

Sundance: 'The Birth of a Nation' sweeps top prizes



Nate Parker, the star, director and producer of "The Birth of a Nation," holds aloft the US Dramatic Audience Award for the film during the 2016 Sundance Film Festival Awards Ceremony. —AP photos



Daniel Kwan, left, and Daniel Scheinert, co-directors of "Swiss Army Man," accept the US Dramatic Directing Award.



Craig Robinson, a cast member in "Morris from America," holds aloft his US Dramatic Special Jury Award for Individual Performance.



Sonita Alidzesh, left, subject of the documentary film "Sonita," and the film's director Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami accept the World Cinema Documentary Grand Jury Prize for the German/Iranian/Swiss film.



Agnieszka Smoczynska, director of the Polish film "The Lure," celebrates onstage after the film won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award.



Colombian actor Manolo Cruz, left, co-director and cast member in "Between Sea and Land," celebrates with co-director Carlos del Castillo after winning the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Acting.

"The Birth of a Nation," writer-director-star Nate Parker's stirring drama about the life of Nat Turner and the slave rebellion he led in antebellum Virginia, won the grand jury prize and the audience award for American dramatic features at the Sundance Film Festival on Saturday night. The film's double-fisted victory sealed its standing as the sensation of the festival's 2016 edition, following its record-shattering \$17.5 million acquisition earlier in the week by Fox Searchlight.

This is the fourth year in a row that a single film has taken the top two prizes in the US dramatic competition, following "Fruitvale Station" (2013), "Whiplash" (2014) and "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" (2015). That general trend aside, many had anticipated precisely this outcome for "The Birth of a Nation," whose rapturous reception on Monday seemed to chime with a number of issues affecting the culture in general and the film industry in particular. A seven-year labor of love for "Birth" will enter the marketplace with high hopes and expectations as an acclaimed work by a black filmmaker in an industry under fire for its lack of diversity in the wake of the #OscarsSoWhite controversy.

Creating a platform

Parker nodded to that particular issue when accepting the grand jury prize: "Thank you, Sundance, for creating a platform for us to grow, in spite of what the rest of Hollywood is doing." Parker wasn't the only filmmaker of color to make reference to diversity in his acceptance speech. Accepting his US documentary directing prize for

"Life, Animated," Roger Ross Williams, who became the first African-American director to win a documentary short Oscar six years ago (for "Music by Prudence"), noted, "In this age of #OscarsSoWhite and diversity, I want to thank Sundance for honoring me."

Just as diversity took the stage at the Screen Actors Guild that same night (with wins for Idris Elba, Viola Davis and Queen Latifah), so this year's Sundance-and its slate of dramatic competition winners-seemed to stand in especially pointed contrast to the Academy's recent woes. Acting awards were given to Joe Seo and Markees Christmas for their performances in "Spa Night" and "Morris From America," respectively, while Daniel Kwan shared the directing award with his co-helmer Daniel Scheinert for "Swiss Army Man," their divisive lost-in-the-wilderness comedy starring Daniel Radcliffe and Paul Dano.

Getting snapped

"Yes, we are the movie with a farting dead corpse, and somehow we still won this award," Kwan said of "Swiss Army Man," which premiered early in the festival and quickly became one of its most divisive and attention-grabbing entries before getting snapped up for distribution by A24. Elsewhere in the US dramatic competition, the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award went to writer-director Chad Hartigan for "Morris From America," his dramedy about an African-American teenager who has relocated with his father to Heidelberg, Germany; the film also drew an acting award for

Markees Christmas. Other thesping prizes were granted to Joe Seo for his role as an Asian-American teenager coming out against the backdrop of LA's Korea town in "Spa Night," and to Melanie Lynskey for her performance as a woman orchestrating a couples' get-together in "The Intervention." A special jury award was presented to director Miles Joris-Peyrafitte for "As You Are," his well-observed '90s-set drama of adolescent angst.

Special jury award

The US documentary grand jury prize was awarded to "Weiner," Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg's juicy portrait behind the scenes of disgraced politician Anthony Weiner's mayoral campaign. The audience award went to "Jim: The James Foley Story," Brian Oakes' portrait of the photojournalist murdered by ISIS in 2014. The directing prize went to Williams for "Life, Animated," his portrait of a young autistic man and his transformative relationship with Disney animated films. Elsewhere in that category, Robert Greene received a special jury award for writing "Kate Plays Christine," his layered look at actress Kate Lyn Sheil's preparations for the role of the late TV journalist Christine Chubbuck, while director Penny Lane and Thom Styliniski for their editing on "NUTS!," a portrait of a small-town Kansas doctor who discovered an unusual cure for impotence using goat testicles.

Other special prizes were given for social impact to "Trapped," Dawn Porter's documentary follow-

ing two Southern abortion clinics, and for verite filmmaking to "The Bad Kids," Keith Fulton and Lou Pepe's portrait of several troubled adolescents at California's Black Rock High School. In the World Cinema dramatic competition, the grand jury prize went to "Sand Storm," Israeli helmer Elite Ziker's debut feature about women caught between the forces of modernity and patriarchy in a Bedouin desert village. "Between Sea and Land," Manolo Cruz and Carlos del Castillo's drama about a mother and her muscular dystrophy-afflicted son living near the Colombian coast, drew both the audience award and a special jury prize for actors Cruz and Vicky Hernandez.

