

Gearing Up For Sundance – Telluride Indie Fest 2000 Greet & Gathers First Time & Seasoned Filmmakers On and Off the Slopes

By Vinca Liane Jarrett

Commencing on Thursday, December 7 through Sunday, December 11, this year's 4th Annual Telluride IndieFest gathered feature, short and documentary filmmakers and screenwriters from Coast to Coast in the cozy mining/ski resort town of Telluride, Colorado. Going to this festival was a no-brainer for me this year, since my client, feature filmmaker Tom Rice, was in attendance with his award winning movie *The Rising Place* (Frances Fisher, *Titanic*, Alice Drummond, *In & Out*, *Walking & Talking*, Frances Sternhagen, *Doc Hollywood*, *Misery*), set during WWII in Mississippi about the friendship between a Southern Belle (Laurel Hollomon, *Tumbleweeds*) and a Woman of Color (Elise Neal, *Mission to Mars*, *Malcolm X*) and featuring an original soundtrack by Jennifer Holiday (*Dream Girls*) and David Foster. Tom flew in directly from Cairo, where his film also showed at the Cairo Film Festival, immediately following the award of Grand Prize at the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis where he received a check for \$50,000.00 towards future film development. Then there was the skiing with pre-season hotel rates (and my hotel included daily lift tickets) and on-season conditions (yep, a 40" base and a foot-and-a-half of fresh powder over the weekend). Finally, there was the buzz; a festival that according to its director, Michael Carr, has doubled in content over each of the past three years, bringing filmmakers waiting to hear about entry into Sundance and Slamdance together to compare stories, seek distribution, and find post-production financing.

Travelling through Denver International Airport, I hooked up with New York based filmmaker Roger Majkowski, who produced, wrote and directed his first feature, *Passing Stones*, for a confounding \$2,500.00, along with actress Elizabeth Van Meter, and co-producer Elizabeth Helpen and legal consultant Adam Lass, both who graduated from Brandeis University. We hooked up almost immediately with Nashville Tennessee record producer Joe Meador, who was heading to the festival with the documentary *Dixie Rose* (Randall Wilson, Director), about the singer/songwriter and her survival of poverty in Mississippi, and then we diverged, as they took a direct flight into Telluride, and I had to make do with nearby Montrose, about 60 miles away.

My puddle jumper, sitting 20 people, was filled to the brim with more filmmakers, and I immediately started jabbering with Denise Matthews, a long-ago B.U. graduate, and now documentary filmmaker and professor of film at University of Georgia, whose movie, *Roll in Columbia: Woody Guthrie and the Bonneville Power Administration* (co-directed with Michael Majdic, media professor at University of Oregon) turned out to be one of the highlights of the festival, featuring one-on-one interviews with Woody's first wife, Arlo and Pete Seeger. Denise later informed me that she and Michael had just gotten a grant for \$50,000.00 to distribute the work in high school's throughout the U.S.

As soon as I arrived in Telluride, a one-horse town with fabulous food and shopping, and purportedly amongst the best skiing in Colorado (I can now attest to that fact!), I headed for the opening party over at the Sheridan Opera House. The Schmooze was in high gear, and I hooked up with first-time screen writer Gerald Wennerstrom from Las Vegas, and the subject of his work, *The Predator and the Prey*, Frank Zdenek Pohl, a hero back in the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia) since he and his bestfriend escaped persecution by the Communists in 1986 by escaping to Austria over high tension electrical wires after witnessing the brutal rape and murder of a Czech girl by a Russian military officer. This is the stuff movies are made of!

Films ran from 10 a.m. each day until eleven at night, and star spottings included actor Jack Klugman (*The Odd Couple*, *Quincy*). One of my favorite features of the week in terms of sheer excellence of story, character and acting, was *Baby Luv*, directed by Robert Martin Carroll (*Sonny Boy*, starring David Carradine), and flawlessly written and co-starring Darlene Young, as adapted from her off-Broadway play of the same name. Rising Star Mariam Parris is sure to hit the big time, after demonstrating her amazing craft in this film.

The film shorts were the most solid overall of the films entered in the festival, particularly the six minute piece *Mom And Me*, directed by L.A.-based Gina Gambill, and starring and written by seasoned actress/screenwriter and first time producer Danelle Hand. I was also blown away with laughter by *The Other Woman*, written and directed by veteran screenwriter Casey Kelly out of Houston, Texas. Finally, the twenty-six minute mini-drama, *Soledad*, written and directed by Shlomo Buchler, demonstrated that an entire story can be told with dramatic tension in less than a half-hour.

While the festival itself faces an uphill battle in terms of organization (*several films had to be cancelled Saturday since projectionists didn't show up, and organized partying simply didn't exist except for the opening afternoon festivity, so filmmakers had to find each other and make the connections all on their own*) and publicity (*although off-season, the town was buzzing with more than 600 Arizona skiers, none of whom seemed to know the festival was going on, nor did many of the locals in shops, restaurants and at the ski slopes, leaving a severe and noticeable gap in attendance*), I am certain if Michael Carr, Director, who truly believes in his festival and art of the screenplay, focuses on these issues, that the Telluride IndieFest (www.tellurideindiefest.com) will be around in years to come, and become a mainstay in the smaller festival circuit. I for one will be enticed back in years to come by the mountain alone, and as long as filmmakers gather in such a divine location the first week of December for what is probably the last active festival of the year, warming up for Sundance.

If you have questions about any of the contents of this article or would like to get in touch with any of the filmmakers or screenwriters discussed herein, you may contact the author at (617) 277-6772 or 821-6772 or e-mail her at JarrettBiz@aol.com. Vinca Jarrett is an attorney of counsel to the firm of Shames and Litwin, a full service law firm with foremost experience in the field of entertainment, including film, music, television and internet. She is also the owner and principal of the script consulting company SKRIPTease, which specializes in screenplay drafting, editing and consulting on feature and television projects both on spec and in production. For more information on Skriptease, please contact Vinca at Skriptease@aol.com.