

# Sundance Shadows

*Incest, S&M, corporate misogyny, a homeless man in love: The festival's most arresting films put a spotlight on darkness.* **BY OWEN GLEIBERMAN AND LISA SCHWARZBAUM**

**A**FTER ATTENDING *Sundance* (see story on page 40), *EW's* movie critics sat down to discuss its highs and lows.

**Owen Gleiberman:** Is it my imagination, Lisa, or was this the *darkest* collection of films ever assembled? It seemed as if every movie at Sundance this year was drenched in gloom—families falling apart, romance on the rocks, downtrodden teenagers venting their angst by ripping off convenience stores.

**Lisa Schwarzbaum:** True, many of this year's Sundance specimens show a preoccupation with moping and sniveling—

not to mention masturbation, drug use, misogyny, and the agony of young men with goatees in love with lesbians. After last year's festival hits, like *Shine* and *Big Night*, made Sundance look "mainstream" and "nice," this 1997 crop is a reminder that Age of Anxiety indie filmmakers are looking for distributors, too.

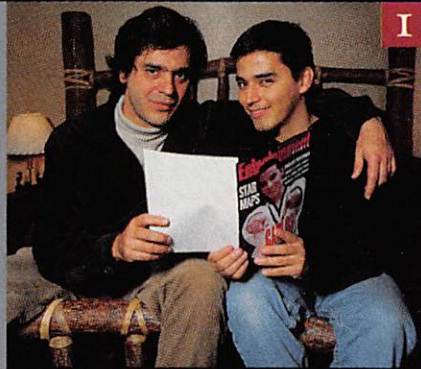
**OG:** To me, a lot of these filmmakers revel in "edgy" themes in an attention-getting way that doesn't cut very deep. Here's an irony for you: Back in 1980, a few years before taking over the U.S. Film Festival and expanding it into Sundance, Robert Redford made *Ordinary People*, the original dysfunctional drama of the therapeutic era. The film was so mainstream it

won the Oscar, yet it was also tougher, more raw and emotional than either of the big family-cataclysm movies at Sundance this year, *The Myth of Fingerprints* and *The House of Yes*.

**LS:** Cataclysm? On what planet? *Myth* is about four grown children who come home to work out their romantic problems and their parental issues during one Thanksgiving weekend. I'd describe it as the back story to a Ralph Lauren ad:

**FROM GOLD TO WACO:** (Clockwise from top left) Tori Spelling, Josh Hamilton, and Posey in *The House of Yes*, Erik Stolhanske in *Puddle Cruiser*, the Branch Davidian compound in *The Rules of Engagement*, and Fonda in *Ulee's*

IT'S AMAZING what can happen in 12 hours at Sundance. At 5:30 p.m. on Jan. 20, Miguel Arteta was just another screenwriter-director without a studio contract. His movie *Star Maps*, a dark comedy about a Mexican-American teenager selling sex on the streets of Beverly Hills (under the guise of selling maps to celebrity homes), had won ovations at its first screening. But three days later, there were still no takers. Word of good movies travels quickly, though, on Park City's two main streets, and the screening room this particular night was filling up fast. "I've worked four years on this movie," Arteta said as he welcomed the audience. "My parents will never believe this." And with that, he pulled out a disposable Kodak and snapped a crowd shot. Two thirds of the way into the screening, the crowd was enthralled, and Bob Aaronson, vice president of film acquisitions for Fox Searchlight, found Arteta's lawyer, Jed Alpert. Before long, the two were huddled inside the theater's men's room with the film's producer, Matthew Greenfield, chatting about distribution rights and first-look options for Arteta's future projects. "This was a quintessential Sundance moment," Alpert said. "Fox's interest was based on this kind of only-in-Sundance audience reaction." When the lights came up, Arteta worked his way through a gauntlet of new fans, accepting hugs, business cards, and invitations to other film festivals, before slipping into a waiting minivan. By 11:00, he was seated at an upstairs table in the Wasatch Brew Pub, surrounded by Alpert and Fox Searchlight execs. The negotiations were amicable but intense. "At one point I needed to go see another client briefly," Alpert recalled. "So Fox Searchlight, fearing that I was fishing for other offers, insisted I disarm myself of all my cell phones." When the pub closed at midnight, the entourage moved on to the Acme Diner. "I knew things looked promising because we'd now been to two restaurants and no one had eaten anything," Arteta said. "They were excited." He was right. By 1:30 a.m., ink was dry on a \$2.5 million contract. The rest was downhill, literally. By 5:30 a.m., Arteta and company could be found sledding down a slope at one of the ski resorts. "Getting this movie sold was a little like finding an apartment," Arteta said, "on the best street of the best city in the world." —David Hochman



