

The Professionals: DGA  
begins after page 14  
Anatomy of a Hit: Smallville  
begins on page 23

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## Fest comfortable with sexuality

By Gregg Goldstein

PARK CITY — This year's Sundance Film Festival is presenting one of its strongest lineups of gay and lesbian films ever, with about 20 features and 10 shorts featuring queer themes. And the **Queer Lounge**, located in Park City's Gateway Center, has become ground zero for all the activity surrounding the films.

Executive director Ellen Huang founded the lounge two years ago after seeing pavilions for different countries and groups in Cannes. "I thought, why not one at Sundance?" Huang said. "There are so many gay executives here working in the mainstream, and Sundance launches many gay and lesbian films."

The lounge has hosted several  
See **SEXUALITY** on page 34

## Sexuality

Continued from page 8—

panels, and with its free WiFi and chic furnishings also provides a fashionable respite and meeting place for festivalgoers.

This year, gay and lesbian projects range from Shari Cookson's docu "All Aboard! Rosie's Family Cruise," which chronicles the first-ever chartered ship vacation for gay and lesbian parents and their children organized by Rosie O'Donnell and her partner Kelli O'Donnell — it was the topic of a Queer Lounge panel discussion Wednesday — to Wash Westmoreland and Richard Glatzer's coming-of-age drama "Quinceanera," which features gay characters.

One of the fest's most powerful films is "small town gay bar," which focuses on two gay bars in Mississippi and the hatred that surrounds the customers.

Even films that aren't specifically about gay subjects have touched on gay issues. For

example, Kirby Dick's "This Film Is Not Yet Rated," a critique of the MPAA ratings board, features a montage of gay sex scenes cited for branding a film with an NC-17 rating compared with parallel straight sex scenes from films that earned R ratings.

There wasn't always such a wide range of films, as Gus Van Sant attested at a Queer Lounge panel Saturday, when he discussed his 1985 film "Mala Noche." He recalled hearing that one film festival rejected his movie because it already had a lesbian film on its slate.

Just as Sundance's film slate has changed, the lounge itself has become more mainstream and no longer displays such signs as "Straight People Welcome" and "Sorry, No Makeovers" that appeared in 2004, Huang said. Some 30%-40% of people who drop in identify as straight, according to a survey conducted on the lounge's computers.

"What the festival reflects is

the culture at large, so why shouldn't (gays and lesbians) be a part of the multiplicity of the human experience on film?" said Maria Maggenti, director of the screwball comedy "Puccini for Beginners," which features a bisexual love triangle. Maggenti, however, doesn't believe in the term "bisexual." "I have a lesbian character and a straight (woman) character who sleeps with men," she said. In the movie, the two women then become involved.

Defining gay identities is a strong theme not only among many films in the fest but also among its filmmakers. "I'm a 'has-bian,'" Maggenti said. "I was a lesbian for a long time, but now I see men, though I prefer to just be called Maria." Lesbian filmmaker Jennie Livingston, best known for her 1991 Sundance Grand Jury Prize-winning, gay-themed "voguing" docu "Paris Is Burning," said it's not always important for projects such as her new short film

"Through the Ice" to have gay themes.

"Films have been traditionally made by straight white men," she said, "so it's just as important to have a wide variety of filmmakers and perspectives."

"Right now there's a lot of mobilization against gays and lesbians largely because of the way the Bush administration used the gay marriage issue to galvanize the Christian conservative right," said Silas Howard, the openly lesbian director of the short "What I Love About Dying," which centers on a lesbian with cancer. "It's important that filmmakers are getting a wide range of stories out there."

For her part, Maggenti seemed surprised by people's positive reactions to "Puccini," especially at its screenings in conservative Salt Lake City. "Maybe the world is a better place than I thought it was," she said before adding after a brief pause, "though I doubt it." ■