

JUST 'CAUSE; SUNDANCE FEST'S TWO TOP DRAMATIC AWARDS GO TO FILMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

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Perhaps reacting against the specter of the evil empire of Hollywood that always seems to hang over this snowy town, the Sundance Film Festival acted more like an outpost of liberal Berkeley on Saturday night, giving its two main dramatic awards to socially conscious films that deal passionately with what a simpler time called the plight of oppressed peoples.

The festival's Grand Jury Prize went to "Slam," director Marc Levin's emphatic, documentary style look at a turning point in the life of an impoverished black street poet in Washington, D.C. Though critics were more reserved than were ecstatic festival audiences, there was agreement on the considerable screen presence of star Saul Williams. Himself a poet, he gave the crowd a bit of spoken word at the ceremony, beginning with "The sun dances in the sky, its rays choreograph the day" and ending with a simple "Our time has come."

Sundance's Audience Award was captured by "Smoke Signals," which also won the Filmmakers Trophy (voted by the fest's other directors) for Chris Eyre. Like "Slam," "Smoke" has literary connections. Based on a short story by screenwriter Sherman Alexie, it displays pungent humor ("It's a good day to be indigenous," one character says) as it tracks a pair of Coeur d'Alene Indians on a singular journey off the reservation.

"The Audience Award is the one we really wanted," said a jubilant Alexie, adding that his personal audience included his wife and child and "72 of my cousins squeezed into my room on the reservation, watching on satellite."

On the documentary side, the panel unexpectedly split the Grand Jury Prize between two of the competition's more straight-ahead items, films that offered inside looks at strange and alienating worlds. "The Farm," codirected by Jonathan Stack & Liz Garbus, goes to rural Louisiana and behind the walls of Angola, with 5,000 inmates America's largest maximum-security prison, and details what it takes for the prisoners to survive.

Although "Frat House," codirected by Todd Phillips & Andrew Gurland, fulfills its promises of "uncovering the secrets of fraternity life," you sometimes wish it hadn't. The film's unflinching portrait of the sadistic, psychotic rituals of hazing, which the filmmakers had to agree to undergo to gain access, makes you weep at "the lengths men go to belong."

The first film at Sundance (or anywhere else, probably) to have a mathematical symbol for a title, "Pi" won the dramatic Directing Award for Darren Aronofsky. The film, an artistic and edgy piece of mystification about a young mathematician's attempt to bring order to the chaos of the stock market, was the competition's most visually stylish entry

despite costing only \$ 60,000. Clearly captivated by "Pi" was director Paul Schrader, who said he told his fellow dramatic jurors that "it will be a long night if we don't find a way to acknowledge this film, our first exposure to a person who has a vision and, God willing, a career." For his part, Aronofsky emotionally thanked his parents, both of whom are recovering from cancer this year, for "that kind of commitment, the will to get things done, they gave to me."

The actual Cinematography Award went to Declan Quinn, probably as much for his previous work ("Leaving Las Vegas," "Vanya on 42nd Street," "Kama Sutra") as for Sundance's "2 by 4," the story of the sexually troubled past of an Irish construction worker.

The Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award went to writer director Lisa Cholodenko for "High Art." Starring an all but unrecognizable Ally Sheedy, its story of careers and sexualities in conflict just about had to be set in the terminally decadent, heroin addicted segment of the art world of New York. A clearly surprised and grunge clad Cholodenko said she felt like she should be wearing "some Bob Mackie dress" for an event this major.

The Sundance panels have the option of creating onetime only awards, and the dramatic judges chose to present a Special Jury Prize for achievement by an actor to Andrea Hart, star of "Miss Monday." The Scottish actress plays a successful businesswoman privately plagued by all sorts of graphic disorders.

Not surprisingly absent from the dramatic awards was Brad Anderson's delightful "Next Stop, Wonderland," which probably ruined its chances for glory by being too accessible and getting a big-ticket distribution deal with Miramax. Similarly missing from the documentary awards was any mention of the superb and crowd-pleasing "Frank Lloyd Wright," penalized for being too conventional for advanced tastes and for having the ultra successful and corporately funded Ken Burns as a director.