**I STRIKING GOLD: 1.** *Star Maps* director Arteta (right, see sidebar) and actor Douglas Spain brandish a prop from their film. **2.** David Frank, Brendan Sexton III, and Isidra Vega of Dramatic Audience Award winner *Hurricane* take a stab at stardom.

making: The jam-packed screening venues experienced unnerving projection and sound problems. Director Miguel Arteta literally stopped one showing of his *Star Maps* by standing in front of the projection booth until a sound problem was fixed. Director Arthur Dong—who later laughed, "I'm the poster boy of disasters"—had to stop a screening of his documentary *Licensed to Kill* three times when a piece of dirt garbled its soundtrack.

Some accused Redford of floating obliviously above the fray. Joked Denis Leary, after unveiling his new thriller *The Bitter End*: "Does Bob Redford really run this thing? I'm convinced he's not even connected. There's a blond guy who walks 50 yards away and waves at you."

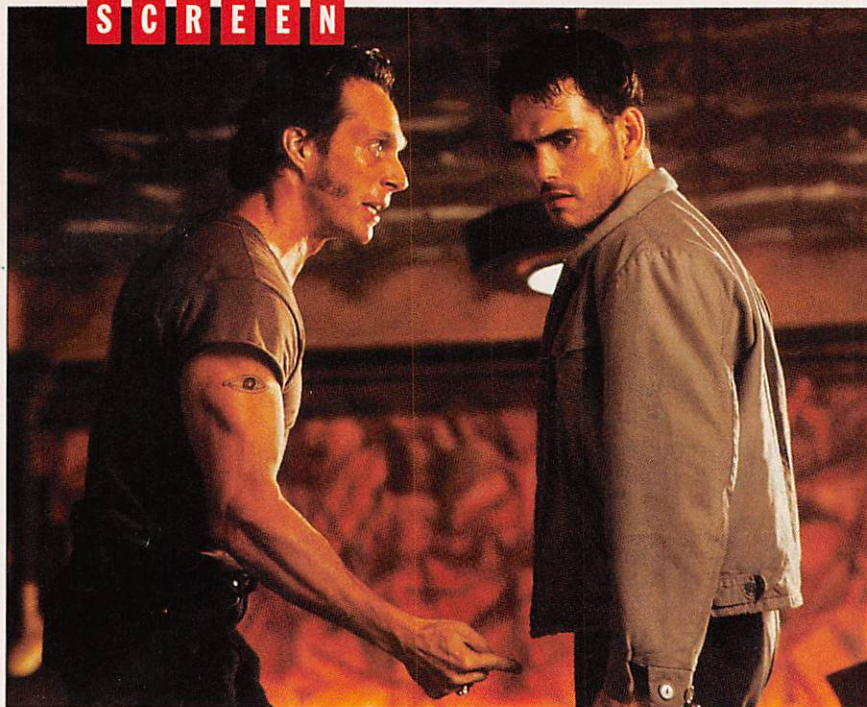
Redford bridled. "I welcome criticism," he said, "but when it reaches the point that it starts to feel personal, that bothers me. I'm very much in touch, but some of it is out of control." And he was aware that size does count: "I would not like to see the festival get any bigger in terms of population. We're getting a swelling of the numbers that are not filmmakers. They are friends of, wannabes, would-bes, left turns, kooka-bees, people out on parole—everything is coming our way."

**THE COMEBACK:** It's one of Sundance's paradoxes that no edition of the festival can truly be judged until years later, when the spotlighted talents either develop or dwindle. Which is why the premiere of Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy*, which Miramax will release March 28, was in many ways this year's emotional high point. After seeing his proudly low-rent *Clerks* become one of the peaks of the 1994 festival, Smith struck out with his crass sophomore effort, *Mallrats*. So the debut of his \$250,000 *Chasing Amy*—an unconventional boy-meets-girl-who-loves-girls love story—needed to seduce the skeptics. That it did, winning a standing ovation. Within the course of one evening, Smith was rehabilitated in the eyes of his fellow filmmakers.

