

# SUNDANCE TWENTYTEN



REBOOT, RENEW, REBEL,  
RECLAIM... WHICHEVER  
WAY THIS YEAR'S PARK  
CITY GATHERING IS  
RECOUNTED, IT WAS ONE  
FOR THE RECORD BOOKS...  
BY DAVID GEFFNER



Spurred by incoming festival director (and long-time Sundance programmer) John Cooper, the theme of this year's indie party on the hill was reinvention in all its many forms. "Cooper" (as long-time Sundance festival-goers affectionately call him) set the tone early on, noting in an interview with Programming Director Trevor Groth that, "it's really a time when we're looking to widen the conversation from these films that are at the festival to the larger dialogue of why culture is important to America."

Those of us who have been visiting Park City for the last decade would argue that Sundance is its own culture, replete with the good (giving voice to those well off the grid of mainstream media) and the bad (an avalanche of corporate promoters and blood-alcohol challenged party-goers). And this year, more than any other in recent memory, the notion that Sundance had to reinvent itself to stay relevant was in full force.

That's why festival honchos expanded the Sundance brand to eight other U.S. cities – Ann Arbor, MI, Brookline, MA, Brooklyn, NY, Chicago, IL, Los Angeles, CA, Madison, WI, Nashville, TN, and San Francisco, CA – simultaneously on opening night. "The concept behind *Sundance Film Festival U.S.A.* is to ignite dialogue as people across the country engage in a collective film experience," Sundance Institute Founder Robert Redford described. "It is an extension of the work we have done for decades...inserting art more and more into the social context of how we live."

Other notable changes to this year's format included a collaboration with on-line vendor YouTube that made three Sundance features available for rent during the festival's run, and the addition of NEXT (<=>), a new section composed of eight American films selected for their innovative work in low- and no-budget filmmaking.

Sundance TwentyTen was a watershed for Local 600. Not only did the Guild have more members screening their work (see *600 at Sundance* - [www.icgmagazine.com](http://www.icgmagazine.com)) than ever before but New York-based director of photography, Zak Mulligan (*Obselidia*), walked off with the Best Cinematography prize in the Dramatic Competition in his first-ever visit to Sundance. (*Obselidia* also won the Alfred P. Sloan award and its \$20,000 cash prize for an outstanding feature film focusing on science or technology.) Other notable standouts included *happythankyoumoreplease*, which won the Dramatic Audience prize, and was shot by New York based Seamus Tierney and directed by first-timer Josh Radnor, Documentary Audience Award winner *Waiting For Superman*, a superb examination of the American public education system written and directed by Davis Guggenheim and co-photographed by last year's Documentary Cinematography prize winner Bob Richman and Erich Roland, *Smash His Camera*, which earned Leon Gast the Documentary Directing Award and was shot by Guild member Don Lenzer, and *Winter's Bone*, winner of the Grand Jury Prize in the Dramatic Competition and the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award. Shot by Brooklyn-based Michael McDonough, *Winter's Bone* was universally praised for its spare visual treatment of its Ozark mountain locations.

Finding just two films (for this article) to best represent the wide tapestry of Guild members this year was a major challenge. The work ranged from Premiere entries like *The Runaways*, a gritty kaleidoscope of 1970's era rock and roll, shot by Benoit Debie, to *Get Low*, which featured lush anamorphic photography of 1930's era Tennessee, as captured by David Boyd, ASC, and directed by Local 600 cinematographer Aaron Schneider. Local 600-shot films that came into the festival solo and walked off with a theatrical dance partner included the riveting "man-in-a-box" Midnight feature, *Buried*, lensed by Spanish up and comer Eduard Grau (see *Unscripted*- ICG February 2010) and picked up by Lionsgate, and *Blue Valentine*, a marital drama set in a hotel room that bumps back forth in the relationship timeline. The emotive *Valentine* was shot by Andrij Parekh and snatched up by The Weinstein Co. for domestic release. In the end, *Cyrus* and *A Small Act* seemed to crystallize the Park City zeitgeist. The former is a low-budget Premiere film shot by first-time Sundancer Jas Shelton and funded by a studio, Fox Searchlight; while the latter is a complex documentary, shot and produced on location in Europe and Africa by Patti Lee, and funded by HBO Films' much-lauded documentary arm. Both works left audiences reeling, which is still the best way to regenerate a quarter-century old film festival (just a reminder).



photo by Chuck Zornick

## Cyrus

"The lo-fi look of the *The Puffy Chair*, may not be for everyone, but I found its disregard for convention to be refreshingly honest," laughs Jas Shelton, in describing the genesis of *Cyrus*, the first film from the micro-budget indie filmmakers, the Duplass brothers, to be financed by a studio and feature top-tier Hollywood casting. "(Jay and Mark's) approach is very raw, and different than anything else out there and my intent (on *Cyrus*) was to maintain the integrity of what the brothers do, albeit with more resources, time, and money to achieve their vision."

