

Sundance Diary

Matthew Ehlers
Mehlers @ eggwork.com
(800) 248-6903

Day One - Thursday January 15, 2004 - The Crash

For the third year in a row I had a short film accepted to the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. This year I was going to the festival to support my short film, *Who's Your Daddy*. It's a three minute comedy short and is part of the Online Festival (www.sundance.org).

The second the plane landed in Salt Lake City I check my messages. I learn that the people I was going to stay with are not renting a condo but staying with friends. I have no lodging. Great way to start. I might have to stay in the Chateau Après for the entire 10 days. It sounds swanky but the Après is a complete shit hole. For 30 bucks a night you get one half of a bunk bed in a room with 20 other guys. Thus I want to get any thoughts of the glamorous life of a Sundance Filmmaker out of your head before we continue.

I spent the day getting my laminate (think back-stage pass) and schedule from the wonderful volunteers at the festival headquarters. I've gotten to know many of the people at the festival and was happy to see them all again.

I met up with a British producer named Michael Knowles who produced a short film in the festival called *Talking With Angels*. He also was stuck at the Chateau Après and we hit main street Park City in search of food and beer.

After several pints I decided to give my ticket away for the premiere and hit the bunk bed early.

Day Two - Friday January 16, 2004 - Enter The Dragon

I got no sleep at the Chateau Après. I was ready to kill my friends for ruining my lodging plans. I helped Mike take his bags to his hotel. He offered to let me stay with him and two filmmakers from New York. I packed my luggage and headed out of the Chateau Après. Hopefully for the last time.

That morning I saw a feature film called *Primer*. A low budget science fiction film about time travel. The dialogue was mesh of scientific jargon. If I only studied harder in AP Physics I would have enjoyed it more. It reminded me of Darren Aronofsky's *Pi*. I did enjoy the film. I hope they get distribution. I didn't know it at the time, but *Primer* wound up winning the Dramatic Grand Jury Prize.

I spent the day going to parties that Sundance sponsored. There you can find free appetizers and (more importantly) free drinks. That is the only thing keeping us poor filmmakers afloat.

I avoided the crazy parties on Main Street which are not affiliated with Sundance but attended by all the celebrities. I wasn't in the mood to confront some Euro-Trash doorman guarding some industry scumbags. Madness. I longed for a pint at Mex or Lux back home.

Mike and I wound up at the Appaloosa Saloon, an honest-to-God Country joint. The bartenders wore Stetson hats and cowboy boots. A cover band played Alabama songs and country favorites like Mountain Dew. A double-jointed local showed everyone how he could point his toes 180 degrees backwards. It felt like I walked onto a David Lynch set. Mike, who's from Manchester, was beaming. "They have both kinds of music: Country and Western," he joked in a horrible American accent.

Back at the hotel I met up with my new roommates. Susan Leber, who produced the feature film, *Down To The Bone* and Ilya Chaiken, who directed a short called *100 Lovers of Jesus Reynolds*. I never got to see their films but I heard good things. I thanked them for letting me share their room. I bought an inflatable mattress from a nearby sporting good store and I got a great nights sleep. Thank God.

Day Three - Saturday January 17 - The Meltdown

Every year Sundance hosts a brunch at the Sundance Ski Resort about 45 minutes away from Park City. The directors get on a bus and arrive to a waiting buffet and an open bar. It feels like you've died and gone to filmmaker heaven. The first year I was there (2002) I joked with another filmmaker saying, "You think Bobby will be here?" I

then looked up and there he was. Robert Redford had just entered the building. He gave a mesmerizing speech about his early experiences as a filmmaker. That cynical little art school voice inside me shut up for just a little bit. The next year I was determined to get a picture with him. Filmmakers always surround him after his speech. It's a real mob. I was cut off by Steve Buscemi and Tilda Swinton. When my turn came he was whisked away by his "people". I felt like those teenage girls in the 60's who tried in vain to get a glimpse of The Beatles.

