

Ostriches in the Snow

Writing a few days after returning from the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, I still feel depressed, slimed even, by the experience. My reaction has very little to do with the films I saw. Certainly, the lineup included quite a few pointless mediocrities, but probably no more than in any of the other 15 years I've attended the festival. Nor did the record number of attendees present much of a problem for the experienced festivalgoer. While Park City's Main Street was like Fort Lauderdale during spring break, and parties were too crowded for anyone to enjoy except the most dogged networkers, screenings were relatively easy to access, and press were almost never turned away. No, the sign that Sundance had gone seriously out of whack were those now-infamous JibJab promos that preceded every film in the festival. I saw the JibJab creative team on the Sundance Channel's Festival Dailies show, babbling about how thrilled they were when "Bob" (that's Sundance founder Robert Redford to you) gave them his approval. What was he thinking? Could years of repeating that Sundance exists to benefit and honor the filmmakers have resulted in a return of the repressed that took the form of these blatant put-downs? The JibJab spots came in three flavors, but all of them opened with the word "Independent," which slowly faded to leave the letters spelling "inept" on the screen before finally disappearing. One was racist (an African-American "freelance demolition expert," costumed like a rap video "ho," blows herself up); another was homophobic (an "asphalt artist"—pronounced "ass fault," get it?—refuses to paint straight highway lines, which results in a car driving off a cliff); the third was an attempt at balance (a white, jock-like fellow with a soft heart for strays is run down by a pack of wild dogs). Talk about setting a tone.

Not that the festival powers-that-be (men of intelligence and taste who probably still harbor some higher vision of film culture) might not want to distance themselves from what Sundance has largely become: the port of entry for fledgling Hollywood careerists and those who want to make a buck off them. And yes, there is the inescapable absurdity—nailed, to give credit where it's due, in the very last seconds by the JibJab promos—of a festival dedicated to independent film, every inch of which is branded with corporate sponsors. Still, the blanket roasting of the filmmakers left a bad taste, especially since some of them had, indeed, bucked trends, odds, and economics to produce unique and compelling works.

The most exciting of these was Robinson Devor's **Police Beat**, the only American film I saw that melded a regional American and a global consciousness. Based on a series of newspaper columns by Charles Mudede, a West African writer living in Seattle who collaborated with Devor on the script, *Police Beat* is a fragmented, first-person police procedural routed through the consciousness of a bicycle-cop named Z (Pape Sidy Niang), a Senegalese immigrant who's not only employed to enforce the laws of a country he barely comprehends but is also distracted by his fear that his girlfriend has run off with another man. As



Z patrols his beat, he encounters a wide range of Seattle citizens, from prostitutes and drug pushers to middle-class property owners with a strong sense of entitlement. Z's lovesickness (a universal malady) and his particular stranger-in-a-strange-land perspective give the film both a dreamlike quality and a moral urgency, as this immensely sympathetic character tries to reconcile people's behaviors, the laws of his adopted country, and his own moral principles. Brilliantly shot by Sean Kirby in 35mm anamorphic (a lot of it handheld), the widescreen images capture the beauty of the city and also emphasize Z's isolation and loneliness. A character study and a cityscape movie, *Police Beat* merges inside and outside in sound as well as in images. The mix of electronica, rock, and classical piano is borrowed from the distinctive programming of a Seattle radio DJ. And Z's experience of being caught between two worlds is most tellingly expressed by having him communicate with others in English while keeping up a running interior monologue in Wolof.

