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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Nonfiction Has Its Day at Sundance

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PARK CITY, Utah, Jan. 30 - It is something of a tradition among observers of the Sundance Film Festival to take note of - and, as often as not, to bemoan - the apparent contradiction between the daring, idiosyncratic filmmaking that is the festival's reason for being and the buzz-mongering and hucksterism that sometimes seem to dominate it...

The divide between art and commerce - or between real and ersatz independence - is beside the point anyway. A more interesting division, one with implications beyond the self-referential confines of Sundance, could be seen in this year's competitive selections.

It was a weak year for the American dramatic competition and a strong one for documentaries, but the contrast between these groups of movies was not just a matter of quality. In any case, the dramatic jury had no trouble handing out prizes - it seems none of the juries did; there were more than 30 awards given. The dramatic jury spread 8 awards among the 16 films that were eligible, including two special prizes for acting, given to Amy Adams, who played a naive pregnant woman in Phil Morrison's strenuously quirky "Junebug," and Lou Pucci, who played a troubled teenager in Mike Mills's "Thumbsucker."

Noah Baumbach won both the Waldo Salt award

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for screenwriting and the director's prize for "The Squid and the Whale," a sharply observed autobiographical story largely about another troubled teenager (played by Jesse Eisenberg). The grand jury prize, the top award, went to Ira Sachs's "Forty Shades of Blue," a domestic drama set in Memphis about a lonely Russian woman, her older husband and his son - one that did not involve a troubled teenager. (Nor did the festival's other Memphis-based movie, Craig Brewer's hip-hop melodrama, "Hustle and Flow," which won the audience award.)

It was perhaps not remarkable that so many of the nonfiction films addressed social problems and political issues, including the Enron scandal, sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, abstinence-only education in public schools, the recent history of American foreign policy and the strange career of the Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori. The documentary jury acknowledged this tendency by giving a special prize to Jessica Sanders's "After Innocence," which follows the lives of people released from prison after their convictions were overturned based on DNA evidence, and by awarding the grand prize to "Why We Fight," Eugene Jarecki's dense and absorbing critique of American militarism. But even documentaries that did not directly tackle contentious public matters - like Henry-Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro's rousing, audience-award-winning "Murderball," about quadriplegic rugby players, or Mark Becker's quiet and poignant "Romántico," about a Mexican guitarist's journey home from San Francisco - seemed motivated by a desire to take hold of some of the hard and strange realities of modern life. (One possible exception was "The Aristocrats," an uproarious dissection of a notorious dirty joke told by a retinue of famous comedians.)

What was striking was how few of the fictional films seemed to share this impulse, or, if they did, to give it persuasive form. Even the best of them - like "Me and You and Everyone We Know," Miranda July's marvelously idiosyncratic debut, which won yet another special jury prize - took place in self-enclosed worlds, delimited either by the preoccupations of the director or by the narrow perspectives of the characters. If the American documentary competition ranged far and wide in history, geography and politics, its dramatic sibling seemed constricted by comparison, surveying a landscape of small towns, suburbs, unhappy families and, above all, troubled teenagers.

A festival devoted to nurturing young filmmakers can be expected to have its share of coming-of-age stories and explorations of adolescent angst, but an alien whose space ship happened to land in Park City last week might have concluded, from the evidence on screen, that the United States is populated mainly by high school students whose consuming interests are drugs, sex and killing themselves and each other.

Which is not to say that drugs, teenage sex and violence aren't genuine social issues, but that the way they are treated in movies tends, more and more, to be a matter of convention rather than insight. The bright, hypocritical suburban world of "The Chumscrubber," a dreadful movie shown in the noncompetitive, high-profile premieres section of Sundance, seems cobbled out of other movies, notably "Donnie Darko" and "American Beauty," that were themselves not all that original. A rancid comedy called "Pretty Persuasion" was even worse, inviting viewers to feel morally superior to a predatory 15-year-old girl while leeringly recording her every sexual adventure.

Rian Johnson's "Brick" is a much better movie than either "Pretty Persuasion" or "The Chumscrubber," wittily transplanting the hard-boiled language and intricate plotting of classic film noir into a modern suburban high school setting, but it is also an exercise in genre, operating at a knowing, ironic and ultimately safe distance from reality. The jury awarded "Brick" - you guessed it - one of those special prizes that were suddenly as common as "my child is an honor student" bumper stickers on suburban minivans.

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Richard Foreman/Newmarket Films
"The Chumscrubber" with Glenn Close.



George Frey/EPA
Ira Sachs receiving the grand jury prize for "Forty Shades of Blue."

But the division between inward- and outward-looking filmmaking - between engagement and solipsism - is not just a matter of the differences between fiction and documentary. This much was clear in the world cinema competition, which for the first time included a dramatic as well as a documentary slate. Even more than its American counterpart, the world documentary jury focused on politics, awarding special prizes to Simone Bitton's "[Wall](#)," which deals with life on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, and "[The Liberace of Baghdad](#)," Sean McAllister's portrait of an Iraqi musician. The grand prize went to "The Shape of the Moon," Leonard Retel Helmrich's exploration of religion, family and daily life in Indonesia. (The audience award went to Peter Raymont's "Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire," about the Canadian general who commanded United Nations forces during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.)

And while the world dramatic competition had its share of genre exercises, under-age sex and coming-of-age stories, it featured two films that showed greater maturity - greater worldliness, if you like - than anything on the American side. The jury gave a special prize (yes, one of those) to Jorge Gaggero's "Live-In Maid," a quiet, self-assured film about the complicated, largely unspoken bond between a maid and her employer, both older women struggling to maintain their dignity during the collapse of Argentina's economy. This is a first film, and it proves that young filmmakers can make movies about something other than themselves. It is also exemplary in showing, with both clarity and subtlety, the impact of historical events on individual lives.

The same might be said of the grand jury prize winner, "The Hero," from Angola, a country that, in the words of the film's director, Zeze Gambao, "does not even have a film industry." "The Hero" takes place at the end of that country's long civil war, and it is one of those movies that are sad without being depressing, in part because of the generosity and warmth the filmmaker brings to the story, and to the actors. It owes an obvious debt to "[The Bicycle Thief](#)" - one of its main characters, a war veteran, spends much of the film searching the rough streets of Luanda for his prosthetic leg - and is infused with the durable spirit of Italian neorealism. Its presence here did Sundance proud, and was a reminder that amid all the hype and the hustle and flow, there is still plenty of room for humanism.

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