

The 2008 Sundance Film Festival: Native Initiative Feature Wins Grand Jury Prize Dramatic Award

Christine McDonald

The 23rd Annual Sundance Film Festival's opening press conference featured Geoffrey Gilmore, director of the festival and Robert Redford, president and founder of the Sundance Institute. Redford introduced *In Bruges* director Martin McDonagh, whose film opened the festival and has had widespread distribution.

Global film was Gilmore's theme for this year's festival, as he noted 34 countries represented this year: "It was an amazing experience for us as programmers to look at work from all over the world and be impressed and excited. With 58 debut films this year, Sundance is a place of discovery and talent." In the past two decades he watched with pride at how many independent filmmakers have become significant voices in American film and how many of these filmmakers have emerged from Sundance.

Redford observed an evolutionary process at Sundance, as evidenced by other disciplines crossing over into film—art, poetry, and music. New to the festival was the Spectrum Documentary section. Both Gilmore and Redford reminded the press that the festival is full of surprises. Redford said, "I've heard lots of stories about buzz but it evaporates and what happens is unexpected."

The Q&A started with a question about the consolidation of entertainment and news. Sundance has always had a political content and seems to be stepping up in the documentary category. Redford responded, "The word *independent* means something not mainstream. Politics can be used in broad terms as our objective." He said Sundance is political in the sense of free from the norms. "These films are documents of our time. Low budget and low tech, hands on—that can be political. The response to the craziness in the world is coming out in personal film and averts the politics of the world and our country. Documentaries have always been hugely important to me. We started promoting documentaries as soon as we saw the festival would survive. Documentaries were the first thing we started to push. I felt we could provide a platform from here. And we felt documentaries would go beyond talking heads as they did. *Hoop Dreams* was the first crossover." Gilmore added that the personal and the political always intersect.

The Sundance Film Festival has made a commitment to Native filmmakers and their work since its inception. The evolution from a showcase of Native film in the "Native Forum" to the inclusion of Native film into the main program allows Native filmmakers to compete with all other films in the festival. The Sundance Institute continues to provide special support to Native American and indigenous filmmakers through panel discussions, filmmaker workshops, and networking events at the Sundance Film Festival and the opportunity to receive individual attention at Sundance Institute labs.

Native Films at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival

Two Native American/Indigenous features were in competition

this year in the Dramatic (*Frozen River*) and International Dramatic Competition (*Nerakhoon [The Betrayal]*). There were also three films out of competition: *The Wind and the Water (Burwa Dii Ebo)*, *Nikamowin (Song)*, and *Sikumi (On the Ice)*.

Frozen River

United States, 2007, 97 minutes, color

Director: Courtney Hunt

Producers: Heather Ray, Chip Hourihan

Bird Runningwater, associate director of the Sundance Institute's Native Program, introduced the film and Courtney Hunt, director of *Frozen River*. Runningwater commented that all those involved with the selection of *Frozen River* were impressed with the level of filmmaking and the layers of complexity in the film, including illegal immigration, smuggling, Native American issues, poverty, single parenting, and the world situation in general. The reaction to the film at Sundance was electric, and the film went on to win the Grand Jury Prize Dramatic Award. The jurors for this award were Quentin Tarantino, Marcia Gay Harden, Mary Harron, Diego Luna, and Sandra Oh. Tarantino presented the award to Hunt at the Festival Awards on January 27th. The film opened in New York City at the New Directors/New Films festival at MOMA and Lincoln Center in March 2008 and is now in widespread distribution.

Hunt received an MFA film degree in 1994 from Columbia University. Earlier, she received her law degree from Northeastern University, concentrating on civil rights and constitutional law. Hunt first screened a short version of *Frozen River* at the New York Film Festival in 2004. It went on to other festivals. She started working on the expanded screenplay after that and in March 2007 started shooting the feature length version of the film, her first feature. The river is the St. Lawrence and the location, upstate New York near Massena during a bitter winter. Much of the filming took place there and near Plattsburgh, New York. Hunt's husband hails from nearby Malone.

The film opens with a scene several days before Christmas. Ray Eddy, a dollar store clerk played by Melissa Leo (*21 Grams*), has been saving for a down payment on a double-wide trailer to replace the family's current falling apart and crowded single. When she looks in the hiding place for the money she's been saving, she realizes that it's not just the cash that's disappeared; her husband Troy has, too. This has happened before because of his compulsive gambling. Ray takes off for the nearby Mohawk reservation, where her husband often plays bingo. In a telling scene, Ray pumps \$7.74 in gas—all she can afford. The gas crisis is even more acute in rural areas where people have to travel long distances to buy necessities and go to work.