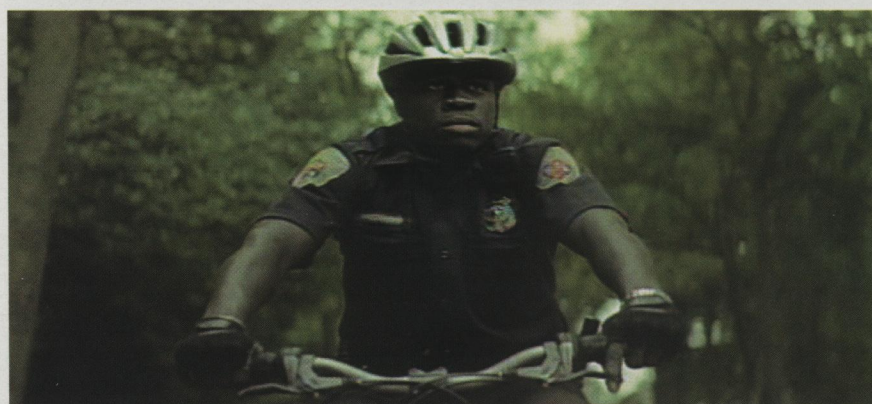
However poetic Mudede's English subtitles, the Wolof voiceover made even distributors who liked the movie dubious about its theatrical viability. *Police Beat* left Sundance with much critical praise but no deal and no prize. Instead, the jury for the American dramatic competition divided its big awards between two Oedipal narratives situated entirely within the nuclear family. Ira Sachs's pale, woodenly acted (except for the ever volatile Rip Torn) **Forty Shades of Blue** won the Grand Jury Prize, while Noah Baumbach's much superior **The Squid and the Whale** had to be content with best director and best screenplay. Partly autobiographical, Baumbach's depiction of the effect of a marital meltdown on the 16- and 12-year-old sons of two competitive, passive-aggressive Brooklyn writers

This page: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*; **opposite page (top to bottom):** *The Squid and the Whale*, *Police Beat*, and *Brick*

(Jeff Daniels and Laura Linney) has the nuance and intricacy of a *New Yorker* story. The snarky tone that marred his previous films is absent here, replaced by a tenderness and emotional vulnerability—particularly in relation to the older son's coming to terms with his anger and love for his mother. If *The Squid and the Whale* is a chamber piece as insular as the Brooklyn middle-class bohemia in which it is set, Don Roos's **Happy Endings** (shown out of competition on opening night) is its sprawling SoCal counterpart—an ebullient humanist comedy that adores its characters but, paradoxically, is deeply suspicious of their drive to breed.

This was a festival obsessed with childhood sexuality and underage sex that was sometimes couched as abuse and sometimes as agency. Gregg Araki's **Mysterious Skin** follows the diverging lives of two small-town boys who have nothing in common except that they were both raped at the age of six or seven by their Little-League coach. Absorbing and occasionally harrowing, it was one of the festival's strongest U.S. films and Araki's most controlled, fully realized work to date. In Miranda July's **Me and You and Everyone We Know** (which is rather like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* revisited under the influence of Laurie Anderson), the children (aged six to 15) are irrepressibly libidinous and joyously subversive, while the putative adults are stunted emotionally and intellectually by their narcissistic wounds. July does not couch her comedy as social critique but rather as a whimsical plea for love. If there is irony in the title, it's missing from the film proper. Some viewers found *Me and You and Everyone We Know* enchanting. I found it, except for a couple of scenes focused on the kids, irritatingly self-absorbed. Unlike many of the U.S. films, it does acknowledge its own blinders. Which is not, however, a substitute for removing them.

One of the stranger examples of tunnel vision combined with adolescent delusions of grandeur, Rian Johnson's one-note **Brick** is built on a high concept—high-school noir—that lacks resonance and indeed logic. To wit, the traumatized, cynical subjectivity of noir is earned through experience and therefore is the privilege, as it were, of adult-



hood. Transposing the genre to high school, rather than refreshing it, renders it unconvincing. *Brick*'s failings serve as a reminder of what's great about *Blue Velvet* or *Donnie Darko*—that the teenage hero's detective or rescue fantasies are his means of emerging from adolescence, defining his moral center, testing his courage, and proving himself in the dangerous adult world. In *Brick*, there is no world beyond high school—again a typical Sundance fallacy. As a filmmaker, however, Johnson is clearly talented. He demonstrates a great facility with film language, a prodigious knowledge of film history, a knack for purloining the right images, and also an ability to create some ravishing ones of his own. What suggests that he's something of an idiot savant is the total absence of any kind of libidinal or emotional juice beneath the clever surface.

