

# SUNDANCE REPORT:

## THE EVOLVING NATIVE INITIATIVE AT THE 22ND SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL, WORLD CINEMA, AND MORE

By Christine McDonald

The opening press conference moved to the Egyptian Theatre on Main Street, in the heart of the action at the Sundance Film Festival and the first location of the Festival 22 years ago. Geoffrey Gilmore, director of the festival, and Robert Redford, president and founder of the Sundance Institute, made opening remarks and introduced *Chicago 10* director Brett Morgan. In a shift from past years, *Chicago 10*, a documentary, was the opening film of the festival. It's only the second documentary to open the festival, following Stacy Peralta's *Riding Giants* in 2004. Morgan's film uses period archival footage and motion-capture animation with the voices of actors in courtroom scenes to portray the Chicago Seven trial. The Vietnam War protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention had eerie resonances as Redford alluded to the connections between today and events almost 40 years ago. The political tone of the press conference was palpable. Redford emphasized the festival's political diversity during its history of screenings and his longtime commitment to documentary and to the creative work of filmmakers producing shorts. He explained his belief that documentary film is a response to lies in government and media, a way to voice truth.

In an interview in the festival's *Daily Insider*, January 19, 2007, Redford responded to a question about how he became involved in making documentary film by referring to his decision to start the Native Forum. "It started out with smaller films about the threats to the environment or Native American issues on Indian

filmmakers and their projects.

While I've attended the Sundance Film Festival since 1996, I began covering the Native Forum starting in 1997. Over the past ten years, I've seen many changes. Two years ago the Native Forum was phased out, and today the work of Native filmmakers competes with all other films in all festival categories. This year there were four Native American/Indigenous features and two shorts in competition, and a short and documentary out of competition. The Sundance Institute continues to provide support to Native American and Indigenous filmmakers through panel discussions, filmmaker workshops, and networking events. Last year's article on Native film outlines the extent to which the Sundance Institute supports the work of emerging Native American and indigenous filmmakers.

### Indigenous Films from the 2007 Sundance Film Festival

#### *Miss Navajo*

Documentary in the Spectrum Program

Director: Billy Luther

United States, 2006, 60 minutes, color

Contact: ITVS: [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org)

TWO YEARS AGO THE NATIVE FORUM WAS PHASED OUT, AND TODAY THE WORK OF NATIVE FILMMAKERS COMPETES WITH ALL OTHER FILMS IN ALL FESTIVAL CATEGORIES.

lands where developers were coming in trying to wipe them out." The Friends Committee on National Legislation's *Indian Report* for the first quarter of 2006 contains an article entitled "Indian Country Telling Its Own Story" that cites Robert Redford's Sundance Institute as a "launching pad" assisting Native American

Bird Runningwater (Cheyenne/Mescalero Apache), director of the Sundance Native Program and programmer for the festival, introduced the film. Luther, the director of the film, and Crystal Frazier, one of the 2005 Miss Navajo Nation contestants who appears in the film, were there to answer questions. Sarah Johnson Luther, the director's mother, was also present. Luther came to the subject because her mother was crowned Miss Navajo Nation in 1966. This is Billy Luther's first documentary feature. She studied film at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and worked as an assistant for the Native American Film and Video Festivals in New York, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian.

The Miss Navajo Nation pageant began in 1952 to celebrate "women and their traditional values, language, and inner beauty."

This documentary is a delightful surprise—a thought-provoking view of what cultures treasure as important qualities and what the Navajo wish to cultivate in their women. Contestants must become role models for their nation through a demonstration of their fluency in the Navajo language—an important part of the preservation of culture—and through a demonstrated knowledge of their history and culture.

As the film progresses, our non-indigenous cultural notions about a “Miss” contest are shattered in several ways. Not an ordinary pageant, the depth of the competition is a revelation for both contestants and observers. In addition to rewarding knowledge of the Navajo language, the pageant prizes traditional and cultural skills like butchering sheep, rug weaving, fry bread making, and drumming, as well as intelligence, persistence, spirituality, family, and what it really means to be beautiful. Crystal Frazier emerges from the film and the Q & A with the filmmaker and the audience as a true ambassador of the Navajo Nation who demonstrates, through her life, a dedication to her community.

