

Slamming Slamdance

A FRUSTRATING FILM FESTIVAL THIS YEAR

BY SARAH JO MARKS

The Slamdance Film Festival runs concurrently with the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. As difficult as it may be for a Slamdance staffer to admit, it's safe to say that most of the thousands who converge on Park City over that week are there for two reasons: the Sundance Film Festival and the skiing. Slamdance gets its audience from its scrappy filmmakers hitting the not-so-scrappy streets (and slopes) of the mountain town and hustling people into their screenings. Just being at the top of Main Street is *not* enough. Empty screenings for mediocre and unfinished movies is not alluring to the standard Sundance crowd, which, based on a very unscientific poll that I conducted, doesn't even know where Slamdance is.

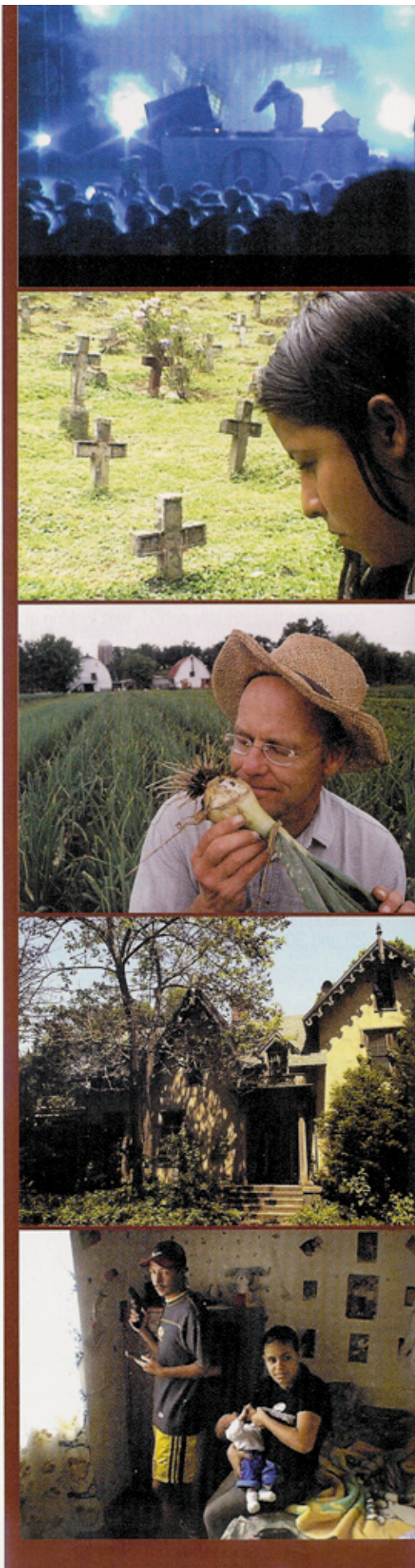
With the exception of a few stand-out films, Slamdance 11 was a weak showing of work-in-progress video documentaries with bad sound and unexcited filmmakers. In past years Slamdance showed some of the best docs in the city, exciting even the most cynical critics and distributors. This year's programming lacked the vitality that made Slamdance so crucial and such a great foil to the glitz of

Sundance.

Films like *The Closer She Gets* (Craig Ouellette, dir./prod.), *Liquid Vinyl* (Taylor Neary, dir./prod.; George Reasner, prod.) and *In A Nutshell* (Don Bernier, dir./prod.) made me question why I was sitting in an uncomfortable makeshift screening room at the Treasure Mountain Inn. A programmer told me once that if I liked everything in a festival, that means that somebody else hated everything he or she saw. That got me thinking: With buzz flying around with great fervor over Sundance docs, where was the excitement at Slamdance?

With trepidation I watched a 10:00 a.m. screening of *Abel Raises Cain* (Jenny Abel, dir./prod.; Jeff Hockett, dir.) from the back row, with no legroom and a huge head in front of me. I waited for the story to unfold—and I thanked the programmer in the sky for showing something smart and provocative. The film, not surprisingly, picked up the Grand Jury Sparky Award for Best Documentary Feature. Filmmaker Jenny Abel chronicles her father's life as the "world's greatest hoaxer" in this entertaining and enlightening film. The film is sweet and at the same time allows the audience

