's death in Carine Adler's anguishing **Under the Skin**?

How deep down into his soul did Nick Nolte reach to come up with his stunning performance in **Affliction**? Director-screenwriter (and Sun- dance juror) Paul Schrader has made his best movie yet with this wrenching story (based on a novel by Russell Banks, who wrote *The Sweet Hereafter*) about a man in midlife, afflicted by the same malaise of drink and meanness that undoes his father (James Coburn). It's dark as hell—and young filmmakers should slav- ishly study its mature pacing, framing, color palette, and even music (a haunting use of harmonic overtones from com- poser Michael Brook).

And who *was* that Sun- dance Kid, anyway, talking into a machine so grimly, so in- tently? Here's hoping he trust- ed his eyes, and not just his ears, in Park City. ■



FACTING OUT: Sundance documentaries included *Wild Man Blues*, with Woody Allen, and *Some Nudity Required*, with Julie Strain (bottom, center)

womanhood in **Cuba 15**; and in three minutes, *Kicked in the Head* director Matthew Harrison eviscerated all on-location moviemaking, once and for all, with **The Bystander From Hell**. (Kevin Costner should only be so efficient.) Jay Rosenblatt

had been, writer-director Bill Condon's satisfying, inventive, cinemaphile fantasy (based on Christopher Bram's novel *Father of Frankenstein*), about the last years of *Frankenstein* director James Whale and a young gardener he fancies,

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