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Sundance Film Festival captures human experience

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

Sundance Film Festival 2013

Park City, Utah — *Editor's note: Sr. Rose Pacatte was at the Sundance Film Festival Jan. 17-27. Read all of Sr. Rose's Sundance entries here.*

In this year's Sundance Film Festival, the first I've attended, women made half of the approximately 200 films screened. This is a milestone even for a festival that has celebrated independent filmmaking from its beginning in the early 1980s.

The cinematic lineup of the 2013 festival, held Jan. 17-27, included films from 39 countries and 51 first-time filmmakers. I saw only 21 films in competition or premiering at the festival (and three others), but this is about all I could handle in 11 days. There were expert panels on topics such as storytelling and micro-cinema -- that is, low-budget filmmaking. But these events, though free to ticket pass holders, were incredibly difficult to get into. Sundance is a place for movie lovers and that's all there is to it. Get in line.

A wide spectrum of the human experience is on display at Sundance. Two films' theme of violence against homosexual persons, in the U.S. and exported from the U.S., was deeply troubling. "Valentine Road" will be shown on HBO later this year, but "God Loves Uganda" has not yet been picked up.

I appreciated "Emanuel and the Truth about Fishes" very much for the unsentimental and human way director Francesca Gregorini explored grief, loss and healing among women, eliciting a tour-de-force performance from Jessica Biel as a mother who experienced a psychotic break after losing her baby -- and I never say someone has given a tour-de-force performance. "Fruitvale" won top awards at Sundance, based on the true story of the killing of an innocent man, Oscar Grant, by transit police in Oakland, Calif., in 2009 and how a modicum of justice was obtained because bystanders filmed the shooting with their cellphones and posted them on YouTube before Oscar made it to the hospital, where he later died.

The Q-and-A sessions after most of the films, with the filmmakers and often the casts, were a bonus to the filmgoing experience. The moderators were from the Sundance Institute and had a genuine respect for the filmmakers. This helped create a warm bond with the audiences, who were free to ask questions for up to a half hour post-film, if the schedule permitted. My favorite was with Sebastian Junger following his film "Which Way is the Front Line from Here?: The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington," which will air on HBO on April 14. Hetherington was an artist and photojournalist who co-directed "Restrepo" (2010) with Junger then died in April 2011 when covering the Arab Spring in Libya. During the Q-and-A it came out that Hetherington was a Catholic. His father, William, told me afterward that Tim went to Jesuit schools and this shows through Tim's life as recounted in the film.

I wanted to see many films that did not fit into my schedule. The films I did not see but will eventually see are:

- "Linsanity," the documentary about Jeremy Lin's life before the NBA. The director, Evan Jackson Leong, said at the Windrider Forum that it was not possible to tell Lin's story without his family and Christian faith.
- "Blood Brother," about a disillusioned young man from the U.S. who felt called to do something meaningful. He was transfixed by an image of Mother Teresa's hands and eyes and realized he could help others, too. He went to India without a plan and found a group of HIV-infected children to love and serve. The director, Steve Hoover, and crew also participated in the Windrider Forum. This won the U.S. Documentary Jury Prize at the festival.
- "Stories We Tell," a documentary by director/writer Sarah Polley, who investigates the "layers of myth and memory" and the secrets of a family of storytellers. The release date is May 17 and the buzz for this film was strong.
- "Austenland" is a feature film about a woman obsessed with Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy as played by Colin Firth. She takes a vacation at a Jane Austen theme park hoping to meet the man of her dreams. Some folks said this was "cute" but not to bother; others thought it very entertaining with something to say about fantasy and reality. The film didn't win any awards, but I want to see it for myself when it is released later this year, Colin Firth notwithstanding.

I had such a good time chatting with people from all over the country, all ages and backgrounds as we waited in lines in the big white tents outside the several makeshift venues. I met the daughter of Finola Kennedy, an Irish author who in 2011 published a definitive biography of Frank Duff, the founder of the Legion of Mary. She was genuinely surprised that I knew who Duff was. I met a flight attendant, about my age, who was with a friend, an older lady who lives in Park City. Every year they buy a ticket package so they can pretend to be film critics for a few days. I met young filmmakers and heard about some young people camping outside the box office in below-zero weather to buy tickets each morning when it opened at 6:30 a.m. I chatted with volunteers of all ages who make a pilgrimage to Park City to work at theater venues and to catch a few films as well. I mentioned in one of my blog postings an Asian-American filmmaker inviting me to one of the rented homes to wait for my next movie and sharing the dumplings her housemates were making for an early Chinese New Year celebration. Wonderful. The taxi drivers I met were from Ethiopia, Bosnia, Mexico and Salt Lake City. I was chatting with one taxi driver and told him I was a nun. He didn't make me pay and said, "Maybe you could visit our website at LDS.org." I wish I could have responded, "Sure, if you will check out ours at ..." Where?

The most surprising thing I saw was a camel in Park City. Eight thousand feet above sea level and 28 degrees Fahrenheit is not exactly camel territory, but the poor thing was being used to advertise a film, "Egypt Through the Glass Shop," that wasn't even being screened at the festival that I could find. I did manage to get an eight-second video of the spectacle, however.

I will have an advantage the next time I go to the Sundance Film Festival, God willing. It will be easier to plan films and venues because distances are real now. I know how to dress (layers), to get used to drinking a lot of water but not eating very much (the altitude does a job on one's appetite). Not all the citizens of Park City are happy about the festival, such as one café owner who told *The Salt Lake Tribune* that she won't serve Hollywood types -- only locals allowed for the 10-day run of the festival -- but most sure know how to put on a good, welcoming show for the 50,000 film lovers who flock there every January.

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