

FEATURES

PAGE 12

SATURDAY, JANUARY 31, 2009



Right: People walk past the Egyptian Theatre on Main Street during the 2009 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. PHOTO: REUTERS

Top: A view of Main Street in Park City, Utah, during the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. PHOTO: EPA

Above: Sundance founder Robert Redford speaks during the opening night premiere of *Mary and Max* on the first day of the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. PHOTO: AP

Left: Spike Lee, director of *Passing Strange*, poses for a publicity photo during the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. PHOTO: AP

The magic fades at

Sundance



This year's Sundance Film Festival was a casualty of the credit crunch, as the deals and glamour dried up. Has the golden age of indie films turned to dust?

BY ANDREW SMITH
THE GUARDIAN, PARK CITY, UTAH

For all the sniping that comes Robert Redford's way every January as the Sundance Film Festival gets under way in the mountain resort of Park City, Utah, no one tells the story of the festival's corporatization of independent cinema better than its founder.

When the US Film Festival became Sundance in 1985, he says, Hollywood was in a rut, and indie filmmakers such as Spike Lee, the Coen brothers and Steven Soderbergh were on the verge of breaking through. Soon, name actors were gravitating to the indie sector in search of better material, leading Hollywood to fear it was missing out on something new and lucrative. In response, major studios set up their own "indie" subsidiaries and started to colonize the festival, bringing A-list actors with paparazzi in their wakes. Suddenly, Sundance was glamorous, full of marketers and goodie bags and wannabes of all stripes, sending hotel room prices spiraling and leaving real indie filmmakers to crash on each others' sofas.

"When that started to get more attention than what we were doing at the core, that's when I started to get worried," Redford says. "But, you know, there's really nothing we can do: we're just going to wait out this trend."

Redford may not have much longer to wait. The past year has seen cash-strapped studios fleeing the independent sector, leaving many to wonder whether indie film can survive the coming recession intact. This year's Sundance provided a window not just on to the culture of the recession, but on to the future of American cinema per se.

When I arrive in Park City, halfway through the festival, the news is grim: only one of the 200 features being shown, a cop drama called *Brooklyn's Finest*, has been sold to distributors. Over the next few days, two more follow: a 1970s-set blaxploitation flick called *Black Dynamite* and a brilliantly skewed love story, *Adam*. A few more are reported to be "still in play." All the same, the talk of the town is of low attendances and sluggish trade.

At one of the many bland receptions Sundance hosts, Carla Mertes, director of the festival's documentary section, lays the blame squarely at the door of the economy. "Foundations and endowments are shrinking," she says, "and

they're going to be granting less. Documentary filmmakers have traditionally been a very DIY, proud breed, and so I think we'll still see plenty of content being produced, but I think we'll see fewer big-budget, highly produced docs — the *Touching the Voids* and *Man on Wires*." She thinks there will be more collaboration, and projects that would previously have taken two to three years to complete will take four to five. "It doesn't mean they won't be done. But it will be about finding the stories. And there are more stories than ever, with the world as it is now."

The recession story is not cut and dried, however. Over lunch, the Oscar-winning British documentary producer John Battsek contradicts Mertes as he reflects on the difficulty of finding cinema audiences for documentaries. "Actually, I'm not sure it's about the recession. I think there's been a shift in the marketplace in the last couple of years, with audiences gravitating towards bigger movies and moving away from the middle ground. You know, *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, *Batman* ... all those films do vast sums of money, and I think that's as much of a problem as anything. Maybe it's something to do with needing fantasy and wanting to escape."

Battsek also suggests that it was too easy to make films for a while, with plenty of equity circulating the industry and DVD sales buoyant (they're now steeply in decline), resulting in a dilution of standards. Nevertheless, the squeezing of the middle ground — meaning projects with a budget of between US\$2 million and US\$30 million, Sundance's core constituency — will become a dominant theme of the week.

