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 unslept-in bed in the Pogachefsky publicity suite well before noon at Sundance.

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 likelier earnest, somewhat self-deluding, celluoid 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 frequency of made young men. One of the most popular documentaries (and co-winner of the documentary award) at 1998's Sundance Film Festival was a made-for-HBO guerrilla story called Rat House. As it happens, Sundance, through no fault of its variety-minded programming, has become one.

Its most visible alumni are starchy whites with hefty distribution deals under their belts, carrying on the sex-lessemotivations tradition of twentysomething Caucasian indie film methodologies to get word out. The film's a kind of Rashomonahon 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, 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?" 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 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 Farnar (Paulina's other director), and Paulina Cruz Suárez (its subject and star) fashioned their own P.R. — making great distraction copy for the festival by turning the cancellation of his Kirt and Courtney into a full-scale press event. The victimizing censorship spin perfectly mirrored the narrative of all of Broomfield's hatchet-pressman films this far: Nick tackles difficult yet highprofile-to-guarantee-distribution subject (connect the dots from Aileen Wournos 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 ofendaughts 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