

# REGIONAL WORKS DOMINATE SUNDANCE 2005

## Sundance Preview

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What is obvious to political strategists — that we are a nation divided in our values — becomes less of a certainty in the Sundance class of 2005, where a palpable yet blurred sense of place defines many of the American Dramatic Competition films.

With the red and blue state map of the U.S. drawn during last year's election still dominating the national conversation, the new crop of independent works debuting at the Sundance Film Festival emerges as a distinctly deep purple hue on its own map. These regionally specific works succeed in defying the national mood through overt color blindness. If we are divided, these works suggest, it is for messier and more complicated reasons than blue states versus red. Like the title of one Dramatic Competition entry, *Forty Shades of Blue*, independent film in 2005 is deliberately nuanced, and unwilling to settle for the easy regional categorization that has prevailed since the election.

New works in this year's Dramatic Competition incorporate such distinct and diverse settings as Memphis, Tenn., Butte, Mont., Seattle, Wash., Los Angeles, Calif., and Asheville, N.C. Whether rural or urban, these environs exude such a precise sense of place and profound measure of soul-searching on the part of its denizens that any effort at drawing up maps feels hopeless. These places are us, wherever we are and whatever our politics.

"They are very eccentric views of who we are right now," explained John Cooper, Director of Programming for the Sundance Film Festival. "A lot of filmmakers this year are playing with notions of how different we are from each other — it's a long way from the Fifties, when we all looked the same and lived in the suburbs as similar people."

Two wildly disparate works set in the Memphis music industry unravel amid new permutations of the same rhythm-and-blues sound that has defined the city since the heyday of Sun Records and Elvis Presley. Ira Sachs' *Forty Shades of Blue* traces the melancholic emotional life of a frustrated Russian émigré trophy wife torn between her distant producer husband, a local legend who helped forge the Memphis soul sound of the Sixties, and his estranged son, who becomes her lover. Memphis is as much of a character in Sachs' film as the main trio, but we see almost nothing of the city except through its interiors. Yet a distinct portrait emerges through the eyes of these eclectic souls — of a city that feels worlds away from its own rich R&B legacy but also frozen in time, evoking on a visual level the emotional highs and lows of the sinuous music that made Memphis.

Writer-director Craig Brewer's *Hustle & Flow* does for Memphis what Eminem's *8 Mile* did for Detroit, serving up an underdog protagonist (in this case a pimp aching to go straight) who finds his voice in beats and rhymes. Examining the Southern-fried crunk scene, which originated in Atlanta through the music of Lil Jon and Ludacris, who appears in the film, this John Singleton-produced drama delves into the side streets, strip joints and parking lots of Memphis, bringing to life a vibrant, multi-racial world where anyone can rise to the top.

Two more competition films turn to North Carolina for emotional truths that resonate on a national level. In the fish-out-of-water domestic dramedy *Junebug*, written and directed by Phil Morrison, a native North Carolinian returns to his rural home after spending years in Chicago, where he has married a cultured British expatriate specializing in outsider art. But his close-knit, working-class, Southern family, including a disgruntled younger brother who works in a factory and a no-nonsense matriarch who is suspicious of her new daughter-in-law's worldliness, strains to accept the urban couple's quirks — and vice versa.

*Junebug* suggests that some families are simply impenetrable to outside forces — including family members who have left home to settle in the city. In the aching tearjerker *Loggerheads*, this year's other North Carolina-set competition entry, family ties become an even more complicated and tangled affair as members of an estranged family attempt to reconvene while external forces and entrenched values conspire to keep them apart.

Written and directed by Wingate, N.C. native Tim Kirkman, and loosely based on a true story, *Loggerheads* is perhaps the most socially relevant work in this year's competition, despite the fact that it is set before and after the Bush/Gore election of 2000. Centering on an itinerant young man who left home at age 17 after clashing with his religiously conservative adoptive parents, and who is immersed in some serious soul-searching in his twenties, *Loggerheads* examines the sort of domestic rift that has come to define the nation as a whole, not to mention the average American household, where values are often divided underneath the same roof.

"The story is a reflection of my own past and my own relationship with North Carolina, but it's also a red state/blue state kind of film," Kirkman insisted. "I think that's a natural outgrowth of the cultural buzz, but (that division) is far more complicated, especially in my home state. Often within one neighborhood people represent both sides and often an entire spectrum in the middle — they can even co-exist on the same block. If you look at the demographics, North Carolina isn't so cut and dried."

No less penetrating is the iconic city of Butte, Mont. as depicted in Travis Wilkerson's elegiac, soul-searching dramatic feature debut *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, in which an unemployed youth struggles against uselessness in a dying mining city that was once the civic pride of Montana. Wilkerson, a Butte native, already explored his hometown in the evocative Sundance 2003 documentary *An Injury to One*; with his latest work, Wilkerson extends his inquiry into the fictional realm, eliciting results that resonate on a national level.