But this year? Pay dirt. Mike and I had a plan. We alerted the Sundance staff that I'd been waiting for 3 years to meet Mr. Redford. When he made his way over I shook Bob's hand and Mike snapped a picture. Then I returned the favor for Mike. Ahhh, I reached the pinnacle of Sundance schmoozing and name dropping.

The rest of the day was spent at the ASCAP Music Lounge. I saw Shawn Colvin and Joe Jackson play acoustic sets. Then it was off to a diner sponsored by American Express for the Online Filmmakers. The food was incredible (and free). I talked with platinum card members who bought a "film fan" package complete with screenings and diner with honest-to-God filmmakers. I felt special.

After diner we headed to the screening. But there in the lobby of the restaurant was someone I did not expect to see. It was Ben. *The Ben*. Of Bennifer, no less. He was waiting for a table. Can you believe it? Ben Affleck waiting for a table? Why would he ever have to wait for anything?! What the hell is wrong with this cruel world?!

Then things got downright silly. I met up with my buddy from Rochester, Tommy Brunnett. He was trying to get into the premiere party for *The Butterfly Effect*. No luck. While waiting with him in the cold I saw the head of a PR firm that I knew. He got me into the Sky Vodka Lounge next door. Across the bar from me was Lance from *In Sync*. I thought he was in space? One thing you discover about getting into these exclusive parties is that they are really boring. I hung out with a bartender named Jessica. She was disappointed that it was the *In Sync* party not the Marilyn Manson party. She hates the former but worships the later. I think both bands are fake and quelled my desire to call her an idiot. I had a sobering walk back to the hotel. I felt dirty.

Day Four - Sunday January 18 - Rest, Sort Of

Whoever invented the portable / inflatable mattress is a God Damn genius. I got eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. Heaven.

Most of the day was spent recovering from the night before. There was a press reception for the filmmakers that I went to. Again, you go to where the free food is. It was crowded with filmmakers and some press. Everyone was color coordinated. The filmmakers wore orange laminates and the press folks wore green laminates. So all the orange laminates run about trying to find green laminates. Filmmakers need press to survive. Who's going to see your film if they've never heard of it? Short films get very little press so I concentrated on the open bar. I did meet a cool guy named Romen. He runs Movieola, a Canadian network which features shorts. My old short, Lunch (www.eggwork.com/lunch), screened on his network. He videotaped me for his show. I don't think I sounded like a wine soaked idiot. If someone sees me in Toronto after a trip on the fast ferry please tell me how I came across.

That afternoon I attended a party for my Alumni, the University of Southern California School of Cinema Television. I think I was one of the oldest alumnus there. The recent film school grads were so full of enthusiasm that I didn't have the heart to tell them they were headed for years of hard work and rejection. Every single one of them were convinced their brilliant short will land them a three picture deal and dinner with Ben. I caught up with my friend Amotz Zakai. He went to RIT then USC and is now a respected up-and-coming producer in Los Angeles. We had some Brie and got out of there. Oh, for the love of cheese.

Day Five - Monday January 19 - New Yawk in the House

I visited Jerry Steoffhaas of the New York State Film Office. Jerry used to live in Rochester where he formed the Rochester Film Office. At Park City, he and his staff took over a storefront and were promoting shooting in New York. They offered visitors free food and coffee (again, free food). They overnighted real NYC bagels from Brooklyn. I told Jerry I was directing a short film in NYC this February. "Hey, I'm doing my part. I'm shooting in NY. Gimme a bagel!"

Day Six - Tuesday January 20 - Critical Beatdown

I went to a screening of Mike's short film, *Talking With Angels*. Thankfully, it was really good. It's difficult to be friends with someone who makes art you don't like. Just that morning Mike learned his short was nominated for a BAFTA, the British Academy Awards. "It's the Oscars but with fish and chips," Mike said. We shared the good news (and many pints) with our friends at the Appaloosa Saloon.