In the film, Frazier, who lives on her family’s farm in Table Mesa, New Mexico, states clearly, “I’m a reservation person.” She is being raised in a traditional Navajo home. She has learned about animals and sees herself as something of an introvert. She got involved in pageants on a dare and because she wanted to have the incentive to improve her Navajo language skills. The farm had just gotten electricity and running water three years before the filming began. While she doubted her abilities, Crystal felt she wanted to learn more, and this motivated her. She brought her own video camera to the competition, met the other four contestants, and worried about her language skills, which she felt was her weakest area of knowledge. Other Miss Navajos are interviewed throughout the film, including the filmmaker’s mother, conveying a sense of how important a position this is for a woman of the Navajo Nation and how they continue the matrilineal line that began with Changing Woman, the first ancestor.

In response to the question, “How has the pageant changed life for you and the Navajo Nation?” Crystal responded that she grew up in the Ship Rock area and lived there for three-quarters of her life. She did cross-country running, track, and basketball and was the 2002 valedictorian of her class. Her family knew her as a tomboy. She credits the pageants with her improved abilities in social interaction and confidence to speak in front of a crowd. “As my mom will tell you, it’s been a great experience.” Billy Luther said Crystal was very compelling when she spoke in public. Crystal explained how hard it was to get involved in the pageants because the Navajo find it difficult to live off the reservation. She said she traveled all over and in essence explored the world through the pageant, where she had to present herself as a role model for the Nation.

Luther commented that although Crystal wasn’t the winner in 2005, “she doesn’t need a crown, she is Miss Navajo.” Crystal continues to travel with Luther at screenings of the film. When asked if there was a sense of competition among the contestants, Crystal replied that the girls she was with were like family to her, since they were all cut off from their families. She said it was hard to organize everything; for instance, on the morning of the sheep butchering she had to get up at 3:00 a.m. to sharpen knives.

Billy Luther said the main reason she wanted to do this film

was to learn from her mother. She based the script on her mother’s life and her winning the Miss Navajo Nation and Miss Indian American contests. In response to a question about how the Navajo are matrilineal, Luther explained that it’s by culture, legends, and stories and from grandmother to granddaughter—land, sheep, and property, but not government. Crystal Frazier elaborated that within Navajo culture, there are clans and what one is comes from the mother’s clan. When asked if she would run again for Miss Navajo, Crystal responded that she wasn’t sure “if the pageant business is my cup of tea.” She’s employed now by the State Department of Agriculture as a field enumerator. She’s also studying pre-mechanical engineering and math through Brigham Young University.

### **Tuli**

Narrative Feature in the Spectrum Program

Director: Auraeus Solito

Philippines, 2006, 107 minutes, color

Contact: Auraeus Solito: aureus\_solito@yahoo.com

Solito, director of the very successful *Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, is from the Palawan nation. His indigenous name is Kanakan-Balintagos. With screenwriter Jimmy Flores he begins this feature examining the taboo subject of boyhood circumcision. Tuli means circumcision in Tagalog.

The first time the film was screened in the Philippines it was given an X rating. The film opens in a village where the camera gazes at the cutting of lush green branches, the sharpening of a knife. Four boys, seven or eight years old, are to be circumcised. One father, Ka Malteng, does the actual cutting with the help of his daughter Daisy, while the other boys’ fathers watch proudly. Ka Malteng, who is married to Purita (she alludes to her daughter being from another father), becomes violent when drunk and abuses his wife and daughter.

The story shifts to Daisy as she is growing up and going about her work making and selling bread. Boys serenade her, and her father encourages her to marry. She says, “let me choose my spouse.” Daisy symbolizes the dissatisfaction with village life and the belief in change. Despite the beauty of rural life and seeming security, many of the girls are subject to violence in arranged marriages, and Daisy and her girlfriend, Botchock, feel they have no choice but marriage with unacceptable men. Grandma Tua represents the old ways of spiritualism in nature, in contrast to the new rituals of Catholicism shown in the film via the flagellation during the Passion Play. Grandma Tua tells of the Japanese invasion and destruction of the Philippines, her rape, and her rescue by her grandfather. When Daisy and Botchock openly start a relationship with each other, the villagers ignore them until events happen that bring the accusation of hexing the village. Oddly, Daisy decides to defy her father and has a baby with Nanding, not her father’s choice for her. The girls are defended by Nanding, who breaks the spell by a task he must complete. While some of the story will escape non-Philippine viewers, the transition from ancient traditions to modern ways while respecting the past resonates throughout the film. It is a film that asks questions and observes while withholding judgment, and it offers a glimpse of

village life that defies easy explanations.

