

## SUNDANCE: THE DOCUMENTARY

## Theatrical becoming fact of life for docs

By KATHY A. McDONALD

For the past three sessions, Sundance has launched not only the year's most lauded docs but also top box office earners, from 2004's "Super-Size Me" to 2005's "March of the Penguins" and last year's "An Inconvenient Truth."

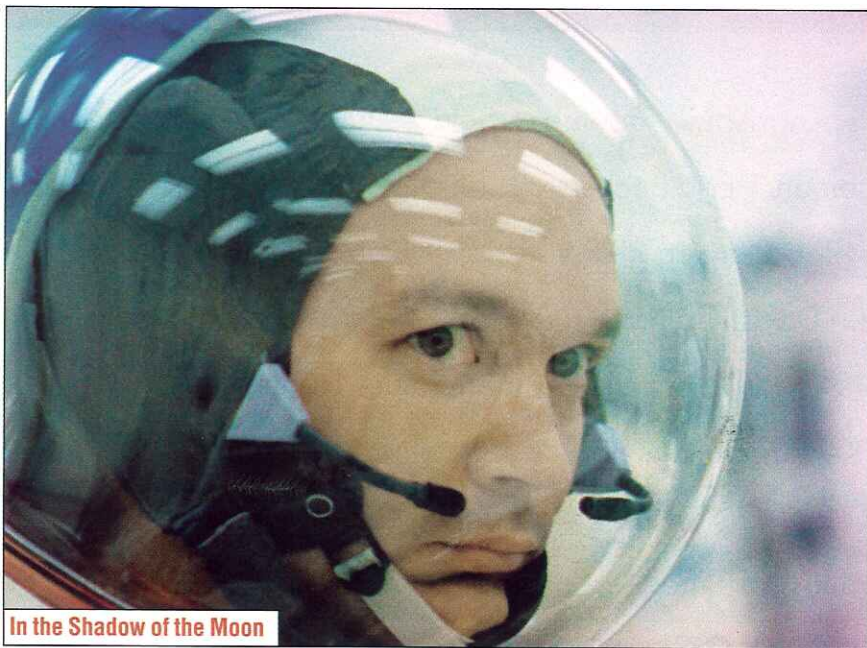
As Sundance's director of programming, John Cooper, explains: "We've started to think much more about the theatrical experience for documentary because it's becoming more of a reality and filmmakers are thinking that way, too. It shows in their work and how they've crafted their films."

But docs rarely incite bidding wars, much less theatrical superstardom.

"The accessible ones have a big point of entry for audiences, like an issue or star," says Sundance Channel senior VP Christian Vesper. Crossover hits typically have elements that resonate with contempo auds; "uplift always does well," he adds.

Opening night film, "Chicago 10" (from helmer Brett Morgen), has a cinematic "hip quotient," per Cooper. It captures the theatrics of the infamous 1968 trial via animation, voiced by thespians such as Hank Azaria and Mark Ruffalo, archival footage and a dynamic soundtrack. Notably, it is Participant Prods.' follow-up to the zeitgeist-nailing "An Inconvenient Truth."

"Even though it deals with a historic subject, it's absolutely about contemporary America;



In the Shadow of the Moon

watching it is a visceral experience," says exec producer Diane Weyermann of the films innovative visual elements.

Some 600 international docs were submitted next to 962 U.S. doc submissions; of those, 42 were selected. Buzzed-about docs include Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand's "Everything's Cool," which wittily tackles global warming; Lincoln Ruchti's crowdpleasing "Chasing Ghosts," which will presumably attract the universe's videogamers; Daniel Gordon's "Crossing the Line"; and "The Devil Came on Horseback," a chronicle of Darfur's atrocities. Rory Kennedy's "Ghosts of Abu Ghraib" achieves its power through revealing a greater truth. "Nanking," from helmers Bill Guttentag and Dan

Sturman, uses a present-day stage reading to bring historic journals to life, putting a human face on the Chinese city's infamous pillaging by Japanese troops in 1937.

Distrib ThinkFilm picked off Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine's emotional "War Dance" prefest. Film follows former Ugandan child soldiers in a national dance competition in this classic underdog story.

