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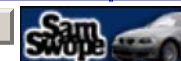
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Friday, January 26, 2007

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Louisville movie team sells 2 films at Sundance

One has early Oscar buzz

By **Judith Egerton**
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The Courier-Journal

Louisville film entrepreneurs Ed Hart and Bruce Lunsford caught lightning in a bottle this week at the Sundance Film Festival when they sold not one, but both of their festival entries.

One of those movies, "Grace Is Gone," starring John Cusack, is in the running for Sundance prizes and is creating buzz as an Oscar contender. "This is like buying your first horse and winning the Derby," Lunsford, a thoroughbred owner and partner in Hart-Lunsford Pictures, said yesterday.

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"Getting two-for-two will probably never happen again -- we want to enjoy the moment. My experience is that usually when you get these high peaks, they are followed by lows."

The Weinstein Co. paid \$4.2 million for the worldwide rights to



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Shélan O'Keefe, John Cusack and Grace Bednarczyk star in "Grace Is Gone," which made its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. (Jon Farmer/Plum Pictures)

THE FILMS

'Grace Is Gone'

Star: John Cusack (also a producer on the film)

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In addition, the Weinsteins and a partner, First Look Pictures, paid \$3.5 million for "Dedication," a dark romantic comedy featuring Billy Crudup and Mandy Moore and directed by actor Justin Theroux. Crudup plays a reclusive children's book author who is forced to work with a new illustrator, played by Moore. The movie is entered in the Spectrum division, a non-competitive Sundance Festival category.

"We were very, very pleased for going two-for-two and getting those prices for the movies," Ed Hart, former owner of Kentucky Kingdom, said yesterday. "But most important, we are really excited that Harvey Weinstein, in particular, was at the negotiations." Weinstein, who promoted the Oscar-winning films "The English Patient" and "Shakespeare in Love," knows how to market a movie, Hart said.

Hart said Weinstein views "Dedication" as the next "Garden State," referring to Zack Braff's 2004 indie hit starring Natalie Portman. "Dedication" may be released in August. As for "Grace Is Gone," it will likely open in theaters later in the year in order to position it for Academy Award consideration.

Hart-Lunsford made both films with its New York production partner, Plum Pictures, for less than \$5 million total. Yesterday the two Louisville businessmen credited the women behind Plum Pictures -- Galt Niederhoffer, Daniela Lundberg and Celine Rattray -- for the movies' success. "They are the producers -- they assembled the talent and brought the pictures in on budget," Hart said.

"Grace Is Gone," entered in Sundance's prestigious and competitive Dramatic category, was written and directed by Goshen, Ind., native James C. Strouse, who previously wrote "Lonesome Jim," a past Sundance entry directed by Steve Buscemi. The movie has a good chance at taking home prizes tomorrow night at the Sundance awards ceremony.

"Grace Is Gone," in which Cusack plays a Midwestern hardware store manager who must tell his two young daughters that their soldier mother has been killed in Iraq.

Cusack, best known for his roles in "High Fidelity" and "Say Anything," is getting rave reviews from Sundance officials, film critics and audiences for his performance as a grief-stricken father.

Plot: A man must find a way to tell his young daughters that their soldier mother has been killed in the Iraq war.

Buzz: "Although clearly coming from an antiwar perspective, the story's emotional effectiveness and family grounding give the film a real shot at connecting with general audiences across the political spectrum."

— Todd McCarthy, Variety

'Dedication'

Stars: Billy Crudup, Mandy Moore, Dianne Wiest

Plot: A misanthropic New York children's book author is forced to collaborate with a flighty illustrator to save his career in this dark romantic comedy.

Buzz: "One of the festival's true discoveries ... (the) performers deliver delicious performances that can shock and amuse simultaneously."

— Kirk Honeycutt, The Hollywood Reporter



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The Weinstein Co. and a partner, First Look Pictures, paid \$3.5 million for "Dedication," featuring Mandy Moore and Billy Crudup. (Chad Hunt/Plum Pictures)

Sundance Festival director Geoffrey Gilmore, who sees every film, had nothing but praise yesterday for both movies by Plum and Hart-Lunsford.

"I think they are both exemplary. 'Grace is Gone' is one of the best films of this year's festival. It has heart and emotional potency. It drives you to tears," he said. " 'Dedication' is one we saw pretty early and we got pretty excited about it. ... (Director) Justin Theroux is a very talented filmmaker."

Getting into Sundance, the Park City, Utah, festival started by Robert Redford, is tough. Of the nearly 3,300 entries this year, only 122 feature films were chosen for screening. Selling a movie to a major movie company for marketing and distribution is like winning the lottery. Selling two movies in the same year is phenomenal. It happens, but it's unusual, Gilmore said.

Having two movies shown at the festival is "like having two children who both get perfect SAT scores!" said filmmaker Gill Holland, a producer of a past Sundance winner, "Hurricane Streets." To then sell the rights for distribution to both is like getting Rhodes scholarships on top of that, he said.

Some Sundance films rake in awards and a swarm of media attention but then are never seen outside the festival. Many get limited release and show up on DVD.

It is the rare movie that goes on to box office and critical success, as did last year's Sundance hit "Little Miss Sunshine," now an Oscar nominee for best picture.

With positive reviews from critic Richard Roeper and the Hollywood Reporter for "Dedication" and early talk of Cusack and "Grace Is Gone" as potential 2008 Oscar candidates, it's a heady time for Hart and Lunsford.

"We saw many movies out there -- some really, really good movies -- but only 'Grace Is Gone' got a standing ovation, and John Cusack got one at the Q&A," Hart said. "The movie touched the audience. It pulls at your heartstrings. It's a compelling and understated performance."

As for the chances of Hart-Lunsford's movies finding mainstream success, Gilmore predicts both will have broad appeal and be well-promoted by the Weinstein Co. "They are clearly committed to getting these films to the marketplace," Gilmore said.

"Grace Is Gone" is a story about a family's grief. While it is an antiwar film, it is not a film from the fringe, Gilmore said. "It comes from a sensibility about the tragedy of war, and John Cusack has never been better."

Next up for Hart-Lunsford and Plum Pictures is a feature picture, "Rocket Man," with Louisville filmmaker Archie Borders that is based on a segment on the public radio program "This American Life." The companies also are in talks with

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director Charles Herman-Wurmfeld ("Kissing Jessica Stein" and "Legally Blonde 2") about a project involving Oscar-winning actress Hilary Swank.

Hart-Lunsford Pictures, formed less than three years ago, is in the Schuster Building on Bardstown Road. Hart is involved in several entertainment businesses, including theme parks.

Lunsford started several health-care firms, including Vencor. He ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2003.

The Sundance Film Festival continues through Sunday.

Freelance writer Peter Byck contributed information for this story.

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