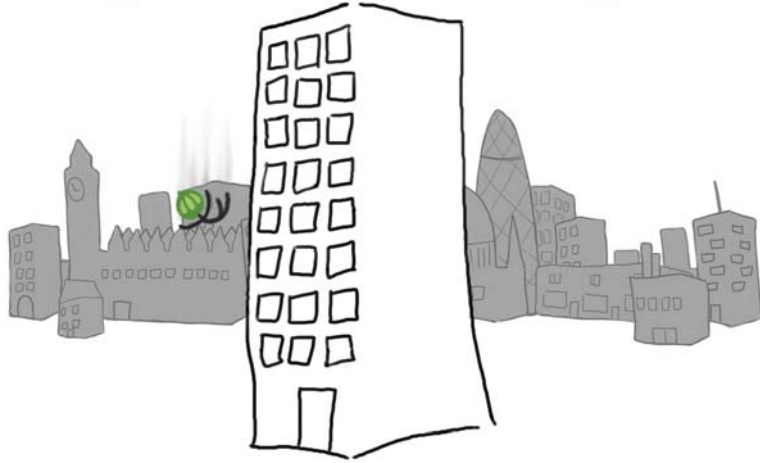


CITY RATS



www.cityratsthemovie.com

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Published on Wednesday, January 21, 2009 - 4:03am

Quint takes a look at a Slamdance flick about suicide, phone sex and dead bodies called CITY RATS!!!

Ahoy, squirts! Quint here with a brief look at a flick playing Slamdance currently called CITY RATS. I was sent a handful of screeners for films playing both Sundance and Slamdance which has helped ease my depression for not making it this year, which I hear is a banner year as far as programming is going.

It's driving me a bit crazy reading all the Facebook status updates from everybody I know, half-know and only know in a Facebook friends way and hearing how much people are enjoying the fest.

I've gone the last two years, but my schedule has been a bit up in the air and I honestly didn't know where I would be for the month of January, so I couldn't commit to the fest. I miss the films and crisp cold snowy weather, but I can't say I miss the stress-out that Sundance usually is.

While I haven't seen one film yet from either Sundance of Slamdance that has knocked me on my ass, CITY RATS has come the closest.

First and foremost, it looks like a real movie, thank God. I can't tell you how annoyed I get at indies that skimp on the production value. I understand at that budget it's a challenge, but it can be done. Look at films like BRICK, BUBBA HO-TEP and hell... even EL MARIACHI and RESERVOIR DOGS. They all looked like movies and probably had the same budget or less than most indies. It's possible.



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Director Steve Kelly obviously made production design a priority and chose a good cinematographer for his story of multiple threads, all dealing with pain of some sort.

In a way CITY RATS is a fairly typical indie film in structure. Seemingly unrelated storylines all connect in odd ways, but never directly interfere with each other. It's a common structure, but Kelly makes the most of it.

One thread follows a lonely man who is separated from his wife and is falling further and further into a deep depression. Tamer Hassan (UNLEASHED, LAYER CAKE and EASTERN PROMISES) plays this man, whose only connection is in the conversation he has with a phone sex operator.

He constantly dreams of standing on the edge of a rooftop, looking down. He views it as a sign that he should just end it. When he gathers up the courage to at least go up and give it a look he looks over and sees a woman (MyAnna Buring of the upcoming LESBIAN VAMPIRE KILLERS) on another rooftop about to jump. He calls out to her and stops it, but has to chase her down.

They strike up a kind of shaky friendship based on their mutual depression. They're brutally honest, telling the other things they'd never utter to anybody else, but it seems that this new friendship is probably not going to be enough save them.

It's not a happy story, but none of them are. But like the rest, the cast imbues their characters with a likability that compliments the strong writing (by Simon Fantauzzo). Those key elements are what keep this film from disconnecting, especially since Fantauzzo is mindful enough of not just hitting rinse/wash/repeat on the indie film structure, throwing curveballs with each character at just the right moment.

Another thread follows a closeted drug addict who is charged with keeping tabs on his full grown Autistic brother. He notices he's hoarding gay pamphlets, which forces him to not only accept that his brother has yearning that he doesn't comprehend and can't fulfill, but that he also has that same yearning, but refuses to

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indulge it.

Their story is sweeter than the rest as the closeted brother embarks on a mission to get his Autistic brother laid, diving head first into the gay scene in London. Again, stereotyping is avoided. The gay club-goers aren't played as savages or perverts out looking for a kink, but real people looking for love.