Top to bottom: From *Liquid Vinyl* (Dir./Prod.: Taylor Neary; Prod.: George Reasner). Photo: George Reasner. ©Big Pictures, LLC. From *La Sierra* (Dirs./Prods.: Scott Dalton, Margarita Martinez), which was the Honorable Mention for the Grand Jury Sparky Award for Best Documentary at the 2005 Slamdance Film Festival Courtesy of La Sierra Productions. Farmer John, subject of *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* (Dir.: Taggart Siegel; Prod.: Terri Lang), winner of the Audience Sparky Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 2005 Slamdance Film Festival. Photo: Taggart Siegel. Courtesy of Collective Eye. From Don Bernier's *In a Nutshell: A Portrait of Elizabeth Tashjian*. Photo: Sean D. Elliot. Courtesy of The Day, New London, Connecticut. From *La Sierra* (Dirs./Prods.: Scott Dalton, Margarita Martinez). Courtesy of La Sierra Productions



to think about how the media works. Alan Abel's reasons for pulling the wool over the media's eyes teaches viewers that you can't always believe everything you see, read or hear.

Did you see *Mad Hot Ballroom* (Marilyn Agrelo, dir./prod.; Amy Sewell, prod.)? Finally, a buzz film for which I had a ticket. People were lining up an hour before the film was scheduled to start, pushing and pulling and hustling tickets. People were excited and ready to see something special. Everyone piled in, old-school Slamdance style, with every seat full and every spot on the floor taken. But despite the *huge* buzz and the sale of the film to Paramount Classics and Nickelodeon, *Mad Hot Ballroom*, about a ballroom-dancing competition for inner-city kids, left me feeling a little empty. The kids were cute and filmmaker Marilyn Agrelo didn't miss a beat, but where was the heart?

The Real Dirt on Farmer John (Taggart Siegel, dir.; Terri Lang, prod.) won the Audience Sparky Award for Best Documentary Feature. Shot beautifully, with insightful interviews and interspersed with creative music video-esque interludes, this earth-friendly doc captures the life of eccentric Midwestern farmer John Peterson. Directed artfully by Taggart Siegel, the film explores the metamorphosis of an aging farm into a bastion of creativity, organic farming and learning. Farmer John plays the perfect subject—not knowing why a film is being made about him and taking the opportunity to tell the tale of his colorful life and farm.

Commune (Jonathan Berman, dir./prod.) fits somewhere between Sam Green and Bill Siegel's *The Weather Underground* and Rob Moss' *The Same River Twice*. It tells the story of a group of hippies, artists and activists from the early 1970s who cobble together \$22,000 in donations from rock stars and buy some land at an abandoned gold-mining ranch in Northern California in order to live together communally. *Commune* is packed with extensive archival footage and interviews with the participants then and now. The film delves into all aspects of communal living while paralleling

a slice of American history that rings true in our troubled times.

Brett Spackman's *Run to Jays: Tournament of Champions*, an entertaining and hilarious telling of a local competition that involves running from a porch to a liquor store and back with a 20 oz. soda in hand, won the Grand Jury Sparky Award for Best Documentary Short. Told in a Christopher Guest-ian style, the film chronicles the athletes as they train and then risk their lives crossing the busy street that separates them from Jay's Liquor Mini Mart, where they will slap down their \$1.25 and return to the porch with their cold drink. But who can do it in under a minute?

This is my fourth year attending Slamdance, and I was frustrated. As a documentary producer and producer's rep, I worry that showcases like Slamdance can ultimately hurt some of these films. Powerful, well-made documentaries will always find their audience. It's the unfinished films that could so easily lose their way. I want Slamdance to be awesome; but by showing incomprehensible works-in-progress, the festival will maintain its quiet presence at the top of



Poster for *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* (Dir.: Taggart Siegel; Prod.: Terri Lang), winner of the Audience Sparky Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 2005 Slamdance Film Festival. Photo Design: Bob Scheffler. Courtesy of Collective Eye

Main Street—and Sundancers will still not know which way to anarchy.

Sarah Jo Marks is a documentary consultant and producer's rep. Check out her website at www.sarahjomarks.com.



Daughter from *Danang* Academy Award Nominee



The Trials of Henry Kissinger

Distributing outstanding programs for worldwide broadcast since 1980

Distribution
Pre-Sales
Co-Production



The Blues presented by Martin Scorsese

CS Associates
200 Dexter Avenue
Watertown, MA 02472
tel: 617-923-0077
fax: 617-923-0025
programs@csassociates.com

Send submissions on VHS or DVD with S.A.S.E. attn: Acquisitions Manager for more information visit www.csassociates.com