

# Back into the light

B Ruby Rich applauds Sundance film festival's return to its low-budget roots

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Ice, ice baby ... Frozen River

Swag and swagger. The celebrity side of Sundance got all the attention this year, leading even insiders to worry that the festival has lost control of its own event. Certainly, a stroll down the main drag in Park City yielded rows of "swag lounges" where stars could be spotted feeding at the complimentary trough. But inside the theatres, a different picture emerged: 2008 turned out to be the year that Sundance returned to its roots. The best films in the US competitions restored the spirit of the festival's early days: regionally shot films on restricted budgets with new or non-actors, by film-makers more passionate about what they were shooting than where their career was heading.

The opening-night honours went to Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges*, starring Colin Farrell, which was pronounced "fun" by the premiere audience and then quickly forgotten. Another British entry had its world premiere: *Derek*, directed by Isaac Julien. The film used a treasure trove of interviews, archival footage and Tilda Swinton's pointed meditations to conjure its subject, the late, great Derek Jarman. Julien's shrewd strategy of permitting only Jarman himself to be the expert intensified his presence, so much so that it seemed as if Julien and Swinton had rubbed the proverbial lamp and released the genie, bringing Jarman's radical cinema back to life.

The documentary category was packed with new strategies and stories. The grand prize went to *Trouble the Water*, a personal investigation of Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans. The directors, Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, were able to apply a microscopic lens to the tragedy through footage shot on a camcorder by a resident, Kimberly River Roberts, which captured the full horror of the disaster. Rather than simply appropriating Roberts's footage, Lessin and Deal have collaborated with her and her husband over two and a half years, recording what happened to their band of survivors as the devastation deepened. Rarely have the personal consequences of government malpractice been so well told.

Their collaborative ethic was more than matched by *Nerakhoon* (*Betrayal*). For more than 20 years, the cinematographer Ellen Kuras recorded the ups and downs of a Laotian refugee family in New York. Kuras has even shared her director's credit with the son and scion of the clan, Thavisouk Phrasavath - who has become a film-maker himself.

The rock icon Patti Smith got her own documentary, a loopy black-and-white insider's view of her life over the past 11 years. Though less well structured than other films here, *Patti Smith: Dream of Life* offered ample compensation in the form of total access and a subject who accepted the camera as a friendly fan. Lovely.

Though small, these documentaries satisfied out of all proportion. As for the big docs by the big guys, Morgan Spurlock's audacious *Where in the World Is Osama Bin Laden?* was a stunt movie posing as an investigation, and *Made in America*, by Stacy Peralta, was a big bombastic look at the history of gang warfare in Los Angeles. No slouch, Peralta traced the Bloods and the Crips backwards and forwards in time through a fanfare of mash-ups, anime-inspired time travel and a hip-hop soundtrack. When the dust cleared, had we learned anything? I'm not sure style like this beats content, but it certainly made folks sit up and take notice.

Of the feature films, it was the small tales set in out-of-the-way places that carried the day. Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River*, a story about two women smuggling immigrants across the St Lawrence River in wintry upstate New York, won the grand prize. Another great story set in winter was *Ballast*, filmed in the Mississippi Delta, with non-professional actors playing dead-end characters who have worsened the hands dealt them by fate. This debut by Lance Hammer took the breath away: transcendent timing, keen performances and lyrical camerawork.

But the feature film that captured my attention, hands down, was *Sleep Dealer*, a science fiction view of a dystopian future by first-time director Alex Rivera. It was my favourite kind of sci-fi: just enough into the future for things we recognise to have

become grotesque, untenable, dangerous. On the US-Mexico border, new factories harvest human energy by connecting to nodes implanted in human workers. There are armed drones and cyber-memories, computer hackers and scary reality TV shows.

Rivera's film was the opposite of the big-money movies that made the headlines (\$10m for *Hamlet 2*, for instance), but it didn't sit with the quiet narrative dramas, either. With two awards - for screenwriting, and for contribution to science - it may have a future. I hope so. It is films like *Sleep Dealer* that give hope for Sundance's future. Rivera revives the promise of an American independent cinema that can intervene in our world, imagine the worst, hope for the best - and entertain like mad along the way.