Another thread follows a flawed love story between Tamer Hassan's phone sex operator (Susan Lynch) who is very attractive, but slightly disabled, requiring the use of Forrest Gump-like leg braces to walk. She's on permanent disconnect, letting cynicism and biting remarks protect her from opening up.

She loves her job, which is the smart twist on her character. She's also a prostitute and deals with what the audience views as disgusting perverts (like a nearly 400 pound man who wants to dress her up as an Indian, tie her up and pretend to force himself on her while wearing ass-less chaps and a cowboy hat). We see these regulars through the eyes of her downstairs artist neighbor played by Ray Panthaki, who thinks he's in love with this girl... or at the very least obsessed with her enough to think she's his muse.

But that's not her point of view. She views what she does a necessity for society to continue and genuinely enjoys bringing pleasure to people like her cowboy, giving him a happiness he can't achieve anywhere else in his life.

The last story I haven't touched upon is my favorite of the movie, about a washed up, strung out burger flipper played by Danny Dyer, who was awesome in the Brit-Horror Comedy SEVERENCE, which kind of got lost in the SHAUN OF THE DEAD wave of (much deserved) love.

One day after work, he's followed by woman with a giant afro who he tells to fuck off, thinking she's a bag lady. Without a word she shadows him, finally talking to him on the ferry after he unleashes a particularly entertaining string of vulgarities at her. She simply asks if she can buy him a drink.

Of course she can.

So, as he's drinking she lays it on him that she is the mother of Dyer's former partner, someone who has gone missing. Dyer and this man used to run drugs for a local violent dealer and when that went bad (doesn't it always?) his partner disappeared and Dyer was let go.

Of course, his partner was the one who stole drugs and tried to cheat the dealer, so Dyer was just thankful to move along when he got the chance.

But now this man's mother finds him and he's compelled to help. In an odd way he didn't particularly like this guy, but he feels responsible to find out what happened. That's the twist of his character. He's insulting towards this man, assuming his death, even in front of his quiet mother, but he does end up putting his life on the line, confronting the dealer and ultimately going on a hunt for something buried that he suspects might be his ex-mate's body.

And the mother, played by Natasha Williams, is my favorite character in the whole movie. She has a quiet strength, relying on her body language and face, using her words carefully and sparingly. She just wants closure, even if that means finding her son's body. Dead or alive, she's prepared for both, it's the uncertainty of which that she can't stand.

Pairing with Dyer is perfection... a guy who brings humor to every role, even as dickish as the dude in this movie. He can talk a mile a minute, usually insulting, but Dyer brings a heart to the character that makes him very likable despite of all his bravado (or maybe even because of it). Williams on the other hand is the perfect listener and unmovable rock of a person.

Like I said, there's not many happy endings in this movie, but a few of the characters find the salvation they're looking for, even if it's painful or in ways they don't expect. Others end up just as they expected they would... Maybe that's their own salvation, even if it's tragic. Perhaps it's what was best for them.

It's my understanding that this movie has a screening tomorrow during Slamdance. If you're attending that fest and haven't caught the flick I highly recommend it. I have no idea what it's playing up against, but I can tell you this one's very well put together and avoids the trappings of the typical semi-depressing indie drama.

You can view the trailer at the official site. [Click here for that!](#)

I also have reviews of Sundance's HUMPDAY and two Slamdance comedies, one called WEATHER GIRL and another that I really dug called YOU MIGHT AS WELL LIVE. I'll also be covering the Santa Barbara Film Festival starting this week, so keep an eye out for my adventures there.

-Quint

quint@aintitcool.com





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Story

Revolver takes UK rights to Slamdance premiere *City Rats*

Jeremy Kay in Los Angeles

15 Jan 2009 06:12

Revolver Entertainment has snapped up UK rights from Facefilms and Scanner Rhodes Productions to *City Rats* ahead of its world premiere in competition at Slamdance.

Steve M Kelly directed from Simon Fantauzzo's script about eight individuals who seek to help each other improve their lives. Danny Dyer, Tamer Hassan, MyAnna Buring and Ray Panthaki are among the cast.

Revolver will stage a simultaneous theatrical, DVD and online release as it did on *Mum & Dad* last December. This is Facefilms' first feature and Scanner-Rhodes' second after the company's 2007 release *Night Junkies*.