### ***Four Sheets to the Wind***

Director/Writer: Sterlin Harjo  
United States, 2006, 91 minutes, 35mm  
English and Muscogee with subtitles in English  
Contact: Producer Ted Kroeber: tkroeber@hotmail.com; (310) 384-0966; ted@americangun-movie.com

Sterlin Harjo developed the script for *Four Sheets to the Wind* through the Sundance Institute's Filmmaker labs; he also received an Annenberg Fellowship in 2004 and a nomination for the 2004 NHK Award. His other films include three shorts, *Crooked Little Hearts*, *They're Playing His Song*, and *Good Night Irene*, the last one reviewed previously in *MultiCultural Review*. Harjo is a member of the Seminole and Creek Nations and is from Holdenville, Oklahoma. He studied at the University of Oklahoma's Film and Video Studies Program.

*Four Sheets to the Wind* is set in Oklahoma and centers around one family and their community as tragedy strains their confidence and hope. When Cufe Smallhill (played by Cody Lightning) finds his father Frankie dead from a drug overdose, there is a palpable sense that his life is going to change. Cufe carries out his father's longtime wish to be "buried" in the family pond, but he doesn't tell the rest of the family. It falls to Cufe to fabricate a body when the coffin is brought to the house, which he does in a wry and comic scene. This scene underlies the entire film's theme that tragedy and comedy, loss and renewal, are juxtaposed in life. That which seems like an ending is really a beginning, as it starts to unfold in the lives of the characters. Cufe leaves home after the funeral to visit his sister Miri in Tulsa; she's having her own problems dealing with her father's suicide. Cufe meets Miri's next-door neighbor, Francie, and begins to explore a relationship with someone who accepts him completely. Both Miri and Cufe find that their home and community is the place where they have gained their strength, and it's the place they can return to when needed. A sense of hope that infects their idea of the future replaces the grief that will stay with them forever.

### ***Eagle vs. Shark***

Director: Taika Waititi  
New Zealand, 2006, 87 minutes, color, 35mm  
Distributor: Swank Motion Pictures: www.swank.com

Director Waititi is of Te-Whanau-a-Apanui descent and comes from the Raukokore region of the East Coast of New Zealand. His film credits include *Two Cars, One Night*, which was nominated for an Academy Award, and *Tama Tu*, about six Maori soldiers fighting on the Italian front during the Second World War. Both films were included in the Sundance shorts program in previous years and reviewed in *MultiCultural Review*. Waititi's talents range from stand-up comic and actor to painter, writer, photographer, fashion designer, and self-taught filmmaker. Currently he's working on two feature films. In an interview that will be published in the summer 2008 issue of *MultiCultural Review*, Waititi commented that he sees *Eagle vs. Shark* as an art film

and romantic comedy of awkwardness. Critics have compared the comedy/drama about two young misfits in New Zealand with *Napoleon Dynamite*.

Maybe it's the deadpan humor, the location in and around Wellington, and the depth of the quirky details in *Eagle vs. Shark* that keep the story moving so that we begin to care about the two characters, what happens to them, and how they seem to be made for each other. Lily is a waitress in a fast-food restaurant, where she sells "Meaty Boy" hamburgers. She doesn't have the social skills for this kind of work and knows it. The highlight of her day is when "Screenblasterz" video store clerk Jarrod comes in to get his fast-food fix for the day. Lily's lack of self-esteem is matched in reverse by Jarrod's healthy and somewhat unrealistic ego. When Lily sneaks into Jarrod's video game/come-as-your-favorite-animal party, she impresses him with her video skills and perhaps her costume. The two are drawn to each other and start to share the secrets of their lives. Jarrod has a long-standing desire to seek revenge on a high school enemy. He tells Lily that his brother, Gordon, is dead. She tells him her parents are dead: Her father died because he got hit in the head by a cow, and her mom died because she missed him. Jarrod tells Lily his mom is dead too. Jarrod decides to play out the desire for revenge and returns home, taking Lily with him. It's a road movie then, as Jarrod looks back in his past at Gordon, at his high school enemy, and at his approach-avoidance of Lily. At one point he rejects Lily and tells her to leave. The quiet persistence of her love and unwillingness to give up the one person who truly "gets" her finally hits home with Jarrod. The two characters are drawn to each other because they seem to bring out the best in each other, and luckily, they recognize it before it's too late.

