

Native Film and More at the 25th Sundance Film Festival 2005

By Christine L. McDonald

Robert Redford opened the 25th Sundance Film Festival in Salt Lake City, Utah, describing this festival as being about what is “decent.” “In a world spinning madly from fear and confusion,” Redford said, the festival is about “different voices in film, and this reflects our world in a more real way.” He sees more truth in these filmmaker voices and the portraits they give us. The festival is “about discovery, diversity, all points of view, personal points of view, and through these directors we get a better vision of our country and the world.” As the world gets smaller, he sees Sundance expanding to adapt. “I don’t like to see labels and I didn’t like to see our country broken down to blue and red states. Rather, we want to celebrate diversity and we want to celebrate differences.” The films, Redford explained, are defined by the quality of the work. The festival this year included film in 23 languages from 32 countries. Redford concluded by saying “the best is yet to come, with a whole series of generations who will bring new voices and points of view.”

At the 25th Sundance Film Festival, all eleven Native Films were included in the regular festival program, including seven world premieres and one for North America—a departure from previous years, when the Native Forum was a separate category that included most films by indigenous filmmakers. By eliminating the separate category of Native Forum, the number of screenings was increased, while Native Films were placed in competition in these categories: World Cinema, American Spectrum, Short Films, Feature Films, and Special Screenings. Geoff Gilmore, Director of the Sundance Film Festival, acknowledged that “by including these films within the major categories of the festival this year, we are not only acknowledging the high quality of the films, but we are encouraging a broader audience of festival-goers to attend the screenings and discover the richness of the storytelling in these films.” Gilmore went on to say, “This festival is living proof of the dramatic evolution of Native American filmmaking and filmmakers and Sundance Institute’s continued commitment to supporting the development of and exhibition of this work.” As part of the Native American Initiative of the Sundance Institute, two panel discussions and two networking events were scheduled to assist Native filmmakers in developing their filmmaking and writing skills. One panel focused on raising funds and the other on how the land shapes Native work.

SPECIAL SCREENINGS:

A Thousand Roads

United States, 2005, 40 min., color, 35mm
Director: Chris Eyre, Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho
Producer and writer: Scott Garen
Writer: Joy Harjo

Eyre (*Smoke Signals*, *Skins*) studied filmmaking at NYU and earned his master’s degree in film before making the critically acclaimed film *Smoke Signals*. Eyre is Cheyenne/Arapaho by birth; he was adopted and only later found his birth family. *A Thousand Roads* was commissioned by the National Museum of the American Indian after the museum’s opening in September 2004. A complete review of the film and an interview with Eyre and producer/writer Scott Garen will be in the next issue of *MCR*.

AMERICAN SPECTRUM:

5th World

Director: Blackhorse Lowe
United States, 2004, 75 min., color

Two young Navajos, a man and a woman in their twenties, take an epic journey from the city where they are living by hitchhiking back home. As they set out for the journey, they discuss that they don’t speak Navajo and point out that many young Navajo don’t. Voiceovers are used to evoke the past. The couple is affectionate and each seems to have an unspoken understanding of who the other is. As the journey lengthens, the landscape becomes more and more beautiful. Eventually, the boy’s aunt and uncle who raised him pick them up close to home. The aunt and uncle show them their wedding pictures and reminisce about the past. We see life on the land, with the tending and slaughtering of sheep, a daily routine where life has a harmony of purpose. The young people find a stability in their relatives’ lives that stands in stark contrast to their own lack of a sense of place and connection to their past. By accident, the two find out that they are related by clan, which means they may not marry since the connection goes back thousands of years and would make them brother and sister by clan. As they realize the impact of this news, which they respect in keeping with their traditions, their relationship unravels. As they return to the city, borrowing the uncle’s truck, they find themselves unable to communicate and ultimately part in a heartbreaking scene of abandonment. The couple’s lack of knowledge of who they are as Navajo ultimately determines their lives in this modern-day tragedy. The director commented in the discussion that some of the wonderful stories told by the aunt and uncle in the film were his own mother and father’s stories.

