



Doing the Sundance

On the making of six million dollar men.
By Susan Gerhard

SOMETHING REALLY horrible happened, actually," director Tommy O'Haver was confessing in low tones as he lay prone, heartbroken, and five-o'clock-shadowed on an obviously slept-in bed in the Pogachefsky publicity suite well before noon at Sundance. "Well, there was this guy ..."

Like the mild-mannered mark Billy of his first feature, a gay-based romantic comedy/buzz-collecting honeycomb called *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, O'Haver "met someone" while promoting his work that week. And like his likably earnest, somewhat self-deluding celluloid alter ego, he had gotten unceremoniously dumped before the relationship even started. The whole life-imitates-art concept had advanced to cruel mockery, and the current story was a few shades darker than *Billy's* buoyant adventure. "Which is why I have this horrible hangover."

He wasn't the only one. To judge from the puffy eyes and crumpled clothing moldering on the dead-alive bodies I saw crowding Park City's hotel hallways, he was merely one of many lurching toward the toilet en route to joining the Sundance fraternity of made young men. One of the most popular documentaries (and cowinner of the documentary award) at 1998's Sundance Film Festival was a made-for-HBO guerrilla story called *Frat House*. As it happens, Sundance, through no fault of its variety-minded programming, has become one.

Its most visible alumni are sturdy whites with hefty distribution deals under their belts, carrying on the sex-lies-semiautomatics tradition of twentynothing Caucasoid indie film-

dom in America. Its pledges: film grads, closet videographers, would-be Q.T.s and Kevin Smiths, and a minority of wayward souls just there for the keg. It's Hollywood's Hell Week: enter as another pimpled face and you have the opportunity to get hazed into salable commodity—in the case of Brad Anderson (for his middling *Next Stop, Wonderland*), a six million dollar man. Or in the case of O'Haver, a \$500,000 one.

Not that O'Haver was paying attention. His sweet-hearted film-literate queercapade reflects his own lack of self-importance. What did he think of the way business was going? "I've been out of loop—doing publicity stuff and getting drunk."

The passage

Rocky rites of passage are to be expected in the snowy oxygen-deprived mountain environs of Park City. For producer-codirector Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, who came to Sundance from San Francisco with the documentary *Paulina*, those rites included scouring the film festival for fans, accepting congratulations from tear-stained viewers after screenings, and worrying: She was disturbed by the fact that her film posters kept getting covered up by posters of films that already had distribution. It was not a coincidence.

Given the paper wars (and who can keep wheat paste pasty at zero degrees anyway?) Taylor, Vicky Funari (*Paulina's* other director), and Paulina Cruz Suárez (its subject and star) fashioned their own P.R.

methodologies to get word out. The film's a kind of *Rashomon*athon about one Mexican housekeeper's variously misunderstood life, and that same woman—Suárez—took it upon herself to seek out Park City's Latinos, most of whom, she discovered, were in restaurant kitchens keeping conventioners' stomach linings padded. And there ended up being a strong nonwhite presence in the audience. But even as viewers left crying, all Taylor could think was, "We're never gonna sell this movie—it's in Spanish, has long takes, no stars, and no guns."

The sad thing is, she was right: they didn't sell the movie during the festival, although they did get word from the San Francisco International Film Festival later in the week that they had just received one of its top Golden Gate Awards.

"Honestly?" she asked when asked about her Sundance experience. "It's been nowhere near the nightmare I'd been expecting it to be. They scheduled the documentaries in good theaters, with lots of screenings. We even had lunch with the Sundance Institute people, and all their cell phones were turned off. In the middle of the festival! It was amazing."

Expectations do get lowered. But Taylor, later, had her own spin. "Nothing concrete happened there, but we did get a bunch of business cards from people; we definitely got a lot of buzz. I think it turned out really good for us."

The spin

You don't need the rajun Cajun in your camp to understand the power of spin at Sundance. After the free hors d'oeuvre-eating contests and turns at the red wine bong, it's one of the first drills pledges have to run. Nick Broomfield, who was also on the Sundance documentary jury this year, won my *Wag the Dog* trophy

—making great distraction copy for the festival by turning the cancellation of his *Kurt and Courtney* into a full-scale press event. The victimization/censorship spin perfectly mirrored the narrative of all of Broomfield's hatchet-journalism films thus far: Nick tackles difficult yet high-enough-profile-to-guarantee-distribution subject (connect the dots from Aileen Wuornos to Heidi Fleiss to Courtney Love); Nick is handled and rebuffed by many people with competing interests; Nick ultimately prevails with unflattering editing; Nick wraps with the last laugh. Meta as he wants to be, Broomfield's stylized version of First Amendment exercise is not necessarily too easy to want to protect. And yet: maybe some viewers didn't get to read the *High Times* Love probe when it came out a few years back.

In any case, Sundance—which has spun out of control in recent years because of onslaughts of a completely different kind—might have welcomed the controversy. At least it generated something other than the fresh-young-faces story that's become so stale. The festival seemed determined to ignore the curse of Hollywood's cash incentives to a certain stripe of commercial filmmaker and soldier on in the spirit of artistic discovery.

And while that mission may not have brought anyone to the festival, it was the decided-upon curriculum, and Bob and friends were sticking to it. For a festival that's stretching its brand name into cable TV with the Sundance Channel, and that has already spawned counterfests (Slamdance) and copycat counterfests (this year, Slamdunk), back-to-the-basics

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamás Productions