"Steve's film is the latest example of how Revolver is constantly exposing new and innovative film-makers by delivering them to a mass audience through new and unique distribution and marketing," Revolver's Justin Marciano said. "We're a great supporter of British film-making and are excited to be working with both the established and emerging talent connected to the film."

Revolver's Joel Kennedy and Nick Savva negotiated the deal with William Borthwick of Facefilms and Scanner-Rhodes Productions' Dean Fischer. Ildi Toth of Altadena Films is handling worldwide sales.

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Slamdance unveils lineup

'I Sell the Dead' to open alternative festival

By MICHAEL JONES

The 15th Slamdance Film Festival has unveiled a genre- and drama-heavy lineup for its narrative and docu competitions. The fest will open with Glenn McQuaid's black comedy horror film "I Sell the Dead."

In the docu program for the Park City, Utah, fest are [Barbara Bell](#) and [Anna Lorentzon's](#) exploration of violent porn websites in "Graphic Sexual Horror"; Lee Storey's "Up With People" chronicle "Smile 'Til It Hurts"; and the world preem of "Strongman," Zachary Levy's bittersweet look at the life of strongman Stanless Steel.

In the narrative section are the world preems of Steve Kelly's drama "City Rats," Tina Mabry's Southern yarn "Mississippi Damned" and Simon Ennis' comedy "You Might as Well Live," starring [Michael Madsen](#).

"The Slammin' Salmon," a comedy from the [Broken Lizard](#) group, will unspool as a special screening.

The Slamdance competition is open only to under-\$1 million budgeted films from first-time filmmakers. Other programs this year include script and short film competitions, a new musicvid showcase and Fireside Chats.

Slamdance will unspool Jan. 15-23.

15th Slamdance Film Festival lineup:

NARRATIVE FEATURE COMPETITION

- "The Ante"
Max Perrier, Canada
- "A Quiet Little Marriage"
Mo Perkins, USA
- "City Rats"



Glenn McQuaid's 'I Sell the Dead,' a black comedy horror pic, will open the Slamdance Film Festival, which runs Jan. 15-23.

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Steve M. Kelly, U.K.

- **“I Sell the Dead” (Opening Night Film)**
Glenn McQuaid, USA
- **“Mississippi Damned”**
Tina Mabry, USA
- **“Only”**
Ingrid Veninger & Simon Reynolds, Canada
- **“Punching the Clown”**
Gregori Viens, USA
- **“Son of the Sunshine”**
Ryan Ward, Canada
- **“Spooner”**
Drake Doremus, USA
- **“You Might as Well Live”**
Simon Ennis, USA

SPECIAL SCREENINGS

- **“At Any Second”**
Jan Fehse, Germany
- **“Drool”**
Nancy Kissam, USA
- **“Finding Bliss”**
Julie Davis, USA
- **“Not Forgotten”**
Dror, USA
- **“Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Undead”**
Jordan Galland, USA
- **“The Slammin’ Salmon”**
Kevin Heffernan, USA
- **“Weather Girl”**
Blayne Weaver, USA

TWILIGHT SCREENINGS

- **“The Conjurer”**
Clint Hutchison, USA
- **“Mum and Dad”**
Steven Shiel, U.K.

DOCUMENTARY FEATURE COMPETITION

- **“Graphic Sexual Horror”**
Barbara Bell & Anna Lorentzon, USA
- **“Hard to Be An Indian”**
Beth Toni Kruvant, USA
- **“Lost Sparrow”**
Chris Billing, USA
- **“Oh My God, It’s Harrod Blank”**
David Silverberg, USA
- **“The Road to Fallujah”**
Mark Manning, USA
- **“Second Sight”**
Alison McAlpine, Scotland/Canada
- **“Smile Til It Hurts”**
Lee Storey, USA



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January 26, 2009

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Steve Kelly Handles *City Rats*

by *Douglas Polisin* | Published January 20, 2009

With both the Sundance and Slamdance Film Festivals underway, Park City, Utah has become the epicenter of indie movies, pitting each festival in a turf war over whose festival represents indie moviemaking in the truest sense. And while Sundance may get all the media hype, there's no question that Slamdance features some great indie films, showcases new talent, provides a platform for truly original ideas and gives its participants a chance to show off a truly grassroots approach to moviemaking.