Variety hosted a party for the "10 Filmmakers You Should Watch". Mike had one ticket but managed to sneak me in as well. I saw several people I knew and hunkered in for some serious schmoozing. "Well, I'm filming this and I'm writing that. Yea, I'm super. Here's my card. Anyway, back to me." I know it's disgusting. In a perfect world your work should speak for itself.

I did see an actor I wanted to work with and made the mistake of approaching him while he was drunk. I don't want to use his name out of respect for his buzz. I introduced myself and mentioned I was doing a feature. He said, "Give me the pitch!" Gulp. I took a breath and gave him my pitch, the dreaded 25 words or less. I thought I did quite well. He staggered back a bit and said. "I hate it." Then he smiled and said, "No. It's great. I'm in. We're doing it." Ouch. Fine, he got me for breaking protocol. Usually big name types smile politely and circle file your card when they get home. I went from schmooze heaven to schmooze hell.

Day Seven - Wednesday January 21

I had a ton of meetings lined up for today. The trick is to schedule them before you even get on the plane. Meetings were the main focus for me this year, not screenings. I was sure I'd see most of the films at The Little Theatre later this year. I went to Park City to take meetings that I'd otherwise have to go to Los Angeles for. Meetings for most professions usually accomplish things. Not in the film world. Mostly I meet with industry types with no power to "green light" a project. I go to some restaurant and give them my pitch. They seem to love it but then I never hear from them again. Oh well, at least they pick up the bill.

Day Eight - Thursday January 22 - Oh God Why?

Mike left at 5 A.M. Bye, bye. Have a good trip. Zzzzz.

Ilya left the day before. For some reason I thought Susan was going to leave Friday. I was wrong. I had an hour to check out or I'd have to pay the full price, some \$200 for that night. I rushed to do some laundry and (gulp) head back to the Chateau Après. I did buy ear plugs but I was already freaking out about not sleeping until my flight home Sunday.

I passed the time by going to see a movie called *Stander*. It's about a South African bank robber who used to be a captain in the police force. The story was great, the action was intense and the cast was fantastic. Go see it when it comes out. I met the director at the brunch the previous Saturday. Her name is Bronwen Hughes and she's one of the nicest people I met all week. I gave her a copy of my films on DVD. She promised to watch them and let me know what she thought.

The Appaloosa Saloon was empty and sad and I was too tired to go to another party or take another meeting. I went to my bunk bed early. I didn't get a wink of sleep.

Day Nine - Friday January 23 - Please, Kill Me

At this point I felt like a zombie. I had a few more meetings and then fell asleep on a couch at Sundance Headquarters. The festival winds down on the second weekend. I noticed that they were even taking down the Sundance Digital Center. So decided I had had enough. I called my airline. Luckily, I had a full ticket and was able to bump up my flight. The next ticket available out of Utah was Saturday. One more night on the bunk bed surrounded by snoring filmmakers was tolerable knowing I was leaving the next day.

Before I left I did see an outrageous documentary called DIG! The film followed two underground bands for 7 years. The bands happened to be two of my favorites: The Dandy Warhols and the Brian Jonestown Massacre. The former found a good deal of success over the years while the later seems to always self destruct. I highly recommend you see this movie. I didn't know it at the time but DIG! wound up winning best documentary feature. I sure can pick 'em.

Day Ten - Saturday January 24 - Escape From Schmooze Mountain

I went to the headquarters to say goodbye to some of the staff. I thanked them for helping me out once again. I was hoping they would say, "Oh no, don't go yet. Stay for the awards ceremony! You'll be glad you did. Wink, wink." Thus, intoning I was going to win a jury award for my short. But they didn't. No worries. Just getting in is reward enough. I sure wish to go back next year with a feature.

Stay tuned to www.eggwork.com to see if that wish comes true.