Ray meets up with Lila Littlewolf, a young Mohawk woman who has taken Troy's car because she said the keys were left in the ignition. Ray follows Lila to her tiny trailer on the reservation and

demands the car back. After threatening Lila with a gun, Ray listens to Lila's plan to smuggle illegal immigrants across the river into reservation land using Troy's car, an old model that allows the driver to pop the trunk open, which is useful in smuggling. Lila makes it clear that they're less likely to be caught if a White woman is working with her. While U.S. border patrols are prohibited from Mohawk land, the drop-off point is off the reservation. Visibly shaken by the thought of breaking the law, Ray leaves. The next day, after a breakfast of Tang and popcorn for her two sons, she goes back to the reservation and accepts the offer.

Ray Eddy is very much on the edge, and Leo's portrayal gets across how broken this woman has become. You can feel the desperation of a woman in the days before Christmas amid all the hype. The rule of law that has governed her life falls apart. Ray is aware of what she's agreed to do as she tries to meet the deadline for the down payment on her trailer. She doesn't want to lose the \$1,500 deposit, but she's finding it hard to put food on the table for her kids and give them a Christmas with presents. Hunt herself grew up in a single-parent family, and the day-to-day struggles are thus what she's best at revealing on the screen.

Ray discovers that Lila, a widow, is a single mother as well and that her mother-in-law stole her son from her, perhaps because of her smuggling work. The smuggling of illegal aliens is a brutal business. The people Ray and Lila deal with are ruthless, and both their lives are opened up to horror. The people being smuggled into the country are terrified, at the mercy of unscrupulous people, and most likely indentured for a long time before they are "free." The resolution of the film involves the Mohawk Tribal Council intervening as well as the U.S. border police and New York State Troopers. Through the darkness of their work, the two single mothers form a bond, one that allows them to care for their families as the two arms of the law, U.S. and tribal, close in.

At Sundance, press screenings don't include Q&A, and I was unable to get an interview with Hunt, but I was fortunate to attend the Q&A and a panel discussion that included Hunt, Leo, and co-producer Chip Hourihan at the Lake Placid Film Forum in Lake Placid, New York, in June 2008. The panel, "What's the Story," was moderated by Russell Banks and also included novelists Richard Russo, William Allan Nicholls, and Linda Reisman. Also attending was *Frozen River* co-producer Heather Rae, who was the Native forum programmer at Sundance for years and worked with the Mohawk community during the filming. Hunt said the situation in the film is real although the characters came from her imagination. From her trips to Malone with her husband, she learned that smuggling was indeed going on and is something that everyone there knows about. Misty Upham who plays Lila Littlewolf is from the Blackfeet tribe in Montana, and she added, "My tribe owns Glacier National Park." She said that during the shooting, they suffered since they worked in freezing cold weather, didn't have heated trailers, and shot everything outside. It took 24 days to shoot on a budget of less than \$1 million.

Banks asked the panelists how their work related to storytelling. Hunt said it depends on the kind of storyteller you are. With epic films like *Dr. Zhivago* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, there's a power that gets lost when you go smaller. "The emotion of a film keeps me in my seat." But, when she viewed a trailer of *Frozen River* on her Blackberry, she felt the emotion wasn't lost despite the small scale. And the trailer scenes were intimate because there were so many close-ups. Banks asked her if when she imagines a film, does she

think "big screen?" Hunt said she thinks about the emotion of the story and whether or not she can shoot the things she imagines.

Banks asked Leo about acting and intimacy: "What do actors do to get intimacy on small and large screens?" Leo said that after a 30-year career on all-sized screens, she felt the best example of intimacy in her career was in *Homicide*. The cameras then were much more primitive, she observed. She went on to say, "Storytelling is an evident human necessity so we can see our lives reflected back." And, each of us finds the best medium to tell our stories. Banks commented that as a fiction writer, he had to choose the visual medium for the film adaptation of *Cloudsplitter*, and ultimately, he chose to go with HBO because he felt television would cross racial and class lines better than a feature film; television would be much more effective in breaking down racial barriers. Banks asked Leo to comment on the impact of emerging formats on storytelling. Leo said that while she liked the idea of curling up in front of a fireplace reading a book, "there is something precious about celluloid and the gathering of humans in the darkened room to share in an experience."

Hunt responded to a question from the audience about format. She noted that little gadgets give you the luxury of repetition. When she was growing up, she could only see *The Wizard of Oz* once a year. But now, her six year old sees things over and over again. Banks commented that on small viewing devices, one might miss seeing the tears falling down Leo's cheeks in *Frozen River*, thereby losing that valuable emotional dimension. Hunt thought that even with a very small screen, the emotional impact of the characters' relationships would still come through. Banks asked if we are now in a moment of history when the mode of storytelling is radically changing? Can everyone be a filmmaker? Hunt responded that people today like reality TV because of the informality of making something fast. "You can make something good or bad in one day or ten years." She went on to explain that when she started *Frozen River*, she had a new baby and was writing in her journal and also some poetry. The character of Ray Eddy started to "talk" as a monologue that came from thin air and developed into a poem. The poem became the basis for her short film, and the short was the basis for *Frozen River*.

Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)

United States, 2007, 87 min., color, Lao with English subtitles
Directors: Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath

Cara Mertes, director of the documentary film program at the Sundance Institute, introduced the film. Directors and screenwriters Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath were present. Kuras, who was also cinematographer for this film, has worked for many documentary filmmakers and is a three-time winner of the Sundance cinematography award. She explained that *Nerakhoon* is a collaboration that has been in process for 20 years. The story took years of thought and philosophical study, and she feels it is a universal story about family and country.

Thavisouk Phrasavath and his family are at the center of the film. As a child, Phrasavath was unaware of the politics of Laos. He knew his father was a soldier but not what that meant. During the Vietnam War, Laos declared its neutrality when in fact it had become a base for the United States, and the father was working with the U.S. government. The Laotian people suffered horrendous bombings during the war. Phrasavath said that children frequently saw soldiers in body bags, and he thought that killing and dying was a normal thing.

After the war, the communist Pathet Lao rose to power. Phrasavath's father was taken to a re-education camp and held incommunicado. Most of the family escaped from Laos under dreadful circumstances. But two daughters were left behind. Phrasavath's mother said she was told that if they make it this far, "you're one step from heaven." They resettled in Brooklyn, New York, through the help of U.S. religious groups, but life there was a nightmare of poverty, gangs, homesickness, and culture shock. They experienced helplessness in the face of what they felt was anarchy, greed, and immorality.

What the film succeeds in doing is weaving the history of the family through family photos and memorabilia with Laotian history and cultural beliefs while juxtaposing the dislocation of life in a new country where dreams of peace and family unity are shattered. Throughout their years in the United States, the family longs desperately to know something about the fate of the father. The mother laments that her children are clueless as to the sacrifices she had to make to save their lives and keep them together.

Fifteen years after their escape from Laos, Phrasavath, who was then 27, received a phone call from his father. He was shocked that his father was still alive. His father then came for a visit and told the family of his suffering at the hands of the Pathet Lao and of his escape to Thailand. He in turn learned that his two daughters were left behind in Laos when the family had to escape. (The girls had been visiting their grandmother when the opportunity to escape presented itself.) The father then explained his role with U.S. forces and with the B-52 bombings of Laos. Amid the hope of his reappearance and after his celebrating with the family, he announced that he needed to return to Florida where he had a new wife and two children. Phrasavath expresses the family's despair that "our hearts are broken again."

In the subsequent years, there were no more calls from his father. Phrasavath eventually called to beg his father to come back to New York and help raise the children from his first marriage. When his father refused, Phrasavath had to help raise his siblings himself until they were grown. In 1998, Phrasavath's father called to tell him that his half brother had been murdered in a gang war, so Phrasavath went to the funeral. By this time, Phrasavath's stepmother and half sister were also dead. His father expressed his profound regret for having collaborated with the United States to destroy his country. He told his son he loved his mother with all his heart.

Finally, Phrasavath returns to Laos and is reunited with his two sisters who had remained there. He finds out that his grandmother, who lived until she was 104, had cared for them. By the end of the film, we learn that Phrasavath has married and has a daughter. This epic story shows the strength and resilience of an extraordinary family that has endured unimaginable heartbreak and loss. One has to think of this family as one with connections in Laos, Brooklyn, and Florida and whose suffering and sacrifices united them in spirit when they couldn't be together in person.

The Wind and the Water (Burwa Dii Ebo)

Panama, 2007, 100 min., color, Kuna/Spanish with English subtitles

Directors/Screenwriters: Vero Bollow and the Yala Collective

Shari Frilot, one of the Sundance Film Festival's programmers, introduced *The Wind and the Water* as the first fully realized feature to come out of Panama. It was produced by a film collective whose members worked both in front of and behind the cameras. Frilot

commented, "It's a beautiful film with a fresh rhythm, and I haven't seen anything like it."

There are only 30,000 Kuna speakers in the world. The Yala Collective developed a script about two Kuna children, a boy and a girl born at the same time. Machi grew up on Kuna/Yala land in a traditional Kuna home while Rosy grew up in Panama City in a secular household despite her Kuna roots. Machi has a close relationship with his grandfather, a very wise man. When Machi and Rosy are 15, they meet by chance in Panama City, where Machi has gone to attend school, an isolating experience for him; he returns to Kuna territory from time to time. Although they live different lives as Kuna, both he and Rosy are devoted to their culture. When a corporation seeks to relocate the Kuna community, Machi and Rosy unite to oppose the plan.