One of these movies is Steve Kelly's *City Rats*, a movie that stays true to the festival's emphasis on a more natural method of moviemaking, where even the simplest of stories can become something much more when big-budget theatrics take a backseat to the ways in which characters are presented and engaged. Taking place over the course of a day in London, *City Rats* is comprised of four different stories in a variety of styles, from the darkly funny to the downright sad. With an ability to skillfully present the story's emotionally charged content with grace, it looks as though Kelly will be a name worth remembering.

MM spoke with Kelly about his first feature film, his approach to directing and what it means to premiere in Park City.

Douglas Polisin (MM): You've made a name for yourself as a great director of prime-time television movies. What were the challenges in the transition to feature film with your cinematic debut, *City Rats*?

Steve Kelly (SK): I've always loved the movies and constantly sort of make my TV drama look and feel as much like a film as possible. I'd delve into the subject matter and extrapolate visual motifs and themes—something volume television drama finds hard to accommodate. I'd select actors with a unique quality who were still hungry and prepared to be different. I found the crews I worked with, loved the challenges of shooting on longer lenses and create high impact frames. So in many ways, I'd been rehearsing for features for years. I have also shot commercials so features felt a very natural progression.

MM: From what I've read, it sounds like you're not a fan of over-rehearsal and that you let the camera capture "the unique moment of truth." That's seems like a very organic approach to directing but also a very risky one. Was it worth the risk? Does that stripped down approach lend itself to the



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simplicity within the script? What are the benefits of directing in this way?

SK: I love working with actors and I get such a buzz from their uniqueness. For me, the Holy Grail of directing is to help actors find that "unique moment of truth." On *City Rats* I made it clear I neither wanted to over-rehearse nor over-shoot any scene. That approach invited each actor to be challenged beyond their comfort zone and in a reactive environment. I zone in on scenes that are a real. A moment in time witnessed by the camera and not contrived. I invite spontaneity and ask actors to surprise me. But this approach hides a mass of background work; it is definitely not an easy option, but I believe it pays off. For me the performances in the movie are beautifully judged and very deep. Even now, when I watch certain scenes, I'm still transfixed.

MM: Was it difficult to balance the humor of the movie with some of the darker things you explore (death, suicide, drugs, sex, etc.)? How did you find that balance?

SK: *City Rats* is a striking mix of comedy and tragedy and has many contrasts. It's a rich... complex... disturbing... heartrending... beautiful... bitter... haunting... damaged...dark... brooding... provocative piece! This heady combination of genre types forced me to work tirelessly to blend each element. It's great to place audiences in difficult dilemmas. Asking them if they ought laugh at such dark subject matter. Perhaps one of the best examples of this would be the three utterly divergent sex scenes, which are by turns eccentric, beautiful, gross and deeply moving. One is a beautiful scene where an autistic man, Chris, loses his virginity in absolute joy and serenity. Another is tragic, as two desperate characters, Jim and Sammy, have just agreed to commit suicide but try to find in sex a reason to live. This is profoundly sad and heartbreaking. The third is where a hooker, Gina, who wears leg braces, is having sex with a punter, John, dressed as a cowboy whilst the man who wants her to be his muse looks on. The scene is funny, repulsive and desperate. You can literally see some of these characters lose their souls during the scenes.

MM: *City Rats* is premiering at Slamdance, what does that mean to you? How does it feel to be a part of the festival?

SK: It's amazing for me to premiere the movie at Slamdance. It's a festival with a passion for selecting, dangerous, original and powerful films looking for the talent of tomorrow and I'm thrilled to be part of that journey.

MM: What is your next project?

SK: I'm currently filming a comedy in the UK. It's a charming British road movie about 11 old and new friends who embark on a trip of a life time. It's funny, heart warming and deeply poignant.



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Slamdance: City Rats

By [Kelly West](#): 2009-01-25 18:18:03

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The critically praised "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button". Out 6 Feb
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While visiting Park City, Utah for the Sundance Film Festival, I had the opportunity to screen *City Rats*, an independent film being shown at the film festival next door, Slamdance. The film follows eight characters throughout a day in London when it seems that each of them is at a crossroads. It's a dark and gritty piece, involving subjects ranging from suicide, prostitution, homosexuality and murder. We see four separate stories play out among the characters as each of them reaches out to another to try and come to grips with whatever it is they're dealing with.