Also of interest in the world doc competition: British director David Singleton's take on the U.S. Apollo missions, "In the Shadow of the Moon"; and Donal MacIntyre's "A Very British Gangster," a look at Dominic Noonan, one of England's most unsavory characters.

There's near unanimous cu-

riosity regarding Robinson Devor's "Zoo," a poetic look at extreme relationships between men and horses (also corralled by ThinkFilm); David Stenn's "Girl 27," which explores a

1937 rape scandal at MGM that had long been covered up; and Dan Klores' "Crazy Love," a story of a strange love affair that dominated Gotham tabloids in the late 1950s.

"What's a better theme than love and loss and injustice?" asks helmer Klores of his film's potential appeal. "Everyone is going to see something different, ranging from repulsion to forgiveness to understanding to sorrow to disgust."

That said, a look at the highest-grossing docs shows some common traits: present-day stories, emotion and humor.

In a prefest deal this week, A&E Indie Films took North American TV rights for Amir Bar-Lev's "My Kid Could Paint That," which follows what hap-

pens when the media gods shine on—and off—a 4-year-old painting prodigy.

"The worst thing that happened to the subject was the best thing to happen to the film," says Bar-Lev.

A&E Indie Films, the feature production unit of the cable net, is taking an equity stake in the pic and will shop theatrical rights at the festival.

Julien Temple's music-driven biopic of former Clash front man, "Joe Strummer: The Future Is Unwritten," has both a strong narrative and a compelling subject, one who has gained in international popularity since his untimely death. "It's a very moving and human story, not a fan film about a pop star," explains the vet helmer.

While theatrical play is a goal, most filmmakers have loftier aspirations, Temple explains: "You want to make a movie that will cause people to think as well as entertain them. For that to happen, you want it to be around a long time, more than just the first weekend."



Crazy Love

## CREATIVES IN TRANSIT

Several features at this year's fest come courtesy of filmmakers who have gained fame in other careers or areas of the biz.

We checked in with a handful to get the lowdown on their films and the transition.

## STEVE BERRA

Without his skateboard, Berra would never have gotten his chance to make a movie. After being discovered at a Nebraska skate park by supreme boarder Tony Hawk in 1992, Berra rose through the ranks to become one of the top pro skateboarders in the world, with his own signature shoe and board brands. In his off



hours, he was indulging in his other lifelong passion: writing and directing movies. But despite scoring an agent and a few writing gigs based on his spec work (as well as finding work as an actor), Berra was struggling to find financing for his first feature as director, "The Good Life," a coming-of-age story set in small-town America. That all changed when he went to the opening of a skate shop and met Lance Sloane, a producer who had actually tried to hire Berra for another film but had been turned down because Berra wanted to focus on directing. "Lance and I hit it off, and after that chance encounter we were in pre-production within a matter of months," Berra says. "We had a lot of terrific,

experienced people on this movie, and they were willing to back me despite my lack of experience. I owe them everything." "The Good Life" stars Mark Webber, Zooey Deschanel, Chris Klein, Bill Paxton, Donal Logue and Harry Dean Stanton.

—Matthew Ross

## JEFFREY BLITZ

Documentary filmmakers learn to become "pretty unflappable," says Blitz, director of the 2002 nonfiction hit "Spellbound." That willingness to roll with the punches proved invaluable on Blitz's feature debut, "Rocket Science," a Sundance dramatic competition entry. On a film set, "There's so much controlled chaos," he explains. "It's great to see all that as a series of problems to be overcome instead of insurmountable obstacles." An alumnus of USC's graduate film school, Blitz co-directed a short film called "Wonderland," starring George Segal, but it was "Spellbound" that helped him work with the young actors in "Rocket Science." "In the most emotionally taxing scenes in 'Rocket Science,' I remembered that talking seriously and honestly myself might inspire serious and honest work from my actors," he says. Blitz plans to continue working in both nonfiction and fiction. "I like to think that I can try to bring some narrative concision from fiction films into docs and maybe try to bring some of the unpredictability of docs into my fiction work," he says. "That's the hope, anyway."

—Anthony Kaufman