The strength of the film lies in the wisdom of the leaders and the hope for the future of the Kuna because of its children. During the Q&A, members of the cast and the Yala Collective discussed the fact that the Kuna are one of the few indigenous groups in Latin America with traditions that are still alive. Since first contact, the Kuna knew what to do to keep their land. The Kuna until very recently didn't have a cash economy. There is a movement among the Kuna to get title to their land, which the Kuna own collectively.

Beyond Native Films

The Sundance Festival work this year was outstanding in the documentary category especially. For this reason, I've expanded my coverage beyond the Native Forum to incorporate films of interest to the readers of *MultiCultural Review*.

The Linguists

United States, 2007, 70 min., color, DVD

Directors: Seth Kramer, Daniel Miller, and Jeremy Newberger

The filmmakers chronicle the work of two language experts, David Harrison from Swarthmore College and Gregory Anderson from the Oregon-based Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, whose mission is to preserve disappearing languages in remote parts of the planet. Between the two of them, they speak 25 languages. The over 7,000 languages in the world are starting to vanish as the speakers age and populations shift and when speaking the dominant languages in a country or region is required to survive economically.

The linguists travel to find speakers of soon to be lost languages in Chulym, Siberia; Bolivia, where the Kallaway language is waning; India, where the Sora language is dying out; and Arizona, where the indigenous Chemehuevi language is now spoken by only one man. By studying and documenting vocabulary, structure, grammar, form, and counting systems, these two linguists begin the slow process of preserving languages. They are completely obsessed with their work which becomes evident and almost comical when their eagerness to hear a newly found language gets in the way of their common sense about how to work with people who are not accustomed to being completely open with strangers. They are driven by the knowledge that every three weeks, another language is lost as the native speakers die off. They listen, record words, and ask questions of newly discovered native speakers of languages few people have heard or know about.

The linguists also reveal a history bound in the isolation of being the only person who still speaks a particular language. Many of them grew up speaking their language with people in their community who have since moved away or died. It's delightful to watch how animated these people become when they realize that these foreigners are capable of speaking with them. The Chemehuevi speaker in Arizona told the linguists, "I speak to myself because all the elders have passed on . . . it's part of your culture . . . without your language, you might as well be dead."

Sleep Dealer

United States/Mexico, 2008, 90 min., color, Spanish with English subtitles

Director: Alex Rivera

Rivera is well known in indie film circles for his experimental work. *Sleep Dealer* won the Alfred P. Sloan prize at Sundance for a feature film with science as a theme. In this science fiction tale of a futuristic society set in Santa Ana del Rio and Tijuana, Mexico, there's no doubt about the close government and business connections that invade society without concern for individuals or communities. It is one of Rivera's most accessible works to date, delivering fast action, animation, breakthrough techniques, and an intelligent script by Rivera and David Riker.

Memo Cruz lives in his father's extremely modest rural Mexican home. He plays dangerously with his computer by learning "Hacking for Beginners" and dreams of big-city life. Near his home is a

U.S. government-guarded dam with water that is off-limits to the locals and valued at \$1,000 a gallon. His "innocent" hacking has catastrophic consequences for his family, and he is forced into hiding in the big city. There he meets a woman who gets him into the sleep dealer industry. With bitter sarcasm, Rivera creates a vision of the virtual workforce, in which "nodes" are surgically implanted into workers. These nodes allow the worker to act as a robot night and day, working remotely using special goggles to perform jobs hundreds or thousands of miles away. Node workers tend gardens, build skyscrapers and roads, and are paid in U.S. dollars, which they can send home to their families in remote parts of their countries. It's a brilliant imagining of a vicious solution to the problem of worldwide immigration; workers are paid without having to live in the country. The resolution of the film involves the village water and a pilot whose conscience begins to bother him after he completes his deadly assignment against Cruz's hacking.

During this year's festival, I attended one of the discussion sessions that was open to the press, called "Black in America," hosted by film critic Elvis Mitchell. I will cover this session in an upcoming issue of *MultiCultural Review*.

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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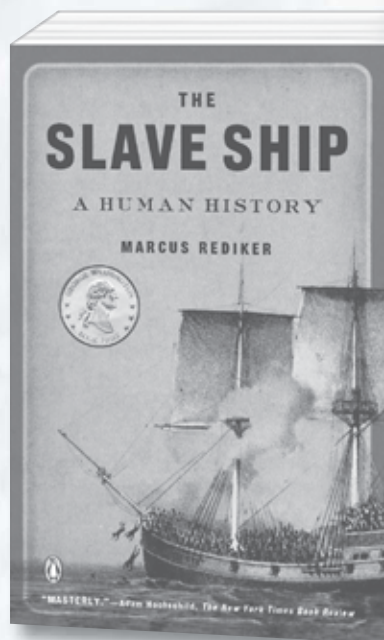
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