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Among the characters are Jim and Sammy, two suicidal strangers who agree to spend one day together before they go through with their suicides. Dean is an artist looking for inspiration. He approaches the prostitute, Gina, living upstairs from him in the hopes that she'll be his muse. Olly is a sexually confused man who, in looking after his deaf-mute brother Chris for the day, begins to explore his own homosexual tendencies. Finally, there's Pete, a man who is being pursued by Carol, the mother of a man who's gone missing. Carol believes Pete may know what happened to her son. As these four sets of characters make their way through the day, we come to see what their personal challenges are and how they do or don't overcome them with the help of each other.

MyAnna Buring, whom you'll see in the upcoming film *Lesbian Vampire Killers* spoke to me a little bit about her suicidal character Sammy, "I was very drawn to trying to understand why someone would be so premeditative about taking one's own life. Where somebody would have to be in order to think that was the only solution. She's a tragic character but I think she's an important one for me to try and understand and get to grips with and I think she's an important character to try to be portrayed because unfortunately there are a lot of people out there who have that experience." Buring went on to talk about how sometimes people just get stuck in their lives and have to reach out to someone for help, "We as people, we help each other. We don't work on our own, we never function alone. We are social creatures," she went on, "It is together that we find solutions."

Ray Panthaki, who plays Dean, the artist looking for inspiration, spoke about how he was able to relate to his character, saying, "I kind of related to it in a sense. That kind of artist being frustrated, people kind of not appreciating what you do. I think as actors we've all been through that frustration where you've been out of work and knowing you have something in you but no one else can see it."

One of the things that sets the stage for *City Rats* is that it takes place on the summer solstice. Director Steve Kelly discussed that aspect of the film and how it factored in to the characters' stories, "It's set on the summer solstice, which is the longest day of the year. Full moon. It's a really strange time where more suicides, more instances of violence, more instances of hospitalization, everything takes place – it's a very heightened environment. We chose to set it on a very hot, clammy day. So the actors had to be sweated up because you

know London is never really that warm. We were really trying to get a grimy look where people were, almost, even before they'd started, being pushed to the edge of where they were at. You get moments in your life where it's a defining moment. You know if you don't take that moment, that moment could be gone forever. You don't get the chance to move on or exercise the ghost inside you. And all these characters, you almost feel like they're losing their souls and they're desperately reaching out to somebody else, to try and give them a reason to live. And some do, and some don't."

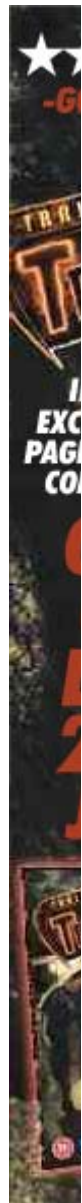
The film doesn't follow the traditional format you normally find in most movies with your basic beginning, middle and end. It's more like a slice out of these people's lives. All of the characters are going through their own turmoil and trying to figure out how to manage it. This could make the film a challenge for some people, if they're normally more comfortable with the typical story-telling format found in most movies. "We're not going to do the classic three act structure," Director Steve Kelly said, "We want people to work at the movie because it engages you. If I work at a movie, I love it, I'm engaged with it. I'm asked to use my imagination. You read a book, it's your imagination. When you see a film, you're spoon fed. Now, I love spoon fed movies as well, don't get me wrong. It's not that. We knew we were breaking all the rules and we knew that there were risks in doing it. We were prepared as experimental filmmakers to have a go and we kind of felt with the actors we had, we made some great statements."

While the acting and the storytelling are both fantastic in this film, one of the things that stood out most to me was how beautifully it's shot. The film manages to capture London in a way that is dark and edgy, while also more unique and in some ways, visually stunning than what you might find in some bigger budget films set in the city. I asked Steve Kelly and the film's screenwriter, Simon Fantauzzo about this. Both became very animated when I brought the subject up. Apparently, filming in London can be quite a challenge. Like with many other major cities, it can be difficult to get the right permissions to film in different parts of the city. Specifically, they discussed the challenges involved in filming at Trafalgar Square. Apparently, you can't feed the pigeons there anymore. Because there's a scene in the film involving pigeons, they had to be sneaky about getting the shots they wanted.