"I wanted to return to Butte and create a portrait of the city right now, one that seemed richer, fuller and more accurate than my previous film," Wilkerson said. "Historically, Butte was the

center of power and wealth in Montana, the engine that fueled our statehood. Now it's a place that people wish wasn't there. I think some of the dilemmas facing Butte will be faced by a larger part of the country over time. There's never been an adequate consideration of what happens (to our towns) in a post-industrial era."

Two years ago, the prevailing theme at Sundance was basic human connection — three unlikely souls coming together at a disused railway stop in *The Station Agent*, for example, or the perfect union between cartoonist Harvey Pekar and his wife, Joyce Brabner, in *American Splendor*. This year that sense of connection seems woefully diminished, as though our efforts to interact with one another, as individuals, families or Americans, have proved futile. Call it post-9/11 ennui or post-election exhaustion. The fact is, America is a fairly fragmented place right now.

In *Police Beat*, Robinson Devor's second feature, following 1999's *The Woman Chaser*, a Senegalese-born bicycle cop finds himself dispatched to various crime scenes around Seattle, offering a hardboiled glimpse into some of the country's more lurid criminal transgressions. (The crime scenes were culled from a police blotter in the local alternative newsweekly *The Stranger*, as written by real-life cop Charles Mudede, who wrote the script in collaboration with Devor).

But this is no immigrant's view of moral turpitude in the Pacific Northwest — instead *Police Beat* focuses on the bicycle cop's frustrating inability to connect with his American girlfriend, who has fled Seattle with another man despite her insistence that the relationship is still intact. Rife with anachronism, the ruminative, richly composed *Police Beat* is an outsider's story turned inward, introducing Sundance audiences to one of the more unique screen personas in memory. It is also set against a Pacific Northwest backdrop that has been recently under-depicted in American film. Another competition entry, *Thumbsucker*, is set in nearby Beaverton, Oregon.

Alternately, actor-turned-director Scott Coffey's digital video feature *Ellie Parker* offers up an insider's story turned outward, casting its gaze on the fitful efforts of an aspiring actress to achieve fame in Hollywood. Tracking its titular heroine (played by Naomi Watts, Coffey's co-star in *Tank Girl* and the TV-pilot version of *Mulholland Dr.*) as she drives from audition to audition, running lines and changing costumes inside her car, *Ellie Parker* serves up one of the more concise cinematic depictions of contemporary Los Angeles social life, one that recalls the 1970's output of Joan Didion in its ruthless, often naval-gazing precision.

It is no surprise that Coffey is an aficionado of the author's novel *Play It As It Lays*, which he first encountered in high school. "It haunted me. It freaked me out. I thought it was beautiful," Coffey admitted of the 1970 tome (and subsequent 1972 movie adaptation, to which he pays homage in the film). "I feel like I had an understanding of Los Angeles from reading that book, and I found many of its themes to be relevant still." What is so refreshing about *Ellie Parker* and its meticulous sense of place is Coffey's ability to translate Didion's emptiness and ennui without seeming derivative. He has created a vision of Los Angeles that resonates far beyond the city's proverbial traffic congestion and vacuous self-absorption, making the film's struggle feel universal despite its specific location.

The connective tissue of so many new works at Sundance this year is not so much their precise or disparate sense of place as much as their ability to take distinct settings and characters and

make them applicable to anyone, as though we are all inherently connected as Americans — even though we may feel more disconnected than ever before, often irrevocably so. If there is a regional bent to so much of this work, it suggests we have turned inward as a nation in order to make sense of the outward drama in which our country is currently engaged. At Sundance circa 2005, you can go home again.

“I don’t subscribe to the post-9/11 (garbage) that insists we’ll never be the same,” Coffey said. “We’re oversaturated with and even tyrannized by so many different stories and narratives that it has become difficult to answer the question of who we are. These films are an attempt to reclaim our sense of self.”

cate...” The soon-to-be-infamous kiss occurs in Roger Kumble’s *Cruel Intentions*, a retelling of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* set on New York City’s Upper East Side. As the geeky 14-year-old Cecile Caldwell, an aspiring Lolita caught up in a vicious plot and several love triangles, Blair steals the show from co-stars Ryan Phillippe (her on-screen lover) and Reese Witherspoon (Phillippe’s real-life fiancée). Blair took up acting when she moved to New York five years ago, and landed her first advert soon after. Dozens of dreary auditions later — “I couldn’t quite manage that bright smile while talking about tampons” — she moved to Los Angeles and tried out for *Cruel Intentions*, landing her first significant movie part (small roles in the lame *In & Out* and the dire *Can’t Hardly Wait* notwithstanding). Next, she’ll play a jaded chemistry student who becomes a porn star in Kris Isaacson’s *Down To You*. “I see her as a cross between Kristin Scott Thomas and Willy Wonka,” she reveals. “And I’m not playing her like some uptight librarian in an Adam Ant video.” Selma Blair: she stands and delivers. ■