For all the doom and gloom, there's still pleasure to be had in Park City during festival time. A 45-minute drive from Salt Lake City, it's a prospectors' town-turned-ski resort with chairlifts running off the main street. You get the chance to earwig the movie people in mirror shades and headsets, as they bark obliviously into iPhones. (Favorite overheard phrase: "Just make sure Jake doesn't kick the llama, okay?")

Perhaps the busiest people at Sundance are the specialist "reps," or agents, who are charged with selling films to distributors. The specialist indie rep behind the eventual sale of *Adam* to Fox Searchlight is Andrew Herwitz of the Film Sales

Company. It's been a terrible year for big- and mid-budget indie films, he says. I suggest the collapsing middle ground will leave space for faster, fleeter guerrilla filmmakers such as Anders Ostergaard (whose *Burma VJ* edits together footage shot with mobile phones in Burma and is one of the talking points of the week). Herwitz explains an uncomfortable truth: that a cheaply made film costs the same to release and market theatrically as an expensive one, and that, with audiences falling, the economics of getting indies into cinemas are collapsing. He and other reps are forced to be ruthless about what they agree to take on.

"A difficult issue of being in this part of the business is that there are many fantastic films, which many people would love and respond to if they saw. The difficulty is, what will cause them to go and see that movie on Saturday night? And if you're a film without stars and without some really unique hook, it's nearly impossible to differentiate yourself so that people will go. There are many great films where the challenge of marketing them is overwhelming, and that's frustrating."

Despite this, Herwitz sees some hope. "The thing is, the audience for good stories has not gone away, and going to movies or renting a DVD is a relatively affordable luxury in a climate like this." Deals are being done, if more slowly and cautiously than in the past. One of Herwitz's clients is the British-South African author and journalist Rupert Isaacson, whose filmed journey to Mongolia with his American wife and severely autistic son is captured in *Over the Hills and Far Away*, as well as an accompanying book, *The Horse Boy*.

Over coffee, he tells me how he financed the film with his book deal, and how distribution offers have already come in, though nothing is likely to be signed until February. Elsewhere, Louie Psihoyos explains that his dangerous expedition to free a group of captive dolphins in *The Cove*, which won an audience award at the festival, was funded with a loan from the Netscape billionaire Jim Clark. However, philanthropic "angel" investors, who have been significant players over the past decade, are vanishing fast.

Another producer, Joanna Seguro, details

for my benefit one positive development: the extent to which production costs have fallen as filmmakers move away from celluloid on to digital formats. Added to this, she says, the same shift in consumer habits that MySpace and YouTube engineered in the music industry "is happening with moving image." The upshot, she says, is that picture quality is increasing, even as the cost of the technology goes downward.

It's a development that also excites Peter Baxter, the British producer who runs the low-budget festival Slamdance. Slamdance is for films that cost less than US\$1 million to make, and pieces such as *City Rats* (an accomplished black comedy-drama by London-based Steve Kelly) and the ecstatically received festival opener, *I Sell the Dead*, prove just what the technology can be pushed to achieve. With new routes for online distribution rapidly opening up (perhaps using games consoles such as Microsoft's Xbox), Baxter suggests that independent film, far from being on the verge of extinction, may stand on the brink of a renaissance.

There will undoubtedly be pain in the short term, though. Baxter admits that the problem — as with the first wave of dotcoms — is that no one has established exactly how to make money from the new distribution formats yet. But there are people at Slamdance who claim to be close.

"This year feels like a watershed year, where we're having to leave behind an old paradigm of how distribution has worked — or hasn't," Baxter says.

"Basically, what we're seeing is a leveling of the playing field. I'm optimistic."

UPDATE:

Freak Out Beast (少年獸), scheduled for this weekend at Red House Theater (西門紅樓) in Ximending, was canceled yesterday because of bad weather and will be cancelled again today in the event of rain. If it does not rain, the indie-music and design festival will proceed as planned but will end at 9pm, an hour earlier than originally scheduled. [For more information, see the preview on Page 14 of the Friday, Jan. 23, edition of the *Taipei Times*.]