While it seems like it was quite challenging for Kelly and Fantauzzo to get the film made the way they wanted it, both seemed to be in agreement that the challenges posed to them in terms of filming in London were a benefit to the film in the end. Fantauzzo commented on Kelly's direction in this regard, saying, "I think what Steve did as well, with the way he filmed it, guerilla style, it gave us that essence of London that I don't think we would have had in that kind of way if we would have always had the permissions." Kelly went on to talk about trying to use what they did have to their advantage, turning vice into virtue and making it work for what they were trying to bring out in the movie, "With low budget filmmaking, that's what you do."

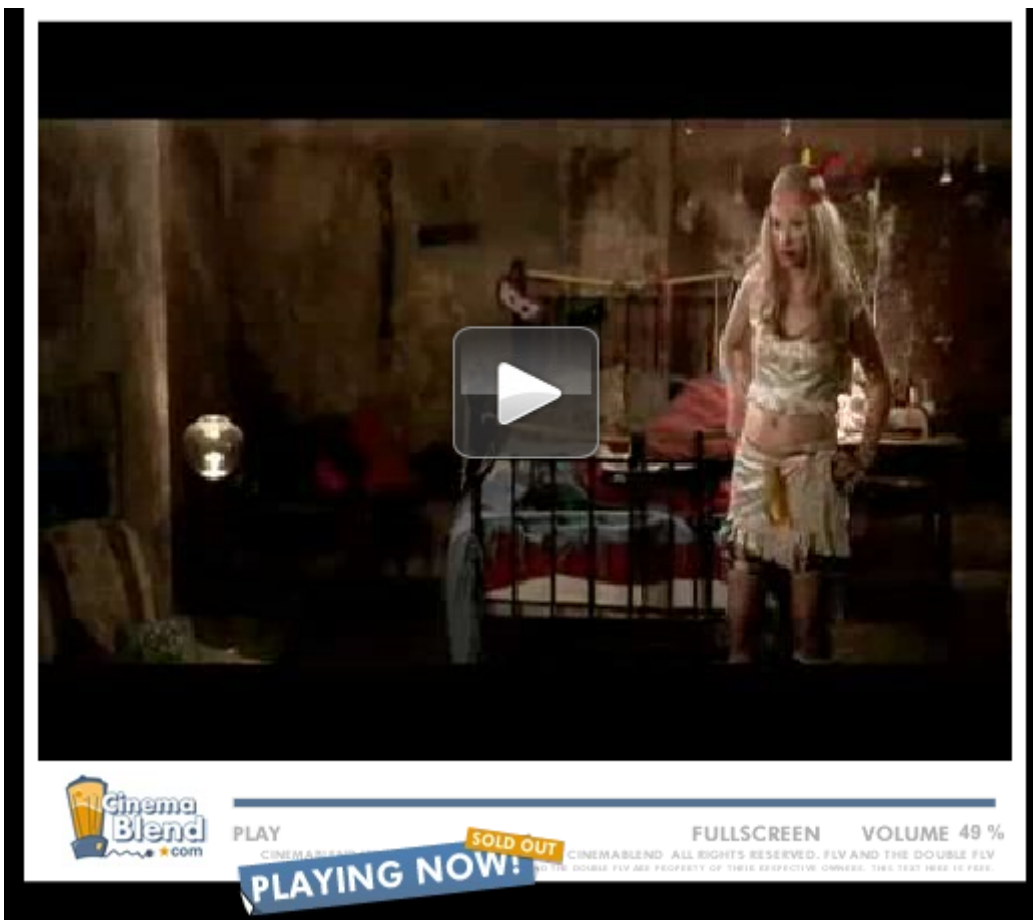
City Rats is a darker movie that probably won't appeal to everyone. That said, I think some people are going to absolutely love it. It's a very human piece that people will either be able to connect to on an emotional level, or not.

Below is the official trailer for the film, along with photos of the cast:



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Live from Sundance: City Rats and Black Dynamite

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by *MovieMaker Staff* | Published January 22, 2009

MovieMaker's coverage of day seven at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. Featuring interviews with the moviemakers behind the festival hits *City Rats* and *Black Dynamite*, which was just bought at the festival for \$2 million.



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New cult classic?

Greg Marshall, Of the Record staff

Posted: 01/20/2009 05:06:53 PM MST

Congrats, "Rats."

The Slamdance drama "City Rats," about eight odd Brits who meet on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, scored a distribution deal in the United Kingdom last week, two days before its premiere at Treasure Mountain Inn.

Director Steve Kelly interrupted shooting a film abroad to attend the festival. "From the beginning, Slamdance was one festival we really wanted to come to," he said Monday evening. "You're now in this incredible town with audiences who are willing to take risks."