"I feel tremendous. I feel vindicated," he smiled. Echoed his star, Joey Lauren Adams: "My stomach was in knots. But at the screening, you could just feel it. They were truly feeling the movie. It made it all worthwhile. Before, I was like, *I want to go home. I hate this weather. You can't park anywhere. And now I love Sundance!*" With that, Sundance '97 achieved a genuine shining—if not quite *Shine*-ing—moment. ♦ (With additional reporting by David Hochman, Dave Karger, Tricia Laine, and Chris Nashawaty)



SCREEN



▲ **ALBINO ALLIGATOR** William Fichtner (left) and Matt Dillon brawl in a barroom clinker.

grave digger's scabrous irreverence. Williams, surprisingly, is the least noticeable of the Americans, managing to restrain himself from using his standard foppy persona as the flamboyant courtier Osric, a part sometimes cut from all but full-length versions of *Hamlet*. (PG-13) ■ RALPH NOVAK

■ **ALBINO ALLIGATOR**

Matt Dillon, Faye Dunaway, Gary Sinise, William Fichtner, Skeet Ulrich

It's no coincidence that Humphrey Bogart looms large during this claustrophobic drama, staring down from a poster decorating the basement saloon

where nearly all of *Albino Alligator* takes place. The movie's plot owes more than a tip of its fedora to *The Petrified Forest*, the 1936 film in which Bogart first wowed audiences by playing a menacing gangster who took hostage the patrons and employees at a small-town café. Here, Dillon, wearing the same unflattering short-on-the-sides haircut as Bogart did in *Forest*, leads a trio of contemporary thieves who invade a bar called the Last Chance (get it?) after they bungle a heist and then spend the movie arguing about whether to whack their hostages. There's much yakking, some shooting, and eventually someone tells a story about alligators—hence the title—sacrificing one of their own for the collective good of the whole alligator community. Subtle this is not.

Although *Alligator* is handsomely shot and directed by Kevin Spacey, the actor who won an Oscar for 1995's *The Usual Suspects*, it never moves beyond being a *Lifeboat*-like cinematic parlor trick showing how much one can accomplish in a restricted space. The actors do what they can with their stock characters, with Dillon impressive as the excitable head hood, Sinise having a couple of moving scenes as his gentler pal, and Dunaway striking sparks as a lippy barmaid. (R) ■ LEAH ROZEN

Spotlight On . . . Park City, Utah

LETTER FROM SUNDANCE

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, THE 13-YEAR-old Sundance Film Festival isn't what it used to be—namely a place for struggling and starving artists to show their wares in hopes of picking up a few art house bookings and maybe a free lunch from a Hollywood producer. The films there are still "independent," at least in the sense that they have no connection to one of the seven major studios. But the names in the credits these days are increasingly A-list—and the deals the indie filmmakers strike with studios to distribute their works can run to eight figures. Last year, Castle Rock paid \$10 million for the rights to the drama *The Spitfire Grill*. As Sundance founder Robert Redford said during the festival, "It's gotten to be a monster—a good monster, but there it is."

This year the trend continues. Among the mainstream stars on the

► **The Sundance Film Festival is "busting at the seams," said founder Robert Redford.**



Sundance screen are *A Time to Kill* costars Sandra Bullock and Matthew McConaughey (in *Making Sandwiches*, a short film she directed), *ER*'s Noah Wyle (in the family drama *Myth of the Fingerprints*) and *Friends*' Lisa Kudrow (in the workplace comedy *Clockwatchers*). Sean Penn, Cathy Moriarty, former *Who's the Boss?* kid Alyssa Milano and Robert Downey Jr. all appear in Robert Downey Sr.'s absurdist comedy *Hugo Pool*.

Still, if some of the films feature established stars, rest assured that the 1997 festival has plenty of off-beat material as well. One of the first films picked up (by Miramax for \$2 million), *The House of Yes*, starring Tori Spelling and produced by her father's company, is the kind of movie that you certainly don't see every day and maybe don't want to—a comedy about incest.

■ KAREN BRAILSFORD and TOM CUNNEFF

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**One clever idea after another.**



**That's Plymouth.**

pretty people (*ER*'s junior hunk Noah Wyle and Julianne Moore, among others) in pretty settings Woody Allen might admire, having tasteful crises.

**OG:** It's a watchable movie, but the conflicts seem predigested. Personally, I preferred the gothic absurdism of *The House of Yes*, a movie that dares to make sibling incest look sexy. It stars Parker Posey as a demented young woman who thinks she's Jackie Kennedy and has been in love with her brother ever since they slept together as teenagers. The film is incredibly synthetic, like Tennessee Williams gone Fox TV, but Posey's high-camp magnetism holds it together.