### ***Nanking***

Directors/Screenwriters: Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman  
Principal Cast: Woody Harrelson, Mariel Hemingway, Jürgen Prochnow, Stephen Dorff, John Getz, Rosalind Chao.  
United States, 2006, 91 min., color and B&W  
Contact: Agape Multimedia LLC: 1-202-266-2298 and www.nankingthefilm.com

No one was interviewed in 1937 when the Japanese Army invaded the Chinese City of Nanking two years before the official start of the Second World War. The filmmakers had archival footage and the incredible diaries of several people who were instrumental in saving so many during the siege. Long referred to as the "rape of Nanking," the six-week siege included aerial bombardment, the killing of more than 200,000, and the rape of more than 20,000 women. A group of Westerners who had made Nanking their home and loved the city and the Chinese people (this group included an American physician, an American headmistress of a college, a missionary, and a Nazi businessman) banded together and set up a security zone of about two square miles.

Actors read from the diaries and letters of those who set up the security zone. The filmmakers interviewed both the few remaining victims of the siege and some of the Japanese soldiers who were part of the invasion, all of whom are in their late eighties. Oddly enough, the Westerners were able to fend off the Japanese and succeeded in saving the lives of over 200,000. The tragedy and

massacre would have been far worse had they not taken action.

It is chilling to realize the consequences of inaction in other world situations, when so few did so much to change the course of history. However, the toll on their own lives was enormous, because they also failed to save more people. The missionary was particularly affected by the number of women who pleaded for her to save their lives, though it was impossible. Filmmaker Guttentag commented during the Q & A that "the U.S. told them to leave but they had a moral obligation to stay. They stood up unarmed to a vicious enemy." The directors cited their purpose in making the film as trying to assist in bringing the issue to some closure and provide peace to the survivors. The website ([www.nankingthefilm.com](http://www.nankingthefilm.com)) ends with statement: "In advance of December 2007, the 70th anniversary of the invasion of Nanking, the Chinese and Japanese governments have convened a joint committee of historians in an attempt to agree upon a common version of the history of the Sino-Japanese conflict, including what happened in Nanking."

### ***White Light/Black Rain***

Director: Steven Okazaki

United States, 2006, 86 minutes,  
color and black-and-white, HD Cam

Contact: Farallon Films: [www.info@farfilm.com](mailto:www.info@farfilm.com);  
(510) 883-0411

Erik Barnouw's *Hiroshima/Nagasaki, August 1945* has been the seminal work about the atomic bombings of Japan in World War II since it came out in 1970. Okazaki decided to explore the same subject because the events are being forgotten in Japan and by the world. The results of radiation on the victims of the bombings is shown through archival footage in hospitals and around the two cities by film crews from both Japan and the United States. Okazaki decided to allow the victims to speak and tell their own stories. The victims of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were seldom asked to reveal the physical effects of the bomb on their bodies.


While this film is primarily a psychological portrait of the victims, one cannot turn away when a man lifts his shirt to reveal the hideous scars and outline of his rib cage from being burned by the radiation from the bomb. The victims have spoken out before, but this is an intimate look at their suffering, with unmistakable evidence of the long-term effects of the bombings. The ignorance is on both sides. Okazaki points out that 75 percent of Japanese were born after 1945. The young people he interviews on the streets of Tokyo have no real knowledge of the events. After interviewing more than 80 people, Okazaki chose 14 people to tell their stories in the film. Many had never shared their experiences with their families because of cultural taboos. Okazaki reclaims their history for the benefit of the world.


### ***Enemies of Happiness***

Directors: Eva Mulvad and Anja Al Erhayem  
Denmark, 2006, 58 minutes, color, HD Cam  
Contact: Danish Film Institute: [dfi@dfi.dk](mailto:dfi@dfi.dk)

Winner of the World Cinema Jury Prize at the Sundance Film festival this year, *Enemies of Happiness* follows the political career of Malalai Joya, a woman who in 2003 challenged the patriarchal authority of the Afghan government. Immediately her life changed from that of a "normal" female citizen to a hunted, feared, and hated political leader who now lives with death threats and has survived four assassination attempts. She decided to run in Afghanistan's Parliamentary election on September 18, 2005, the first in 35 years. She ran in Farah Province, an area where the Taliban still hold power. Her enemies said she had gone beyond what was allowed and didn't deserve to be there. She moved from house to house every day to maintain her security.

The film follows Joya's election campaign and victory. During the campaign, her supporters were many of the people whom she had come to help over the years. She understands her role as a symbol against oppression. She spends time in villages negotiating family problems, offering comfort to people suffering from all kinds of troubles and serving as a symbol of hope in the violence-prone countryside. Her victory is incredible. At the opening session of the Parliament, she is seen not in a burka but wearing a headscarf. As she travels to the historic event, she looks out at the people who supported the elections and remarks, "They look at us with hope."

**Christine McDonald** is director of the Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, New York, and the Film/Video Subject Editor of *MultiCultural Review*. 



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