Vision and design

In the same category, the directing laurels went to Belgian helmer Felix van Groeningen ("The Broken Circle Breakdown") for "Belgica," a tale of two brothers trying to launch a nightclub in Ghent. Another special jury award, for unique vision and design, was bestowed on Polish director Agnieszka Smoczynska for her 1980s-set mermaid musical-horror film, "The Lure." In the World Cinema documentary competition, both the grand jury prize and the audience award went to "Sonita," director Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami's portrait of the eponymous Iranian rapper. Michael Marczak drew the directing prize for "All These Sleepless Nights," a year-in-the-life portrait of Warsaw youth.

Three special jury awards were presented for best editing to Mako Kamitsuna and John

Maringouin for "We Are X"; best cinematography to Pieter-Jan De Pue for "The Land of the Enlightened"; and Heidi Brandenburg and Mathew Orzel for "When Two Worlds Collide." The audience award for the Next section was given to Kerem Sanga for "First Girl I Loved," a lesbian romance between two Southern California high schoolers. Earlier in the week, Ciro Guerra's "Embrace of the Serpent" received the \$20,000 Alfred P Sloan Feature Film Prize, presented annually to a film that focuses on science or technology as a theme. The Colombian film, which is nominated for the foreign-language film Oscar, bowed in the festival's Spotlight sidebar. Also previously announced, the Sundance Institute NHK Award for a visionary emerging filmmaker was presented to Japanese writer-director Atsuko Hirayanagi for "Oh Lucy!," which screened in competition at the festival.

The Sundance Institute Global Filmmaking Awards, given to emerging independent filmmakers around the world for their future projects, went to Armando Capo, "August" (Cuba); Abdella Taia, "The Treasure" (Morocco); Geetu Mohandas, "Insha' Allah" (India); and Antonio Piazza and Fabio Grassadonia, "Sicilian Ghost Story" (Italy). The ceremony was hosted by Taika Waititi, the New Zealand director and Sundance veteran whose latest feature, "Hunt for the Wilderpeople," bowed in the festival's Premieres section. Kicking off the proceedings with a stated desire to leave Park City immediately, Waititi quipped, "We're on a mountain. We're not meant to be here. We're not meant to survive here. We're dying." —Reuters



Michal Marczak, director of the Polish documentary film "All These Sleepless Nights," accepts the World Cinema Documentary Directing Award.



Elite Ziker, director of "Sand Storm," accepts the World Cinema Dramatic Grand Jury Prize.

The full list of winners

US Dramatic Competition

Grand Jury Prize: "The Birth of a Nation"
Audience Award: "The Birth of a Nation"
Directing: Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan, "Swiss Army Man"
Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award: Chad Hartigan, "Morris From America"
Special Jury Award: Miles Joris-Peyrafitte, "As You Are"
Special Jury Award for Breakthrough Performance: Joe Seo, "Spa Night"
Special Jury Award for Individual Performance: Markees Christmas, "Morris From America"
Special Jury Award for Debut Feature: Melanie Lynskey, "The Intervention"

US Documentary Competition

Grand Jury Prize: "Weiner"
Audience Award: "Jim: The James Foley Story"
Directing Award: Roger Ross Williams, "Life, Animated"
Special Jury Award for Editing: Penny Lane and Thom Styliniski, "NUTS!"
Special Jury Award for Social Impact: Dawn Porter, "Trapped"
Special Jury Award for Writing: Robert Greene, "Kate Plays Christine"
Special Jury Award for Verite Filmmaking: Keith Fulton and Lou Pepe, "The Bad Kids"

World Cinema Dramatic Competition

Grand Jury Prize: "Sand Storm"
Audience Award: "Between Sea and Land"
Directing Award: Felix van Groeningen, "Belgica"
Screenwriting: Ana Katz and Ines Bortagaray, "Mi amiga del parque"
Special Jury Award for Acting: Vicky Hernandez and Manolo Cruz, "Between Sea and Land"
Special Jury Award for Unique Vision and Design: Agnieszka Smoczynska, "The Lure"

World Cinema Documentary Competition

Grand Jury Prize: "Sonita"
Audience Award: "Sonita"
Directing Award: Michal Marczak, "All These Sleepless Nights"
Special Jury Award for Editing: Mako Kamitsuna and John Maringouin, "We Are X"
Special Jury Award for Cinematography: Pieter-Jan De Pue, "The Land of the Enlightened"
Special Jury Award for Debut Feature: Heidi Brandenburg and Mathew Orzel, "When Two Worlds Collide"

Other awards

Next Audience Award: "First Girl I Loved"
Alfred P Sloan Feature Film Prize: "Embrace of the Serpent." —Reuters



Miles Joris-Peyrafitte, co-writer/director of "As You Are," accepts the US Dramatic Special Jury Award.



Roger Ross Williams, director of "Life, Animated," accepts the US Documentary Directing Award.