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## SUNDANCE

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**Park City, Utah** -- Certain things are a given in Sundance Festival films. Adolescents will experiment with sexuality in discomfiting ways. Unheralded poets and scientists

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will be recognized in documentaries. And too many faces in need of makeup will be shot in grainy digital close-up.

Yet within the Sundance formula there remains ample opportunity for experimentation, and the annual independent film festival in Utah still is the best place to find fresh storytelling and original voices. Here's a look at some of the more intriguing films from the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, many of which will make their way to Bay Area screens over the next year..

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**The Ballad of Jack and Rose:** Filmmaker Rebecca Miller, daughter of Arthur, crafts an intense relationship between an idealistic, dying father (Daniel Day-Lewis, Miller's husband) and the adolescent daughter (Camilla Belle) he keeps out of school and on their self-sustaining farm. Day-Lewis brings stubbornness and regret to a man who has often acted selfishly, and Belle offers enough hints of maladjustment that you worry about this girl's future. The film really comes alive when the father invites his girlfriend, a high-strung townie played by Catherine Keener, to live in the house along with her two sons. As an overweight, possibly gay young man hiding behind a nylon jacket he refuses to unzip, Ryan McDonald is a witty, wise and singular presence.

**Ballets Russes:** Nearly everyone who was anyone in ballet in the first half of the 20th century was associated with the Ballet Russe and its offshoots. Among contributors were Nijinsky, Balanchine, Alexandra Danilova, Alicia Markova and, of course, Frederic Franklin, who remains physically and conversationally sure-footed at 90. Invigorating and informative, this documentary by San Franciscans Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine elucidates the origins of modern ballet. Interviews with former dancers, still vigorous in their twilight years, serve to promote the benefits of regular exercise.

**Duane Hopwood:** The title character (David Schwimmer) is a decent guy: an Atlantic City, N.J., casino pit boss with two young daughters and an ex-wife (Janeane Garofalo) he still loves. He also drinks way too much. Filmmaker Matt Mulhern offers bright, incisive dialogue -- and such casting delights as Dick Cavett as Duane's elderly gay neighbor -- to cut the dreariness of Atlantic City in winter. The casting of Schwimmer could not have been more perfect. He seems so harmless that the events befalling Duane might be attributed to bad luck. Then it becomes clear that we are witnessing an alcoholic hit bottom.

**The Dying Gaul:** Filmmaker Craig Lucas ("The Secret Lives of Dentists") inserts black comedy into an even blacker character study, which means this story could happen in just one place: Hollywood. As a naive, cerebral screenwriter and an insinuating, philistine studio chief, Peter Sarsgaard and Campbell Scott engage in a prolonged, electrifying battle of wills that's equal parts artistic, moral and sexual. Patricia Clarkson is the ultimate

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Hollywood wife, able to ruin someone's life via e-mail as she lolls by her infinity pool.

The Fall of Fujimori: Old dictators don't go to jail -- they become motivational speakers. Former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori stanching terrorism and kick-started the economy of his embattled country during his 10 years in office. That was before he fled to Japan -- and speaking engagements in hotel conference rooms -- amid charges of murder and corruption. Almost certainly duplicitous in some of the crimes committed by his government, Fujimori regards San Franciscan Ellen Perry's camera with a politician's practiced smile-and-denial routine. Perry doesn't try to build a case for or against Fujimori. Instead, she offers a fascinating study of the ramifications of a president's obsession with fighting terrorism.

Hustle & Flow: Finally, a showcase for the talents of Terrence Howard, a young actor whose tremendous charisma has been relegated to character roles. He plays a small-time Memphis pimp, drug dealer and would-be rapper in this energetic, sweaty crowd-pleaser directed by Craig Brewer and produced by John Singleton. The plot builds in a familiar fashion, but the beats do not. Howard is electrifying in musical moments that start with an old Casio and build to a goose-bump-inspiring crescendo. Paramount, which bought the film for \$9 million, recognized the film's commercial appeal, which extends to a pimp character who has to be the most benign flesh peddler ever committed to film.

