



## Telluride Film Festival Report

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**Editor's Note:** Our distinguished former colleague Tim Appelo, now an editor at *City Arts* magazine, attended the small, elite, high-altitude gathering of cineastes in Telluride, Colorado over the Labor Day weekend. We envy his travels, and relay his report...



The Telluride Film Festival is like a blasting cap that detonates the bigger explosion that follows the next week, the Toronto Film Festival. Last year, *Juno* set off Telluride's biggest blast of buzz, propelling it to Toronto and on to Oscar glory, and a sneak preview of part of *There Will Be Blood* got everybody's blood up.

This year, the big noise was supposed to be David Fincher's forthcoming \$150 million-or-more period epic *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, in which a baby born the last day of World War I starts out looking 80 years old and then

gets younger, turning into Brad Pitt.

But the 20-minute preview of *Benjamin Button* did not go over as big as *Blood* did. Blogger Jeff Wells gleefully dissed it; *Variety* defended it. I found it a gorgeously glossy and shocking departure for two-fisted Fincher, who said at the preview, "I don't think of myself as the guy who has to make the movies for perverts. I just get lucky enough to do it. I haven't been offered a lot of romantic comedies."

*Benjamin* does look romantic as hell, but mournful somewhat in the manner of *Atonement*, darkly radiant with sepia sorrow. The special effects that age (and then youthify) Pitt are Oscar-worthy, and though it's tough to tell from 20 minutes, so may he be. Some fear it could be an inert period piece, a coffee-table movie whose pages turn too slowly, like *Memoirs of a Geisha* or *Snow Falling on Cedars* (also by producers Kennedy/Marshall). I'll bet \$150 million that it will be a must-see by one of the great directors of our time, and also a commercial disappointment. I'm not sure audiences are ready to see Cate Blanchett throw herself at old man Brad, and see him reject her. It's like seeing Julia Roberts in one of her not-smiling roles.

But you've got to see *Benjamin Button* anyhow, because it's such an interesting, artful career zigzag. Fincher agreed that it's a big departure for him: "Yeah, thank God. No one pees in this movie."

The real explosion at Telluride was an even more startling departure, Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*, a picaresque, incredibly kinetic romantic adventure fable about an orphan in India who makes a mint on TV's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Someone does evacuate in this movie: fans of *Trainspotting* will be pleased that it features an open-air outhouse scene more disgusting than the Worst Toilet in Britain.

"Listen, all British films have toilets in them," Boyle told me at the party after the shrieking, weeping, deafening applause of the sold-out screening. "I don't know what it is. We're obsessed with toilets."

The hero's rise from the muck to wealth and fame is utterly heroic, packing in everything great about Boyle's previous films and a whole new look and feel you've never seen in any film, Brit or Indian. "It's the fulfillment of everything you've done," *48 Hrs.* screenwriter Larry Gross correctly told Boyle at the party.

Only 20 percent of it is shot on conventional celluloid; the rest is done with two kinds of spy cameras, one concealed in the cinematographer's backpack, so that the teeming tumult of India could be captured spontaneously, unawares. When the two young slumdog brothers invade the Taj Mahal to profit by their

own sly schemes, so does Boyle's innovative guerrilla crew, which was forbidden to film there.

*Slumdog* is one of two movies at Telluride about tough kids coming up in a crime scene. *Gomorrah*, about the Mafia's stranglehold on Naples, is fresher than any mob movie you've seen since *Goodfellas*, and more authentic, fascinatingly revealing a place you've never seen, via vivid characters whose fates will sear your heart. But *Gomorrah* is slow, overlong, and clumsy, while *Slumdog* is like a ride strapped to the front of an Indian train. The soundtrack is a bicultural beaut, featuring a far more apt and artful use of the year's best song, "Paper Planes," than the *Pineapple Express* soundtrack, fine-tuned by M.I.A. herself. The last scene is a bravura cultural mashup, a combination of a Bollywood wedding party scene and the final sequence of *There's Something About Mary*. I cannot express how touching and exhilarating this movie is.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is the breakout Telluride hit, but there's more big news from the 2008 fest. Kristin Scott Thomas's powerhouse performance as a mysterious murderess rejoining her family after years in prison should make *I've Loved You So Long* France's Oscar entry, and it may just win. I've always respected her, but never knew she could attain such barren, scary heights. Isabelle Huppert never had such gravitas.

For me, the most fascinating and moving experience of Telluride 2008 was the tribute to Jan Troell and his new movie *Everlasting Moments*, which should win the Oscar. Troell famously got screwed by Hollywood after his Oscar-nominated *The Emigrants*, and returned to play Ben Jonson to Ingmar Bergman's Shakespeare on Sweden's film scene. The problem was, Troell needs to wield his own camera, and Hollywood union rules prevented it.

Telluride opened my eyes to why this was a disaster. In his first hit, 1966's coming-of-age tale *Here Is Your Life* (hailed by Bergman as a masterpiece of Swedish cinema), the young hero finds a moth or butterfly in the factory where he works, and rides along on a cart holding it aloft. In context, it's an amazing visual symbol of freedom under oppression. In the half hour before shooting the scene, "I found this dead butterfly in the window," Troell told the audience. "It was not in the script, but that butterfly spoke to me." He couldn't have created this scene in the Hollywood system, wherein as much as possible must be nailed down in advance.

The butterfly symbol recurs in his new movie, *Everlasting Moments*, which is replete with them. It's a masterful portrait of an artist, a Swedish housewife who turns out to be a genius of still photography. The everlasting moments are the ones she fixes in her lens, and virtually every scene in the film is immortal. I'll never forget the moment when the heroine is about to photograph a man making shadow puppets to delight children, when suddenly the puppets are engulfed by the shadow of a zeppelin passing overhead.

The scene of a young girl walking suicidally out onto the ice and vanishing in the mist echoes the famous shot in *The Emigrants'* sequel *The New Land* where the camera pans back from a dying immigrant boy in a primeval American forest. Troell confesses that he learned psychology from Bergman, but he has something Bergman can't match: a pantheistic feel for the natural world. Troell is a force of nature. Bergman is a bitter Lutheran preacher; Troell is humane, a former teacher, and more of a realist. "It was natural for me to have realism, but realism paired with lyricism," he said at Telluride. Parts of *Everlasting Moments* have the greatness of 19th-century fiction - one stunning scene of the rescue of a horse beaten by its owner very effectively echoes Dostoyevsky.

I claimed the very last seat at the sold-out screening of *Everlasting Moments*. When it gets to theaters after riding its Telluride buzz to arthouse fame, don't miss the moment. This movie is really what Telluride is all about - and what movies are about. They make you feel immortal. —TIM APPELO

**Current Seattle release dates for the following are: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Nov. 26; *Slumdog Millionaire*, Nov. 28; *I've Loved You So Long*, Nov. 7.**