The film, safely classified as experimental, follows eight lonely people. One character, Dean, played by Ray Panthaki, loves to recite bad poetry in public. Other characters delve into the lives of handicapped prostitutes and throw watermelons from roofs to test the effect for potential suicide.

Panthaki has been to Park City with a film once before and said he is more familiar with the grind of junkets and promotion than he was when he first visited in 2003.

"All the characters are connected," he explained, "even if they never meet each other."

MyAnna Burning describes the challenges of shooting an independent film in London in stark terms. "No money and little time," she laughed.

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The Carpetbagger



The Times's Awards Season Blog

January 16, 2009, 12:01 pm

The Bagger at Sundance: What's Also Next

By [The Bagger](#)



A scene from "City Rats," playing at Slamdance. (Cityrats, Ltd.)

The organizers of [Slamdance](#), the other film festival right up the street from the Sundance, have watched the travails of the indie exhibition world with interest, but not much fear. Although one of their films has already been picked up – Revolver, a U.K. distributor, bought a film called "City Rats" in advance of the festival – most of the movies there are not coming soon to a movie theater near you. That doesn't, however, mean that they won't show up on a screen somewhere. Much of the festival [is being streamed live online](#), and Peter Baxter, the festival's president, says that alternative means of distribution will give filmmakers more leverage and more audience than they have had in the past.

"Technology has already made it much easier for individuals to make more interesting films without a lot of money and now we are looking at a way for them to find new inroads to the audience," he said.

Mr. Baxter acknowledged that there is not a great business model to go with Web-based content, but then, there's never been a great one for most indie product anyway. "Why not start looking at other ways of getting films made and seen?" he said.

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Touching the void

This year's Sundance film festival was a casualty of the credit crunch, as the deals and glamour dried up. Has the golden age of indie films turned to dust? By Andrew Smith

Andrew Smith

The Guardian, Friday 30 January 2009



A window on the future of American cinema ... scene from Brooklyn's Finest

For all the sniping that comes Robert Redford's way every January as the Sundance film festival gets under way in the mountain resort of Park City, Utah, no one tells the story of the festival's corporatisation of independent cinema better than its founder.

When the US film festival became Sundance in 1985, he says, Hollywood was in a rut, and indie film-makers such as Spike Lee, the Coens and Steven Soderbergh were on the verge of breaking through. Soon, name actors were gravitating to the indie sector in search of better material, leading Hollywood to fear it was missing out on something new and lucrative. In response, major studios set up their own "indie" subsidiaries and started to colonise the festival, bringing A-list actors with paparazzi in their wakes. Suddenly, Sundance was glamorous, full of marketeers and goodie bags and wannabes of all stripes, sending hotel room prices spiralling and leaving real indie film-makers to crash on each other's sofas.

"When that started to get more attention than what we were doing at the core, that's when I started to get worried," Redford says. "But, you know, there's really nothing we can do: we were just going to wait out this trend."

Redford may not have much longer to wait. The past year has seen cash-strapped studios fleeing the independent sector, leaving many to wonder whether indie film can survive the coming recession intact. This year's Sundance provided a window not just on to the culture of the recession, but on to the future of American cinema *per se*.

When I arrive in Park City, halfway through the festival, the news is grim: only one of the 200 features being shown, a cop drama called *Brooklyn's Finest*, has been sold to distributors. Over the next few days, two more follow: a 70s-set blaxploitation flick called *Black Dynamite* and a brilliantly skewed love story, *Adam*. A few more are reported to be "still in play". All the same, the talk of the town is of low attendances and sluggish trade.

At one of the many bland receptions Sundance hosts, Carla Mertes, director of the festival's documentary section, lays the blame squarely at the door of the economy. "Foundations and endowments are shrinking," she says, and they're going to be granting less. Documentary filmmakers have traditionally been a very DIY, proud breed, and so I think we'll still see plenty of content being produced, but I think we'll see fewer big-budget, highly produced docs - the *Touching the Voids* and *Man on Wires*." She thinks there will be more collaboration, and projects that would previously have taken two to three years to complete will take four to five. "It doesn't mean they won't be done. But it will be about finding the stories. And there are more stories than ever, with the world as it is now."