In fact, Shelton, who began his career as a gaffer in Austin, Texas, became the "bridge" between the studio's desire for a pleasing visual look, particularly with lead actress Marisa Tomei, and the Duplass brothers down and dirty ethos, which centers around long improvised scenes that eschew glamorized close-ups or cinematic lighting.

"We shot a few scenes prior to production as a 'proof of concept' to sell the studio on this hybrid approach," Shelton continues, "which includes all handheld takes, 360 degree lighting, and lots of cross coverage. We used two cameras shooting at all times, each camera typically assigned to cover one cast member, and had no rehearsals. That meant we lit the entire space and allowed the directors to basically 'catch lightning in a bottle.' The scene develops in real time and Jay and Mark will shape it as we go along. There is no second chance to clean up the lighting, so as a DP, you're always on your toes."

*Cyrus* is a darkly humorous tale about two middle-aged singles – John C. Reilly and Marisa Tomei – who meet by chance at a party and commence a heated love affair. All goes

well, until Jonah Hill enters the picture, the 21-year old son of Tomei's character, still living at home and intent on subverting any relationship that would come between him and his mother. A war of wills begins between Reilly and Hill's characters to see who will stay and who will go, with hilarious and sweetly emotive results.

Shelton says his background as a gaffer was key in working with the Duplass', "because photographically, you have to light the scene without really knowing where the actors are going to be," he relates. "We do a lot of lighting in the background and use practicals to build separation, as we are limited in shaping the foreground with lighting instruments that could potentially distract the actors." In fact, Shelton and his gaffer, Mark Manthey, were as spontaneous as their cast, taking every opportunity to sneak in small Kino-Flos or handheld elements that would throw more light on the actors.

Another Duplass philosophy is to create "disadvantageous angles," i.e., off-center frames, jerky pull zooms within shots, and odd reaction shots that leave audiences feeling the entire movie was shot through a police stakeout van. "The term they like to use is 'getting it wrong,'" Shelton explains. "Which takes a lot of work for a lighting and camera crew to create this feeling that nothing in the frame is premeditated and we just happened to stumble upon these people in their house." Shelton says all of the operators are on headsets, and the pull zooms and quick pans from one actor to another (reminiscent of Dad at his 5 year-old's birthday party) are techniques co-director Jay Duplass has refined over the years. "Jay seems to have this intuitive ability that none of us can fully replicate,"

Shelton smiles. “[Operator] Tod Campbell probably comes the closest, but finding those specific moments within the scenes is an art form within itself.”

The cinematographer says *Cyrus* was unique among his indie projects in that time was not a limiting factor by nature of the shooting style. “We spent 2-3 hours pre-lighting the space,” Shelton adds. “But once we began shooting, we go straight through without any re-setting. A single take will go 20-30 minutes, and one scene may take 2 hours to complete, but there are no time constraints, per se.”

Such a workflow made the RED camera system an ideal choice. And Shelton says the *Cyrus* team tested the RED, as well as a Sony EX-3, which performed very well, as well as 16mm. “At the end of the day, RED provided all the quantifiers we needed,” the DP remarks. “Long record times, relatively light-weight for handheld, and a high resolution to film out for a theatrical venue. There were limitations with the speed of the RED cameras. We were typically shooting at T2.8 with zoom

lenses in a documentary style, and that required using significantly more light than we would have preferred. The camera is a PL mount, so we could use a standard Optimo 28-76mm zoom lens, and Angenieux’s 30-80mm Rouge (designed for the RED). The struggle was to find a telephoto lens in the 150mm range that was light enough for handheld, and there are not many options. We ended up using a 50-150mm lens that RED makes, which we carefully tested to ensure a satisfactory match with the Optimos.”

When quizzed how *Cyrus*’ unorthodox work style will impact future work, Shelton was enthusiastic. “I have a fairly conventional approach to lighting and photography,” he concludes. “So working this way has really opened my eyes. Your whole approach as a DP is about maintaining control – contrast, color, lighting, etc. – so letting things go, i.e., finding the magic moments that would not occur if you were forcing things into a conventional box, has had a profound effect on my approach.” ☘



photos courtesy of Patti Lee

## A Small Act

From the most humble of beginnings great things can come is the best way to describe the remarkable genesis of *A Small Act*, a micro-budget documentary, shot on a single HD camera (Panasonic HVX200 with a wide-angle adaptor) by Local 600 DP Patti Lee with just one other crewmember, Lee’s long-time partner, director Jennifer Arnold.

