

Sundance Is for Independents

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Greaves and Buscemi in
Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2

Prior to every screening at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, the word *independent* appeared emblazoned across a red screen in fat white lettering — until, as certain letters began to blur and fade from view, *independent* morphed into *inept*. This wordplay preceded each of three festival trailers in which crudely animated protagonists — a dogcatcher, a road worker and a demolitionist — explained the importance of approaching their professions as outsiders, while being subjected to some on-screen humiliation meant to suggest that fine line between independence and incompetence. Of course, it's impossible to know whether these pre-feature entertainments were intended as mere preludes or deliberate provocation. (Certainly, most festivalgoers regarded them as little more than an annoyance.) Either way, the trailers were particularly well-suited to a festival that found no less a Hollywood-Indiewood fence-sitter than Steven Soderbergh lending his name to two films — *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½* and *The Jacket* — that encompassed the best and the worst of what regularly gets lumped together under the banner of American independent moviemaking.

Screening in the festival's much-hyped Premieres section, *The Jacket* is a threadbare, infuriatingly derivative time-travel melodrama that marks the American debut of British director John Maybury, who began his career as an apprentice and set designer for the great Derek Jarman, before moving on to his own structuralist/experimental films and, more recently, the

excellent Francis Bacon biography *Love Is the Devil*. But *The Jacket*, shamelessly cribbing from Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and steadfastly refusing to be about anything other than its own dime-store flash and loop-de-loop machinations, is as calamitous a case of an artist betraying his own instincts as was Gus Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting*. All of which might be written off as par for the Hollywood course, were it not for the fact that *The Jacket* premiered at Sundance, credits Soderbergh as executive producer and will be released in the spring by Warner Independent (there's that word again) Pictures, the year-old studio subsidiary responsible for bringing us two of the best (and most authentically independent) American movies of last year, *Before Sunset* and *We Don't Live Here Anymore*.

Which is to say that what makes *The Jacket* a counterfeit independent film isn't its budget or studio affiliation or starry cast, but the fact that, over the course of its two-hour running time, it doesn't contain a single original thought or gesture. And as Sundance veterans know all too well, the same can be said of a great many of the festival's Premieres, which for all their marquee value and ballyhoo are reliably the least interesting and innovative films on display. So, those seeking real inspiration at Sundance must look elsewhere — to the festival's dramatic and documentary competitions and to the aptly named Frontiers sidebar, where, last year, Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* first stunned audiences and where, in 2005, one could discover another extraordinarily bold, undiluted vision: William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*.

In 1968, Greaves, an Actors Studio alum, descended on Central Park with a skeletal film crew and a game cast in an attempt to weaken (or perchance collapse) the barrier separating reality from invention, performer from performance, being from seeming. Called *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, the film showed Greaves directing different pairs of actors in a single scene about the disintegration of a marriage — cajoling, goading, psychoanalyzing and otherwise pushing his performers toward their emotional and psychological breaking points, while nearly inspiring mutiny among his crew. At the time, Greaves envisioned making five films from his enormous wealth of material, but *Take One* was never properly released, and so the project languished for 35 years. Until, that is, a series of successful revival screenings (and the prodding of Soderbergh and Steve Buscemi) prompted Greaves to begin again. Reuniting two of the stars from *Take One* (Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker), *Take 2½* returns to the scene of the original experiment, creates a new scenario built upon the events of the past, and sets about another aggressive peeling away of artifice and falsity, not just in the performances but in the filmmaking itself. The result is a uniquely exhilarating movie about moviemaking in which we are never quite certain whether we are situated behind the scenes or in front of them.

Depressing as it can be to observe the hearty hordes that congregate outside the festival's massive Eccles Theater, pleading mercifully for tickets to *The Jacket* or *The Chumscurber* or any number of other independent-in-name-only offerings, as you ride the Sundance shuttles and buses, you realize something crucial. Namely, that this is one of the youngest of film festivals, by which I mean not the age of the festival itself but rather the age of those who attend it, be they filmmakers, volunteers or otherwise. And at a time when it's increasingly easy to be cynical about the state of film culture in America, it's no small thing to see a handful of twentysomething film buffs emerging from a screening of *Take 2½*, their eyes shot wide open, their sense of what movies can be forever enlarged — the way one imagines Soderbergh and Buscemi reacted when they first saw *Take One*. Moments like that are a powerful reminder that,

for whatever its flaws, Sundance is still the world's most important showcase of American independent cinema, and one that has a unique opportunity to shape the hearts and minds of the next generation of cinephiles. That's a powerful responsibility, and one not to be treated lightly.

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