WORLD DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION:

Dhakiyarr vs. The King

Director: Tom Murray and Allan Collins, Willi Willi Nation
Australia, 2004, 56 min., color and B&W

In 1933, Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda of the Yolngu people of northeastern Australia reacted according to his custom to the assault of his wife by a white policeman. He defended his wife by killing the man. Yolngu justice came into bitter conflict with white justice. Dhakiyarr was arrested and treated in the very worst way; the white trial ended in months of humiliation for him. The Yolngu cultural ways were completely disregarded during the trial; eventually, however, the sentence was overturned. Dhakiyarr gained his release but never made it home, and it was suspected that he was murdered.

This elegy for Dhakiyarr, whose people recently tried to find out what happened to him, becomes a quest for both Yolngu and whites to discover the truth from over 70 years ago. What moves us most in the film is the meeting of the descendants of Dhakiyarr and the whites after so many years and their attempts to heal the wounds of both peoples. Both sides try to come to an understanding of the events that divided their cultures. The ability of both sides to learn from the terrible events of the past and to join together as equals stirs feelings of hope and the possibility of reconciliation.

SHORTS COMPETITION:

Tama Tu

Director: Taika Waititi, Te Whanau a Apanui
New Zealand, 2004, 18 min, color, 35mm

Set in Italy during World War II, the film features a battalion of Maori soldiers who are held up in a bombed-out building waiting for the gunfire to cease. Over 5,000 Maori warriors fought with the Allied Forces against Hitler in WWII. While waiting long hours between gun battles, the Maori communicate with facial expressions that silently convey their feelings and emotions. One soldier gently kisses a photo of his family, one smokes, one feels a coin, and one man whittles some wood. Often the soldiers' expressions are quite humorous, as battle-fatigued friends play jokes on one another to relieve the tension of their situation. They all become unsettled when a raven flies in the window. Although they are weary and frightened, we get the sense of them as warriors who never lose sight of the humor of small moments or the opportunity to tease one another. It's so realistic, you think you're sitting there with them watching and waiting for the battle to end. You can't help but think about the commitment they have made to risk their lives and the truth that not all of them will make it out. "Tama Tu" is a small masterpiece by its Academy Award-nominated [for *Two Cars, One Night* in 2003] Maori director.

Natchiliagniaqtuguk Aapagalu: Seal Hunting with

Dad

Director: Andrew Okpeaha MacLean, Inupiaq
United States, 2004, 11 min., color

An Inuit boy learns the ancient tradition of seal hunting from his father in the snow-and-ice-filled landscape that informs the life of the tribe. The beauty of the landscape is also seen as the means to find the life-giving seals.

SPECIAL PRESENTATION:

Trudell

Director: Heather Rae, Western Cherokee
United States, 2005, 75 min, color



Native American activist, poet, recording and performance artist John Trudell is the subject of this Sundance Institute-sponsored documentary by the former program director of the Native Forum. Rae's successor, Bird Runningwater, introduced the film. He explained that Sundance looks at 3,000 films a year to select 120 for the festival. He said that this year he was particularly pleased with the films submitted by Native peoples. He also thanked the Ute people of Utah for their support.

Robert Redford, who was interviewed in the film, also attended many of the screenings of Rae's film. Rae spent over ten years assembling interviews, researching in archives, and exploring Trudell's poetry and music to establish a working relationship with him throughout those years.

Trudell was born and raised near the Santee Sioux reservation in the Omaha, Nebraska, area. He served in the U.S. Navy from 1963 to 1967. He joined other Native Americans from 1969 to 1971 in the occupation of Alcatraz Island. His activism deepened, and in 1973 he became the national chairman of AIM (American Indian Movement). It was after the mysterious fire in his home in 1979 that killed his wife, mother-in-law, and three children that Trudell turned to music in part to heal and to keep the tragedy from destroying his life. It was at this time that he became friends with Jackson Browne. When his activism transformed into art-poetry, performance art, music, and memorable albums, which he's still turning out today, Trudell continued to find himself associated with some of the most important events in contemporary Native American history. Trudell felt that at this time in his life, he reconnected to the earth. Trudell's love for his people and the land stand out in this portrait of a complex and committed participant in the future of his people. 📖