Junebug: Nothing and everything happens in director Phil Morrison and screenwriter Angus MacLachlan's delightful, deliberately paced film about a Chicago art dealer's (Embeth Davidtz) visit to her new husband's (Alessandro Nivola) family in North Carolina. Their arrival upsets the balance in the household. As Mom barely contains her hostility and her younger son (Benjamin McKenzie from "The O.C.") simmers with resentment, Dad hides in the basement with his woodwork. In other words, it's a typical family. The standout in this exquisitely acted film is Amy Adams as the brother's pregnant young wife. Exuberant and loquacious, she showers the exotic-seeming art dealer with questions, compliments and affection. Endearing at every moment she might have been irritating, Adams received a special Sundance acting prize.

The Joy of Life: Jenni Olson's experimental film features familiar San Francisco landscapes shot in unfamiliar ways by cinematographer Sophia Constantinou. For a San Franciscan, the film evokes the experience of being in one's car and too absorbed by the events of the day to notice the beauty all around. Image and voice-over meet in the second half, when Olson showcases the majesty of the Golden Gate Bridge and recounts its history of attracting suicidal people.

Me and You and Everyone We Know: Christine, the Eldercab driver played by Miranda July, flirts with a shoe salesman (John Hawkes) and offers her card: "Call me if you ever feel too old to drive." In her accomplished feature directing debut, multimedia artist July has created characters who are smart,

funny, odd and recognizable: virgin teenage girls discussing their potential sexual prowess, a 6-year-old boy entering the danger zone of an Internet chat room (cutting and pasting sentences he can't spell) and the sensitive shoe salesman, who explains that people wear shoes that chafe because, on some level, they think they deserve pain. Try getting that level of insight at your local department store.

**Murderball:** Directors Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Shapiro go inside the rough-and-tumble world of international quad rugby, in which quadriplegics compete in chairs with wheels like gladiators' shields. The film's engaging back stories focus on two tough guys with animosity toward each other: granite-jawed Joe Soares, an American star who went on to coach Canada's team, and U.S. player Mark Zuban, a muscular, tattooed trash-talker. In a moment that will make sports-fanatic husbands wince, Soares, on a dinner date with his wife to celebrate their anniversary, answers her toast to their marriage with a toast to Team Canada.

**Romantico:** Director Mark Becker followed aging troubadour Carmelo Muniz on his rounds of restaurants in San Francisco's Mission District and back home to Mexico, where he ekes out a living playing brothels. Like many Mexican immigrants, Muniz must choose between earning money for his family while being apart from them and staying at home, stuck in poverty. Luminous cinematography, **romantico** music and lingering shots of Muniz's sad-sack expressions combine for an artful documentary.

**The Squid and the Whale:** If the U.S. moviegoing audience were made up entirely of New Yorker subscribers, this film by Noah Baumbach might rule the box office. Witty and flawlessly acted, it follows the misadventures of two boys coming to terms with their parents' divorce in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in 1986. The father (Jeff Daniels) is a self-involved professor and author ("That was Mailer's favorite of my books") who has infected his older son (Jesse Eisenberg) with snobbery, and bad-mouthed his adulterous ex (Laura Linney) to the boy. The intimacy of this autobiographical work cuts two ways. The emotions are authentic, but there's no escaping the feeling Baumbach has dragged his family through the mud.

**Strangers With Candy:** Nobody plays a boozier, user and loser better than Amy Sedaris, who stars as Jerri Blank, a lascivious, Lee-jeaned 47-year-old former jailbird who returns to high school in this film version of the cult Comedy Central series. There's enough outrageousness here to satisfy newcomers, but devoted fans of the series will be disappointed. The laughs don't come often enough, and the cinematography is a little too handsome for a movie based on a TV show that spoofed those old "Afterschool Specials." Dolling up the movie dulls the comedy.

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