

VAIL FILM FESTIVAL 2005

Vail Daily

Vail sets the stage for indies

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One is a quirky comedy directed by two brothers from Texas. The other documents an ongoing tragedy.

In some ways, "The Wendell Baker Story" and "Seoul Train" could not be more different. Yet the first feature by brothers Luke and Andrew Wilson (written by Luke and featuring their actor-brother Owen) and the debut documentary by producer-directors Jim Butterworth and Lisa Sleeth attest to the indie streak Scott and Sean Cross, founders of the Vail Film Festival, want to stoke.

"Our main goal when we set out was to foster independent filmmakers," says VFF's Sean Cross. "To really give people a hand up and get their work seen, that's something we've been able to accomplish this year."

The festival starts today and ends Sunday.

Count Sleeth and Butterworth in the "newbies worth knowing" category. "Seoul Train," their taut journey into the underground network that funnels North Korean refugees through an unsympathetic China to Mongolia and South Korea (if they're lucky) provides a moving vision of desperation but also of activism. The film has won a number of awards. "It was never supposed to be anything like this," says Butterworth by phone from his Vail home. "We had no idea that the film would get made, let alone turn out to be like this."

Just hours before heading back from their 2003 trip to South Korea, the two knew their video footage would become a bona-fide movie.

"We'd spent two months living among and interviewing these folks from the underground railroad," says Butterworth. "The last week before we came home, (activists) Chun Ki-won and Moon Kook-han entrusted us with their own footage they had shot. It gave us access to footage that as Westerners there's no way we could have gotten on our own."

"Seoul Train" plays Friday and Saturday; it also will screen Monday at Denver's Starz FilmCenter.

For filmmakers, eureka moments come in different flavors.

When Andrew Wilson read brother Luke's script two years ago - a 200-plus-page look at an ex-con turning his life around in a hotel for retirees - he told his sibling he would not change a word.

But it wasn't until a week into the shoot in Austin, Texas, that the litany of delays became a dim memory.

"Editor Harvey Rosenstock put together a rough cut of a scene with Kris Kristofferson and it just looked incredible. It looked exactly the way I imagined it when read Luke's script," says Andrew. "I'd love to duplicate that feeling."

Check out vailfilmfestival.com for a complete schedule of panels, tributes and films. Many, including Brennan Shroff and Paul S. Myers' "Southern Belles," Cole Claassen's "Fern Hill" and Dirk Simon's "Between the Lines," have Colorado ties.

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