

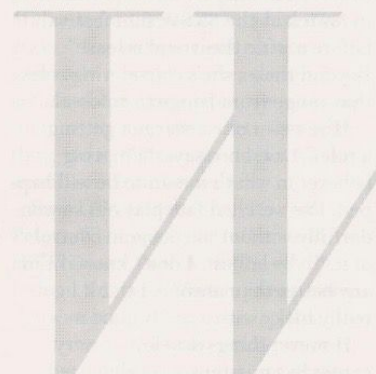
Sales-bait black comedy *The Details* premieres Jan. 24 at the Eccles.



Laughs and cringes unspool Jan. 22 when *My Idiot Brother* shows up.

The Indie Market's BIG REBOUNDED

Money ... in indie films? Buyers say yes as a contracting market has led to better films, bigger casts and optimism in Park City
BY JAY A. FERNANDEZ



WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES.

Thanks to healthy box office for specialty films, half a dozen new distributors and a hopping sales market at Toronto, the independent film world is suddenly rebounding like it's LeBron James. As a result, the Sundance Film Festival, which launches its 27th annual program Jan. 20, may showcase something odd in the movie business: stability.

"Twenty-four months ago, it was like the fall of Saigon," says Graham Taylor, head of WME's global sales division. "And every quarter it's increasingly gotten better."

The festival has lined up what many

consider an especially strong, truly indie-minded program that includes a sampling of films with higher-profile casts. So buyers and sellers alike are feeling not just optimistic but genuinely eager.

More than a half-dozen films have already been snatched up pre-fest, including *Take Shelter* (by Sony Pictures Classics), *The Music Never Stopped* (Roadside Attractions), *Corman's World: Exploits of a Hollywood Rebel* (A&E IndieFilms) and *Project Nim* (HBO).

Such filmmakers as Miranda July

(*The Future*), Lee Tamahori (*The Devil's Double*), Drake Doremus (*Like Crazy*) and Dee Rees (*Pariah*) will unveil new work, while such Premiere section movies as *My Idiot Brother* (Paul Rudd, Elizabeth Banks), *The Details* (Tobey Maguire, Laura Linney) and *Margin Call* (Kevin Spacey, Jeremy Irons) will roll out the bigger names.

Meanwhile, the documentary lineup includes several returning heavyweights: Morgan Spurlock (*The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*), Alex Gibney (*Magic Trip*, co-directed with Alison Ellwood) and James Marsh (*Project Nim*). Even Kevin Smith is back — this time with *Red State*, his first foray into horror.



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— GRAHAM TAYLOR, head of WME's global sales division

Sundance's 10 HOT TICKETS

Predicting which movies will find buyers at Sundance is a little like forecasting the Utah mountain weather — the radar is usually pretty accurate, but surprises come out of nowhere. These movies, however, are almost sure bets to sell.



The Details
Dir. Jacob Aaron Estes
Why it might sell Estes (*Mean Creek*) returns to Sundance with a black comedy about suburban conflict. The cast (Tobey Maguire, Elizabeth Banks) will entice buyers.
Reps UTA/CAA



The Devil's Double
Dir. Lee Tamahori
Why it might sell Based on real events, it's an acting showcase for Dominic Cooper, who plays Saddam Hussein's crazy son Uday and his beleaguered body double.
Reps CAA/Paradigm



I Melt With You
Dir. Mark Pellington
Why it might sell Pellington assembled a provocative cast (Thomas Jane, Jeremy Piven, Rob Lowe) for this thriller. Druggy and dark, but genre films often find buyers.
Reps UTA/Submarine

Ewan McGregor weathers a pandemic in the romantic thriller *Perfect Sense* on Jan. 24.



SUNDANCE 2011

and *I Am Love* (Magnolia) did well, and *Roadside Attractions* pushed *Winter's Bone*, last year's Grand Jury Prize winner, to a strong \$6.2 million showing at the box office.

This year, high-volume regulars IFC, Sony Pictures Classics and Magnolia will be on the prowl, along with Newmarket, the Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions Group and Samuel Goldwyn. Fox Searchlight could pick up a film, as could Lionsgate, Roadside, Paladin, Image Entertainment, Phase 4 and Anchor Bay, among others.

"The challenges that have always existed in terms of releasing independent films still exist," says Arianna Bocco, head of acquisitions at Sundance Selects/IFC Films. "But for films like *Winter's Bone* or *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, the audiences are still there."

While the range of distribution outlets is a boon to filmmakers, some agents at the bigger agencies scoff at the tiny commissions that come from increasingly small sales. But that has opened the door for independent sales agents such as Kevin Iwashina of Parlay Media and Submarine's Josh Braun to do well in an environment where buyers are increasingly savvy about using digital platforms.

