

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, February 6, 1998

HEADLINE: Cold Comfort;

From the wintry, cell phone packed hills of Park City, Utah, Lisa Schwarzbaum picks the best of the rest of the fest

BYLINE: Lisa Schwarzbaum

About three days into the 1998 Sundance Film Festival, he began appearing everywhere: a mysterious, short, Ben Stiller look-alike, 30ish, with an aggressive set of the jaw. He wore a black, knitted condom of a hat like a dare ("I'm so important, I can look like a dork"). And he talked talked talked into a cell phone as if he held the future of independent filmmaking at his ear.

At a movie theater, waiting for the lights to dim, he nattered, even while greeting actual human beings seated nearby. At Starbucks, oblivious to the snow booted customers sipping skim lattes all around him, he blabbed. For all I know, he was brokering deals, placing bets, urgently whispering "Don't forget to pick up dry cleaning!" as a memo to himself on his home answering machine. But if he had hushed up for even a minute, my ubiquitous, anonymous mascot of Sundance '98 might have noticed this: That the artistry of the documentaries in competition proved, once again, that docus (note to marketers: for more sex appeal, why not call them "nonfiction films"?) are our last truly independent movie art form, and our most powerful; that a good short film can linger in the mind far longer than a witty feature about callow lovelies in love; and that, as always in such a high intensity setting, some of the best films sit quietly outside of competition, available for discovery by anyone willing to get off the phone.

DOCUMENTARIES Slam was a strong drama, yes actor/poet Saul Williams practically vibrated with intensity, and the sound of soliloquies spilling from behind prison walls was a thrill. But even poetry slams in the slammer paled beside the power of *The Farm*, a compassionate film by Jonathan Stack and Liz Garbus about the maximum security prison in Angola, La., that won the Grand Jury Prize for documentary (sharing honors with the funny, horrifying *Frat House*). Years of gaining the trust of inmates most crucially, earning the support of one of the prison's longtime residents, Angolite magazine editor Wilbert Rideau are rewarded with vivid portraits of six men at various crossroads in prison existence, including beginning a life sentence, coming up for parole, waiting on death row, and dying in jail. Matching passion with rigorous filmmaking standards, Stack and Garbus have made an important document, and a great movie.

Indeed, with the bar set so high, documentaries about famous people, among them Barbara Kopple's savvy portrait of Woody Allen on a neurotic tour of Europe with his New Orleans jazz band (and Soon-Yi Previn) in *Wild Man Blues*, and a made for PBS pledge drive middlebrow biography of the larger than life architect in *Frank Lloyd Wright* by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick were less compelling (and less artistically exciting) than personal documentaries about unfamous people. To make *Paulina*, about the matter-of-factly brutal younger years of a Mexican housekeeper in a wealthy Mexico City home, Vicky Funari effectively wove scenes of the real, resilient middle-aged woman with dreamlike dramatized scenes from a nightmarish childhood. **And in *Baby*,**

It's You, about the last-ditch efforts she and her husband made to conceive a child in their late 40s, filmmaker Anne Makepeace leavened what might otherwise have been too much intimate information with humor, skepticism, and a flinty grace.

(Less successful was *Some Nudity Required*, Odette Springer's cliché ridden psychoanalysis of why she ended up working in the schlocky, breast baring world of B movies.)

SHORTS Fifteen minutes were enough for Scottish director Lynne Ramsay to assemble disjointed shots of kids' legs, a woman's hand, and a man's pint of beer into an exquisitely detailed, engrossing drama of broken marriage and the bewilderment of children in *Gasman* easily one of the best films, of any length, on the docket this year. In 11 minutes, Steve Box (from the Aardman Animations gang behind *Wallace and Gromit*), created a weird, nostalgic world of early cinema in *Stage Fright*. Elizabeth Schub took just 12 minutes to make a vibrant, full color snapshot of a young Cuban on the verge of womanhood in *Cuba 15*; and in three minutes, *Kicked in the Head* director Matthew Harrison eviscerated all on location moviemaking, once and for all, with *The Bystander From Hell*. (Kevin Costner should only be so efficient.) Jay Rosenblatt won an award for *Human Remains*, a dark and sardonic compilation of faux "home movies" from some of history's worst dictators Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao but he took a windy half hour to do so, partly because of the unsubtle footage of ashes being raked that brackets each monster's scrapbook.

OUTSIDE OF COMPETITION Why wasn't *Gods and Monsters* up for an award? If it had been, writer director Bill Condon's satisfying, inventive, cinemaphile fantasy (based on Christopher Bram's novel *Father of Frankenstein*), about the last years of Frankenstein director James Whale and a young gardener he fancies, would have been a shoo-in for honors: It's got *Death in Venice* depth and great performances by Ian McKellen and Brendan Fraser.

And speaking of unanswered questions, why was the thin Australian comedy *The Castle* bought by Miramax for \$ 6 million while Paddy Breathnach's much sharper, drollier Irish hitman comedy, *I Went Down*, languished unhyped? Why did Vincent Gallo get all the flashbulbs for *Buffalo 66*, while *One, Tony* Barbieri's tauter story of young man misery, went relatively unheralded? Why haven't we seen more of the extraordinary British actress Samantha Morton, who (in the Emily Watson school of fearlessness) is so riveting as a young woman spiraling into promiscuity following her mother's death in Carine Adler's anguishing *Under the Skin*?

How deep down into his soul did Nick Nolte reach to come up with his stunning performance in *Affliction*? Director screenwriter (and Sundance juror) Paul Schrader has made his best movie yet with this wrenching story (based on a novel by Russell Banks, who wrote *The Sweet Hereafter*) about a man in midlife, afflicted by the same malaise of drink and meanness that undoes his father (James Coburn). It's dark as hell and young filmmakers should slavishly study its mature pacing, framing, color palette, and even music (a haunting use of harmonic overtones from composer Michael Brook).

And who was that Sundance Kid, anyway, talking into a machine so grimly, so intently?
Here's hoping he trusted his eyes, and not just his ears, in Park City.