**LS:** Owen, *Yes* is way too arch and contrived. It's the ultimate in irony instead of emotions—the refuge of green filmmakers. Now, *In the Company of Men*, on the other hand—hoo, boy, that packs a punch. Here's a strong, provocative drama about a couple of young corporate buckoes who hate women and who set out to date, dump, and humiliate one chosen victim just because they can. I have an awful feeling that retro sexism is back in style—probably tied to all this interest in big, stinky cigars—but I can't deny that *Men* was one of the best and most original pieces I saw.

**OG:** It's a riveting film, with a hushed intensity that reminded me of *sex, lies, and videotape*. The director, Neil LaBute, makes corporate encounters feel like thriller confrontations, and the film is so uncompromising in its view of how manipulative men can be that it's almost scary to watch. Not as scary, though, as *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, an amazing documentary about the infamous performance artist who specialized in self-mutilation.

**LS:** Life is too short to spend time seeing something as grotesque as *Sick*. I refuse.

**OG:** So did most of the people at Sundance. *Sick* may be the most disturbing film I've ever seen—it makes *Crumb* look like Capra—yet it's also extraordinarily rich and haunting. It's about how Flanagan, who had cystic fibrosis, martyred his flesh in order to master his pain.

**LS:** The most affecting, and *adult*, film at Sundance this season was probably missed by three quarters of the festival mob, too. *Ulee's Gold*, from Victor Nuñez—he made *Ruby in Paradise*—is

a poor title for a beautiful piece about a beekeeper in Florida who holds his family together. Peter Fonda gives a great performance in the lead role. And—get this—the story is optimistic! The characters are developed! The pace is poetic! No one says f---!

**OG:** The most sheerly entertaining movie I saw was *Puddle Cruiser*, a wonderfully funny and observant comedy about campus dating rituals in the age of gender politics. It reminded me a lot of *Swingers*, a movie that, I think, is going to turn out to be the prototype for the new indie romantic comedy.

**LS:** *Swingers*, don't forget, was rejected by Sundance last year, and entertainment wasn't high on the agenda this year—but there was a certain charm to *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, a sweet, oddball documentary from Errol Morris that featured a chatty specialist in naked mole rats and a voluble robot builder.

**OG:** The truth is that even a lot of the most buzzed-about movies were, at best, merely okay. *Hurricane*, cowinner of the audience award, is a kinder, gentler *Kids*, with a plot that feels a bit too warmed-over. If anything, the documentaries at

Sundance generate more drama than the fiction features. One that grabbed me was *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, an investigatory epic about the FBI siege of the Branch Davidian compound. It presents powerful new evidence that the FBI, and not the Davidians, caused the fatal inferno at Waco. Ideologically, the film is too slanted. It mounts an apologia for David Koresh and, I think, soft-pedals his complicity in the tragedy. But it's still a vital and mesmerizing document.

**LS:** Funny what mesmerizes at a festival like Sundance. Who would have guessed that after all the hype about Parker Posey and Gen-X-in-crisis films, the Grand Jury Prize would go to *Sunday*, a lyrical, “unsexy” meditative drama about a middle-aged homeless man in a charmless New York City borough and the melancholy woman who picks him up. I loved this un-chic movie, but relatively few Sundancegoers saw or talked about it. Which is, in a way, the great thing about this interesting and unwieldy festival: When you least expect it, a quiet little “find” boldly goes where all the slacker chroniclers in the world do not. ♦

## SUNDANCE SYNCHRONICITY

# WHAT'S IN IN INDIES

NAKED MEN, PARKER POSEY, comedies so black you forget to laugh—those were the *predictable* presences pervading screens at Sundance '97. But from 127 features, a few unexpected motifs coalesced.

**NBC's Thursday-night lineup:** Lisa Kudrow starring in *The Clockwatchers*, Jason Alexander in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and Noah Wyle in *The Myth of Fingerprints*.

**Generation AARP:** Rising above the rookies were Genevieve Bujold in *The House of Yes*, Roy Scheider and Blythe Danner in *The Myth of Fingerprints*, and Peter Fonda in *Ulee's Gold*.

**Misleading titles:** In *Arresting Gena*, nobody does. *Hurricane* is nothing like *Twister*. And we're baffled about why naysayers fill *The House of Yes*.

**Mondo shots:** *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* has scenes shot through a Roto-Rooter. *Black & White & Red All Over* takes a spliff's-eye view during a party scene.

**Bic tricks:** *Chasing Amy*, *The Clockwatchers*, and *Box of Moonlight* feature match and lighter stunts you shouldn't try at home.

