

Sundance with the Devil

BY SARAH KEENLYSIDE

PARK CITY, UT: For a year that looked slow for Canada at the Sundance Film Festival, with only one feature and seven shorts playing the indie fest, it turned out to be anything but.

“Last year we had a phenomenal number of Canadian films at the festival. This year we had a phenomenal film,” says Brigitte Hubmann, international festivals specialist for Telefilm Canada.

She’s referring to Peter Raymont’s feature documentary *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire*, which played at Sundance in the World Documentary Competition, winning the Audience Award. (The Canadian doc *The Corporation* claimed the same award last year.) The film is a moving account of retired lieutenant general Romeo Dallaire and his recent journey back to Rwanda, where in 1993 he led the failed UN peacekeeping mission.

On the film’s opening night, festival boss Robert Redford made a rare

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Ill Fated, Phil the Alien play well at Slamdance

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appearance, telling the audience that it was because of films like *Shake Hands* that Sundance was created. Redford stayed for the screening and Q&A follow-up.

Interest in the film was also intensified by Dallaire himself, who was at Telefilm's cocktail party at the Park City Marriott's presidential suite (aka the Canada Lounge) on Jan. 22 – greeting festival-goers and signing copies of his similarly titled book.

"It was such an intense weekend surrounding that film," says Hubmann. "It was strange spending those two days with the general. People were coming up to him like he was a holy man."

Another hit was, naturally, *Ryan*,

which scored an Oscar nom partway through the Jan. 20-30 festival, along with an honorable mention in Sundance's International Short Filmmaking competition. The animated short by Chris Landreth is the story of the National Film Board's famously troubled animator Ryan Larkin. "That film has literally been winning an award a week since it was rolled out at the Cannes Film Festival," Hubmann joked.

Halifax native Ellen Page (*Marion Bridge*) also turned heads for her starring role in the U.S. pic *Hard Candy*, about a girl who sets a trap for an Internet pedophile.

But awards and honors aside, the Canadian presence was scaled down at this Sundance. Nineteen Canuck films screened here last year, down to

eight in '05. Hubmann explains several factors could be to blame, including that the festival's World Dramatic category was cut down from the usual 28 to 16 films.

The long-running Native Forum category, which had played host to many Canadian films over the years, was also eliminated. "The logic behind them abolishing the Native Forum is the same logic that pushed TIFF to get rid of Perspective Canada [last year] – to de-ghettoize those films. There's been a quality increase in the films over the years and they felt they could hold their own in the other categories," says Hubmann.

But where Sundance lacked in Canadian entries, the alternative Slamdance Film Festival (Jan. 21-28) took up the slack. Four Canadian features and five shorts played Slamdance and were met with favorable attention from both audiences and the industry.

On Jan. 25, ThinkFilm struck a deal for the Canadian distribution rights of Mark Lewis' film *Ill Fated*, and Rob Stefaniuk's *Phil the Alien* took an honorable mention for best narrative feature.

Other features included Blaine Thurier's *Male Fantasy* and Édouard Lock's *Amelia*, a filmed version of a performance by his Montreal-based dance company La La La Human Steps.

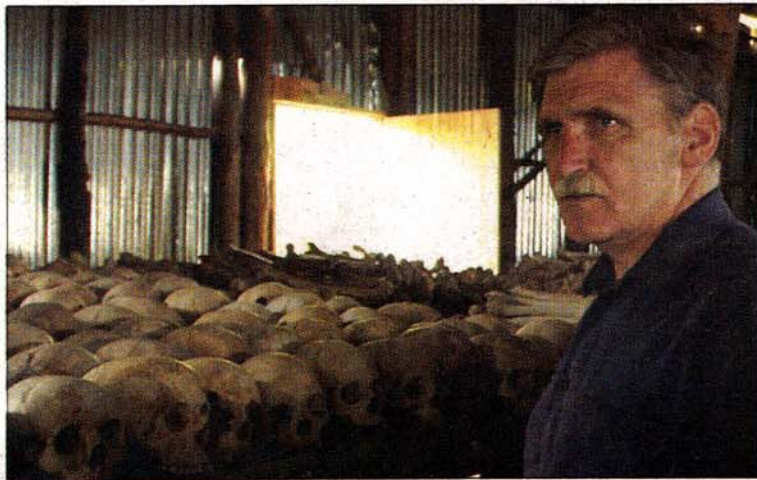
Hubmann was pleased by the

inclusion of so many Canadian films at Slamdance, but did express concern over the festival's handling of film prints and the projection quality. During a screening of *Ill Fated*, the reel fell off the projector, scratching the print.

"It was all over the floor like spaghetti," she says. The remaining five minutes of the film were watched on a laptop computer with the audience huddled around. •

–festival.sundance.org/2005

–www.slamdance.com



Shake Hands with the Devil scored an Audience Award at Sundance and a personal nod from Robert Redford