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FEATURES

Indie film news, reviews, commentary, interviews, podcasts and more, updated throughout the week.

Can Sundance's Hits Fly Outside Park City?

By Anthony Kaufman on 02/10/2010



A scene from "The Kids Are All Right," Focus Features, 2010

The high altitudes of Park City, UT -- home to the Sundance Film Festival -- have been known to cause dehydration, insomnia and an overappreciation of certain independent movies. What sparks standing ovations and multi-million dollar acquisitions in the rarefied confines of the snowbound town doesn't always carry over into the outside world. For every "The Blair Witch Project," "Super Size Me" or "Precious," there's a "Hustle and Flow," "Hounddog" or "Hamlet 2." Where do you draw the line between hype and reality, sleep deprivation-induced passing crush or bona fide true love? A really great film that will resonate with niche (or even mainstream) audiences, or one that happens to provide the weary festivalgoer adequate satisfaction when compared with all the muck? Here's a little Sundance soothsaying about how four festival hits might fare when they arrive at a

theater near you.

"The Kids Are All Right"

A late selection at the festival, director Lisa Cholodenko's dramatic comedy about a lesbian couple (played by Annette Bening and Julianne Moore) confronted with their kids' hippy sperm donor (Mark Ruffalo) was an undisputed hit of the festival. The film drew the fest's biggest payday: Universal subsidiary Focus Features coughed up \$5 million to distribute the film not only in the U.S., but key foreign countries, the U.K. South Africa and Germany. "Kids" also drew some of the most enthusiastic praise: Salon's Andrew O'Hehir said the film "ranks with the most compelling portraits of an American marriage, regardless of sexuality, in film history."

Critical Buzz: Unlike Cholodenko's darker previous efforts "High Art" and "Laurel Canyon," "The Kids Are All Right" has a lightness of touch that many viewers foresee as its saving grace when it comes to the marketplace. While Variety critic Rob Nelson begrudged its "formulaic" qualities and "ingratiating sitcom-style entertainment," these were nevertheless the traits that he admitted would lead to "solid" commercial prospects." The film had naysayers among certain bloggers and alternative press critics, but it's the mainstream journalists -- in whatever limited supply that still exists -- that could drive ample positive word of mouth on the film.

Market Comparison: A story that centers on liberal L.A. lesbians may not find fans in Peoria, but observers feel that Cholodenko's well-drawn likeable characters won't scare away cosmopolitan audiences. And, after all, it was Focus Features that safely steered the gay cowboy movie "Brokeback Mountain" to an \$83 million box office gross in 2005 and the Harvey Milk biopic "Milk" to \$32 million in 2008. In the wake of Proposition 8 and the newly energized debate around gay marriage, "The Kids Are All Right" could serve as a lightning rod for political presses, furthering interest in the film.

Then again, straightforward sophisticated comedic dramas have had a hard time finding audiences lately. Unless the movie taps into the "It's Complicated" romantic comedy crowd, "The Kids Are All Right" could be a film more fondly remembered at that progressive-friendly "granola festival" (as *Variety* critic Todd McCarthy disparagingly referred to Sundance) and then subsequently lost amidst next fall's award season.

Prognosis: "Kids" will do all right.