The recession story is not cut and dried, however. Over lunch, the Oscar-winning British documentary producer John Battsek contradicts Mertes as he reflects on the difficulty of finding cinema audiences for documentaries. "Actually, I'm not sure it's about the recession. I think there's been a shift in the marketplace in the last couple of years, with audiences gravitating towards bigger movies and moving away from the middle ground. You know, *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, *Batman* all those films do vast sums of money, and I think that's as much of a problem as anything. Maybe it's something to do with needing fantasy and wanting to escape."

Battsek also suggests that it was too easy to make films for a while, with plenty of equity circulating the industry and DVD sales buoyant (they're now steeply in decline), resulting in a dilution of standards. Nevertheless, the squeezing of the middle ground -

meaning projects with a budget of between \$2m and \$30m, Sundance's core constituency - will become a dominant theme of the week.

For all the doom and gloom, there's still pleasure to be had in Park City during festival time. A 45-minute drive from Salt Lake City, it's a prospectors' town-turned-ski resort with chairlifts running off the main street. You get the chance to earwig the movie people in mirror shades and headsets, as they bark obliviously into iPhones. (Favourite overheard phrase: Just make sure Jake doesn't kick the llama, okay?)

Perhaps the busiest people at Sundance are the specialist "reps", or agents, who are charged with selling films to distributors. The specialist indie rep behind the eventual sale of *Adam* to Fox Searchlight is Andrew Herwitz of the Film Sales Company. It's been a terrible year for big- and mid-budget indie films, he says. I suggest the collapsing middle ground will leave space for faster, fleeter guerrilla film-makers such as Anders Østergaard (whose *Burma VJ* edits together footage shot with mobile phones in Burma and is one of the talking points of the week). Herwitz explains an uncomfortable truth: that a cheaply made film costs the same to release and market theatrically as an expensive one, and that, with audiences falling, the economics of getting indies into cinemas are collapsing. He and other reps are forced to be ruthless about what they agree to take on.

"A difficult issue of being in this part of the business is that there are many fantastic films, which many people would love and respond to if they saw. The difficulty is, what will cause them to go and see that movie on Saturday night? And if you're a film without stars and without some really unique hook, it's nearly impossible to differentiate yourself so that people will go. There are many great films where the challenge of marketing them is overwhelming, and that's frustrating."

Despite this, Herwitz sees some hope. "The thing is, the audience for good stories has not gone away, and going to movies or renting a DVD is a relatively affordable luxury in a climate like this." Deals are being done, if more slowly and cautiously than in the past. One of Herwitz's clients is the British-South African author and journalist Rupert Isaacson, whose filmed journey to Mongolia with his American wife and severely autistic son is captured in *Over the Hills and Far Away*, as well as an accompanying book, *The Horse Boy*.

Over coffee, he tells me how he financed the film with his book deal, and how distribution offers have already come in, though nothing is likely to be signed until February. Elsewhere, Louie Psihoyos explains that his dangerous expedition to free a group of captive dolphins in *The Cove*, which won an audience award at the festival, was

funded with a loan from the Netscape billionaire Jim Clark. However, philanthropic "angel" investors, who have been significant players over the past decade, are vanishing fast.

Another producer, Joanna Seguro, details for my benefit one positive development: the extent to which production costs have fallen as film-makers move away from celluloid on to digital formats. Added to this, she says, the same shift in consumer habits that MySpace and YouTube engineered in the music industry "is happening with moving image". The upshot, she says, is that picture quality is increasing, even as the cost of the technology goes downward.

It's a development that also excites Peter Baxter, the British producer who runs the low-budget festival Slamdance. Slamdance is for films that cost less than \$1m to make, and pieces such as *City Rats* (an accomplished black comedy-drama by London-based Steve Kelly) and the ecstatically received festival opener, *I Sell the Dead*, prove just what the technology can be pushed to achieve. With new routes for online distribution rapidly opening up (perhaps using games consoles such as Microsoft's Xbox), Baxter suggests that independent film, far from being on the verge of extinction, may stand on the brink of a renaissance.

There will undoubtedly be pain in the short term, though. Baxter admits that the problem - as with the first wave of dotcoms - is that no one has established exactly how to make money from the new distribution formats yet. But there are people at Slamdance who claim to be close.

"This year feels like a watershed year, where we're having to leave behind an old paradigm of how distribution has worked - or hasn't," Baxter says.

"Basically, what we're seeing is a levelling of the playing field. I'm optimistic."

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