Set in a small Kenyan village with no electricity or plumbing, the film relates the story of Chris Mburu, a one-time impoverished youth who was sponsored by a Swedish Holocaust survivor (he never met) through primary school. Hilde Back’s small act of kindness (\$15 per term) enabled Mburu to continue his education, and eventually graduate from Harvard University, where he went on to become a human rights lawyer for the United Nations. Mburu never forgot Back’s generosity, and started his own scholarship fund to help students in his village replicate his life-changing trajectory. However, because secondary school costs in Kenya average \$500 (USD) per year, Mburu knows his foundation must award scholarships to those students most likely to move up the educational ladder, and that includes a benchmark score on the nation’s crucial nationalized test, the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exam. Add to that the simultaneous violence, during the filming of *A Small Act*, of Kenya’s ethnic-based electoral process, with 1,500 killed and more than 600,000 displaced, making Mburu’s mission a personal imperative.

“Jennifer heard about this story from her friend Jane, whom

she met while studying abroad at the University of Nairobi. Jane (also featured in the movie) is Chris’ cousin,” Lee recounts. “It was 2007 and Chris was preparing to meet Hilde for her 85th birthday in Sweden. The first production company we approached gave us enough seed money to go over there and shoot, and then we just kept getting more investors. I wanted a larger style HD camera (with interchangeable lenses), but by necessity we had to travel light enough for just two people! We also thought it would be disruptive to go into this tiny African village with this large cinema-style camera.”

Once in Kenya, Lee and Arnold visited 6 different schools in Chris’ village to target a few students to follow for their film. Their ultimate subjects, Kimani, Ruth and Caroline, all turned out to be the top three students in the same school, making production logistics (particularly when each child learns of their KCPE scores) more centralized. The scores could be accessed on-line, which Lee and Arnold did and learned the outcomes. But without electricity, the students had to rely on cell phones to receive text messages of their fates.

“Seven hundred thousand kids take that test and they all text message at the same time,” Lee explains. “The process stretched out over two days, heightening the drama, and we were lucky that each kid got their scores alone so we could film the reactions of each one individually, along with their families, who literally look to these test results as the one hope of lifting them out of poverty.”



Lee points to the scene of Kimani receiving his KCPE score as one of the most effective moments in the film, despite the single camera workflow. “I’m very proud of that scene,” she says, “because it’s not just a big wide shot and a few close-ups. It’s really well covered. We knew Kimani was the one we wanted to focus on first for the score results, so we spent a lot of time shooting his reaction, and as soon as we got that coverage, we focused on his mother because she was the person who was most impacted by what would happen. You get the entire feel of the moment and the scene is not missing any of the characters.”

Shooting the other key event in the film – the announcement of the scholarship awards by Mburu’s foundation – required communication unlike most film crews ever experience. “The meeting ran more than six hours,” Lee continues, “so I would shoot the meeting for awhile, then go outside to shoot the kids while Jennifer stayed inside recording audio of the meeting. I had a radio receiver on the camera, and whenever something happened at the meeting, Jennifer would beep me on her mixer and I would run back inside!”

Lighting was an insistent challenge for the DP, given the harsh overhead sun and dark skin tones of her subjects. “We brought lightweight Flexfill reflectors-- one silk, which we rigged overhead with small lightweight stands that became a diffuse overhead light box for the interviews, and one bounce. Our interviews were always shot outside,” Lee shares, “with carefully

chosen backgrounds so we wouldn’t have anything blowing out behind them.” Backing up the HVX200 P2 cards was tricky; with no electricity (and no portable generator), Lee had to rely on a car inverter to keep the two batteries for her laptop juiced. And shooting electoral violence in Kenya was even more of an adventure: “We were tear-gassed by the police,” Lee exclaims, “which in Kenya is not a big thing.”

The intimately told message made *A Small Act*’s Sundance run memorable. After the second screening, the cast was approached by Microsoft founder Bill Gates as well as by the socially directed philanthropist George Soros; by festival close \$90,000 in cash contributions had been made by audience members to Mburu’s foundation. Lee says producing the film provided a greater sense of accomplishment than anything she had previously done as a DP for hire. But perhaps the greatest legacy of *A Small Act* never even appears on screen – after two of the three students portrayed in the film did not receive scholarship money due to their low KCPE scores, Lee and Arnold anonymously sponsored the two young Kenyans on through the next phase of their education. ☘

[Editor’s Note: Jennifer Arnold is scheduled to screen *A Small Act* on Easter weekend in Chris Mburu’s village in Kenya]