"The greatest trend for independent films these days is video-on-demand," Greenberg says. "It's not always a huge amount of revenue, but it's enough that it helps you hedge the bet."

So with the right expectations, filmmakers, sellers, buyers — even audiences — could go home from Park City happy.

"We're looking for the best film of the year," Oscilloscope exec David Finkel says without irony. "I don't know where it's going to come from, but that's what's exciting about Sundance."

THR

"There's an embarrassment of riches out there," Phase 4 Films acquisitions executive Larry Greenberg says.

After a troublesome few years characterized by contraction and uncertainty, many industry players sense that the expectations of the buyers, sellers, producers, filmmakers and financiers who populate the independent film world finally are more in touch with reality. Operating under a tighter margin for error, producers are committing to better films on more sensible budgets, and they are allowing time to find the right deal, without expecting the headline-screaming payday of the festival's nutty years.

"People are now consciously taking an approach to making their films in the right budget range for the possibility that the only way you're going to get it [released] is by doing it yourself," says producer Joey Carey, whose Sundial Pictures has *Little Birds* and *Pariah* in the competition program. "Which means not relying on this idea that some third-party distributor is going to come into the festival and give you a chunk of change up front and take over for you."

Wild cards

The Guard

Director-writer John Michael McDonagh
This dirty, funny story about a small-town cop (Brendan Gleeson) and an FBI agent (Don Cheadle) trying to bust a drug-smuggling ring is full of Irish wit.

Sales: UTA

On the Ice

Director-writer Andrew Okpeaha MacLean
MacLean's 2008 short won prizes at Sundance, and this feature-length adaptation about two teenagers trying to get away with murder above the Arctic Circle may echo the stark *Winter's Bone* (2010) and *Frozen River* (2009).

Sales: WME

The Future

Director-writer Miranda July
The prize-winning *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005) filmmaker returns with an oddball tale of a searching couple in their 30s that features time travel and a stray cat as a narrator.

Sales: UTA

UTA sales maven Rena Ronson agrees there has been a reality check.

"When you come in and are more reasonable, and your expectations are set properly, there's less of a concern to explain to people why you're not getting your \$10 million sale," she says. "But there's also a lot more creative dealmaking being done."

In January 2010, Sundance saw a modest return to dealmaking, which carried through September's Toronto International Film Festival. And with half a dozen new or resurgent distribution entities — ATO Pictures, Wrekin Hill, the Weinstein Co., Relativity Media, Liddell Entertainment and FilmDistrict — this year's festival should see more opportunities, if smaller purchase prices.

Last year, for instance, Focus Features made its one targeted choice wisely, shelling out almost \$5 million for Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right*, which went on to gross \$21 million domestically and won two Golden Globes, including for best comedy/musical. Last year's titles *City Island* (Anchor Bay), *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (Music Box)



Like Crazy

Dir. Drake Doremus
Why it might sell Current "It girl" Jennifer Lawrence appears in this long-distance romance with Anton Yelchin, but it is star Felicity Jones who surprises most.

Reps UTA/Submarine



Margin Call

Dir. JC Chandor
Why it might sell A big, serious movie about the 2008 financial crisis, with a, big serious cast (Kevin Spacey, Paul Bettany, Jeremy Irons, Stanley Tucci, Zachary Quinto).

Reps UTA/Elwes/Untitled



Martha Marcy May Marlene

Dir. Sean Durkin
Why it might sell A buzzy drama about a woman who returns to her family after fleeing a cult could be a breakout role for star Elizabeth Olsen.

Reps UTA



My Idiot Brother

Dir. Jesse Peretz
Why it might sell An insightful comedy about a pot dealer (Paul Rudd) who moves in with his three sisters (Elizabeth Banks, Zooey Deschanel and Emily Mortimer).

Reps UTA



Perfect Sense

Dir. David Mackenzie
Why it might sell A love story set against a global pandemic, the romance/thriller hybrid with Ewan McGregor and Eva Green could lure art house and genre buyers.

Reps WME



Salvation Boulevard

Dir. George Ratliff
Why it might sell A religion comedy starring Pierce Brosnan as a corrupt preacher, with Greg Kinnear, Jennifer Connelly and Marisa Tomei adding more indie star power.

Reps UTA



The Son of No One

Dir. Dito Montiel
Why it might sell Gritty subject matter (two men deal with murders they committed as kids) but with an A-list cast led by Channing Tatum, Al Pacino and Katie Holmes.

Reps UTA/WME/Elwes