It was less than 15 years ago that actors were advised not to appear in independent films lest they damage their careers. This year, there were at least a dozen performers more compelling than the films they graced. The breakout actor was Terrence Howard, who stole George C. Wolfe's hyperbolic *Lackawanna Blues* from a volatile ensemble cast—at least until Jeffrey Wright's five-minute cameo as a poet and convicted killer took the film to another level. But no one could get in the way of Howard as a Memphis pimp who finds redemption by becoming a rapper in Craig Brewer's thoroughly clichéd but—thanks to Howard's performance—pretty irresistible *Hustle and Flow*, which won the audience award, as well as a \$9 million deal with Paramount Classics. (The enthusiasm of Sundance's almost entirely white audience was proof to the suits that the movie could cross over.) Howard has Brando's catlike way of appearing to move in slow motion as well as his unpredictable mix of sweetness and brutality. The extended, weed-saturated scene between Howard and Ludacris is destined to become as much of an actors' touchstone as Brando and Steiger in the car in *On the Waterfront*.

Sundance's nurturing of documentary film has played no small part in

the genre's increased visibility. Two of the most exciting, kinetic films in the festival were documentaries: David LaChapelle's *Rize* takes us inside the subculture of "krumping," a new dance form that grew up in SoCal's poor black neighborhoods. A mixture of the sacred and the profane, it combines elements of African trance dancing with break dancing, but krumping involves speed and polyrhythms far beyond anything that breaking demanded. Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro's *Murderball* follows quadriplegic rugby players as they compete in a series of games that take them all the way to the 2004 Athens Special Olympics. Played in wheelchairs, quad rugby is a sport of incredible ferocity and ingenuity. The film is ultimately a meditation on aggression and competitiveness as the defining elements of masculinity. And on the subject of ferocity, Timothy



Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*

Treadwell spent 12 summers in Alaska with grizzly bears that he videotaped and talked to as if they were human toddlers and he were a combination of Mr. Rogers and Siegfried and Roy rolled into one. Eventually, Treadwell overstayed his welcome and one of the bears killed and ate him along with his female companion. Werner Herzog, now a full-time resident of Los Angeles, found in Treadwell the perfect Herzogian subject (someone so crazy that the director can feel sane by comparison). In *Grizzly Man*, he provides an investigative framework for Treadwell's remarkable footage while refusing to sensationalize his horrific death. The film makes an implicit case for why the Alaskan wildlife refuge must be preserved. But Treadwell's story and his video diary are, dare I say, insufficiently digested for *Grizzly Man* to be more than another curiosity in the ever-curious Herzog oeuvre.

The social and political commitment of most of the documentaries made its absence in most of the fiction films all the more conspicuous. It was as if the filmmakers—or perhaps the festival programmers—had assigned responsibility for dealing with the crises of the U.S. and the world to documentary, thereby re-enforcing the ostrich tendency of AmerIndie fiction. There were exceptions—and all of them, like the aforementioned *Police Beat*, were hybrids. William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*, the sequel to his scandalously unappreciated 1968 *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 1*, once again provokes us to ask questions about the deployment of power in the filmmaking process and its relationship to power and hierarchies in the world. *Take 2½* is not the most graceful of films, but Greaves's willingness to walk the line between the naive and the profound (in other words, to pound away at the question of why this particular film—or this particular commitment to another human being—is worth making at this particular moment) is admirable and haunting. And in the sketchy but nevertheless promising *Who Killed Cock Robin?* Travis Wilkerson explores the failing U.S. economy and the decimation of the labor movement though the lives of three young men living in Butte, Montana. The film is most powerful for Wilkerson's refusal to inject any hint of uplift in its bleak conclusion, but his wariness of amping-up reality also makes him stint on character development and dramatic conflict.

This year Sundance made its former World Cinema sidebar into a competitive category with awards for both fiction and documentary. Given the scarcity of good, let alone great, homegrown films, and their abundance in the rest of the world, it may be that Sundance will be forced to further shift its priorities. For the moment, showcasing American Independent films remains its *raison d'être*. To read about films in the World Dramatic Competition that were literally, aesthetically, and politically all over the map—among them Jun Ichikawa's *Tony Takitani*, Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs*, and Lee Yoon-ki's *This Charming Girl*, go to the online Sundance coverage at www.filmlinc.com. □