Given that, it was a pleasant surprise to see "Wild Man Blues," directed by well-known documentarian Barbara Kopple, win the Cinematography Award for her longtime collaborator, director of photography Tom Hurwitz. The intimate and amusing "Blues" lets us enjoy the impeccable comic timing of Woody Allen as he and then companion SoonYi Previn barnstorm through Europe on a New Orleans jazz tour. A surreal Manhattan visit to Allen's aged parents completes this artfully put together adventure.

Another documentary veteran to get a laurel was Penelope Spheeris, whose "The Decline of Western Civilization, Part III" won the Freedom of Expression Award. Similar in tone and themes to Spheeris' first "Decline," made 19 years ago, "Part III" examines the Hollywood Boulevard based world of punk rockers not even alive when the movement began. The film alternates performance and interview footage, and Spheeris' empathy for these articulate, baby faced nihilists makes this a surprisingly poignant document. "This is my 12th film and the one that's closest to my heart," the director said in introducing "Decline" earlier in the week. "I feel like if I die tomorrow, I've done something."

Winning the Filmmakers Trophy for documentary was director Steve Yeager, whose "Divine Trash" details the early career of shock value veteran John Waters and brings us back to the days when the young filmmaker preferred seeing "Olga's House of Shame" to "Battleship Potemkin."

"Out of the Past," an ambitious attempt to place the state of Utah's attack on the Gay Straight Alliance in a Salt Lake City high school into a wider historical context, took the Audience Award on the doc side. The Directing Award for documentary went to Julia Loktev for "Moment of Impact," a wrenching look at the aftereffects of her father's near fatal automobile accident. "This film was made in such a private, hermetic way, shot and edited by myself," the director said, "that coming to a place like this with it has been slightly terrifying."

Given that this year's documentary competition was much stronger than the dramatic one, several excellent films ended up more empty-handed than they deserved. Two of the most involving documentaries, "Some Nudity Required" and "Baby, It's You," took the popular personal documentary genre into fruitful new areas.

"Nudity" is the work of Odette Springer, a former music supervisor for producer Roger Corman's stable of stripper, hooker and slasher movies. Moving and provocative, with several unexpected turns, "Nudity" illustrates how today's B picture business interacts with the insecurities of its participants and shows what happens when smart people make stupid movies. A brave, candid and nonjudgmental film on a surprisingly complex topic.

Anne Makepeace's "Baby, It's You" may sound like a predictable look at a woman over 40 trying to get pregnant, but the addition of deeply personal family histories and such wacky relatives as a would-be polygamist and a recluse more attached to his goats than people turn it into a whimsical and completely moving meditation, simultaneously warm, funny and painful, on what family and children mean in today's ultra confusing world. ("Baby, It's You" will open this Friday in Los Angeles for one week only at a Laemmle location to be announced.)

One of the continual mysteries of Sundance is how some of the best of the independent films in the festival end up not in the prestigious competition but in the less showy American Spectrum section. This year there were a minimum of two films at least as good as anything in the main event that inexplicably had to settle for the minor league.

The quiet and lovely "Gods and Monsters," written and directed by Bill Condon, is inspired by the last days of the great horror director James Whale, creator of "Frankenstein," and played, in one of the best performances the year will see, by the exceptional Ian McKellen. Interacting with Brendan Fraser's hunky young gardener, McKellen's Whale shows the power of personality in this nominally frail old man as he copes with a lifetime's memories and regrets. Similarly delicate is "One," the directing debut of Tony Barbieri. Carefully and rigorously made, this deliberate and melancholy film deals beautifully with the unexpressed tensions and resentments in the relationship

between two lifelong friends at a crisis point in both their lives. This is serious and uncompromising filmmaking in the best sense of the words.

Back in the competition, Carlos Marcovich's "Who the Hell Is Juliette?" from Mexico won the Special Recognition in Latin American Cinema Award. Taking honorable mention in short filmmaking (Debra Granik's "Snake Feed" won the special recognition) was Jay Rosenblatt's completely engrossing "Human Remains," which features riveting footage of celebrated dictators like Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and Mao acting just like ordinary folks.

And up the hill at the striving Slamdance Film Festival, the Grand Jury Award went to Kevin DiNovis' "Surrender Dorothy," described as the relationship between "a sexually confused busboy crippled with an intense fear of women" and "a handsome but homeless heroin addict." And if 10 days at the independent film capital prove anything year after year, it's that it takes all kinds to make a world.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: A flurry of Sundance movie posters, top; Robert Redford meets young directors, above left; delivering reels of film.