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San Francisco Chronicle

**For five films, focus shifts to Sundance festival**

Carla Meyer, Chronicle Movie Writer

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Art, mental illness and personal and international politics inform local filmmakers' works selected this week by the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, running Jan. 20 to 30 in Park City, Utah. Of the five local features, three made the documentary competition, reflecting the Bay Area's status as a hub for such films.



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San Francisco filmmaker Ellen Perry interviewed former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, now a fugitive living in Japan, for "The Fall of Fujimori." The film explores Fujimori's success in stemming terrorism as well as his political collapse amid charges of corruption and murder.

"In the film he defends his tactics, and do I like him? Yes," Perry said. "He's so complex. He basically inherited a country that was in chaos ... and he did the best he thought he could do." The film could serve as a "crystal ball" for the United States regarding the effects of an overzealous approach to terrorism, she said.

Perry called news of the film's inclusion in Sundance "a huge beacon of light" after the insular, years-long process of making the film. "With documentary projects, it's just you and your editor and a couple other people, and you're editing in these tiny rooms, and it's like you're working in a tunnel."

San Francisco producer Henry Rosenthal hopes his documentary "The Devil and Daniel Johnston," will shed light on the talents

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of Johnston, the Texas songwriter and performer beloved by fellow musicians who is hampered by manic depression.

"Kurt Cobain called him the greatest living songwriter," Rosenthal said of Johnston. The production, centered in Texas and headed by director Jeff Feuerzeig, had to weather the musician's shifting mental states. "It wasn't hard to get to him (for interviews), but it could be hard to get through to him," Rosenthal said.

Struggles and musicianship are also subjects of "**Romantico**," Mark Becker's look at an aging troubadour's efforts to make ends meet in San Francisco and in his small Mexican hometown. Becker discovered "**Romantico**" subject Carmelo Muñiz serenading hipster crowds at Mission District restaurants.

"The migrant life is not so great for a 60-year-old," Becker said by telephone from New York, where he moved in the midst of making his film. "Sometimes he was sleeping on a cardboard box in a hallway." But Muñiz's story also has lighter elements. "He and his partner were a duo, but they called themselves a trio for marketing purposes," Becker said with a chuckle.

Music documentaries always are embraced by Sundance, but dance -- especially the least scruffy kind, ballet -- is chronicled less frequently at a festival that still fancies itself iconoclastic. So San Francisco's Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine, a husband-and-wife team, were thrilled to hear their documentary "Ballets Russes" made the cut.


"It's the first ballet film in Sundance in 14 years," Geller said of "Russes," slotted in the noncompetitive "special screenings" section. Upon hearing the news of the doc's acceptance, Geller and Goldfine informed a network of former dancers from the various companies of the Ballet Russe, the visionary troupe that disbanded in 1962.

"The youngsters, the babies, are only in their 70s and they're hooked up to e-mail, so word travels fast," Geller said with a laugh. He and Goldfine traveled to London and Oklahoma, among other destinations, to interview troupe veterans such as ballet master Frederic Franklin. Recently named Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Franklin might bring some royal flourish to Park City.

"He's 90, and it's a high altitude, but we're hoping he can come," Goldfine said.

Whereas local documentarians had to travel to track their subjects, film archivist and director Jenni Olson stayed put in making the experimental film, "The Joy of Life," part of the festival's noncompetitive "frontiers" section. Olson's film lends voiceover to static landscapes of San Francisco.

"They're not your standard landscapes, but empty alleys and broken-down buildings," Olson said. Olson devotes half the film to the diary musings of a butch lesbian and half to the history of Golden Gate Bridge suicides -- an intriguing mix for a film called "The Joy of Life."



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"A lot of people imagine it's ironic, but the title came before the (subject matter)," Olson said. "I used to walk to work every day and see a cigarette ad on Mason and Ellis with the slogan, 'the joy of life.' It always made me happy."

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