**Lawn ornaments:** One of the slackers in *subUrbia* steals a cement leprechaun as a goof. Ditto *Box of Moonlight*. And *Pink Flamingos* was a midnight movie. —Gregg Kilday, David Hochman, and Chris Nashawaty



**GRAY'S IN:** Scheider, Danner

# The American Patient

'War' is a farewell to Bullock and O'Donnell's charms

**R**ICHARD ATTENBOROUGH'S **IN LOVE AND WAR** (New Line, PG-13) wants to make you swoon, but I'm not sure the movie could muster the energy to swoon. It's a love story in which the sparks don't fly so much as trail limply to the ground. The picture is based on *Hemingway in Love and War*, the 1989 book drawn from the diaries of Agnes von Kurowsky, whose brief, probably platonic love affair with Hemingway during World War I became the basis for his most stirring novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. Given the thinking of today's studio executives, it's easy to see why the *Hemingway* was dropped from the title: Who wants to see a movie about, you know, some *writer*? Chris O'Donnell's performance as the brash, naive 18-year-old "Ernie" is certainly in line with that logic. Watching this pretty, cocksure kid, who glides through life as if it were a '90s fraternity mixer, it's hard to divine even a prophetic glint of Hemingway's doomy grandeur. Wounded on a battlefield in Italy, Ernie, a Red Cross



**GLOOM WITH A VIEW:** Bullock is all dressed up with no place to go as Hemingway's paramour

volunteer, is taken to the hospital and cared for by Agnes (Sandra Bullock), an American nurse who saves his leg from amputation (the Italian doctor who has a crush on her seems all too eager to cut it off). Hemingway announces that she's going to fall in love with him, and despite the fact that she's eight years his senior he makes the prediction come true.

You can see what Attenborough was going for: a portrait of the artist as a young preppie. Yet since the story has almost no dramatic thrust outside of the fact that we're watching Ernest Heming-

way, reducing him to a prototypical wise-guy stud sentences the audience to sitting through a vaporously generic wartime romance. Directed with diligent aimlessness, *In Love and War* proceeds something like this: Boy meets girl, girl nurses boy to health, boy flirts with girl, girl gets sent to the front, boy follows her there, boy and girl make love (once), boy and girl drift apart. The end.

Did I mention that girl barely changes her expression? Sandra Bullock is joyless and recessive here, as if her idea of playing "period" were to glaze the character over with dignity. Agnes' motivations remain almost completely obscure, but then, so do Hemingway's. After returning to the States, he receives a Dear John letter from Agnes, which he responds to by trashing his room—a bit of an overreaction, since what we've seen looks more like a summer-camp fling. Eight months later, he's in a cabin in the woods, growing a beard, drinking whiskey, acting gruff and morose, writing. What happened to the preppie? Why, he's turned into...*Ernest Hemingway*. (You half expect him to whip out a cigar and start inquiring about real estate prices in Key West.) The torment of lost love has forged not merely a writer but a prematurely bitter old man. Maybe that's what actually happened, but *In Love and War* is so wispy and inept that instead of feeling Hemingway's pain, I looked at him and thought, Get over it, kid. **D** —OG

## CRITICAL MASS

Here's how a sampling of critics and movie audiences from across the country grade 10 current releases.

	CINEMASCOPE Audience across the U.S.	ROGER EBERT Star Trek & Ebert	GENE SISKEL Star Trek & Ebert	JAM BERNARD Knight-Ridder Syndicate	CARRIE RICKEY Steven Regis Knight-Ridder Syndicate	MIKE CLARK USA Today	ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY	AVERAGE*
BEVERLY HILLS NINJA (TriStar)	B+	—	—	F	C-	D	D+	D
FIERCE CREATURES (Universal)	B-	C+	B+	B	B-	C	C	B-
GRIDLOCK'D (Gramercy)	—	B	B-	B+	A-	—	B	B
HAMLET (Castle Rock)	—	A	B+	C+	B	B	A-	B+
IN LOVE AND WAR (New Line)	B+	D	C	C-	B-	D	D	C-
METRO (Touchstone)	B+	B	B-	D	C+	D-	D-	C-
MOTHER (Paramount)	B+	B+	B-	A	B	B	B+	B+
PREFONTAINE (Hollywood)	—	B+	B+	C	B	B	C+	B
STAR WARS (20th Century Fox)	—	A	—	A-	A	B	A	A-
THIEVES (LES VOLEURS) (Sony Classics)	—	B+	B+	—	—	A-	B-	B+

\*Average does not include CinemaScore.