

# The Washington Post

## Sundance Film Festival 2011: Georgetown graduates among favorites

By [Ann Hornaday](#), Wednesday, January 26, 8:09 PM

IN PARK CITY, UTAH In "Another Earth," a young woman seeks to escape her past by traveling to an alternate version of the planet. The feature's first-time director, Georgetown graduate Mike Cahill, has been on a rocket ride himself this week in Utah, where his sci-fi thriller-romance got scooped up by Fox Searchlight for around \$1 million. Cahill confessed to being "blown away" to a world beyond his current existence, though this week's otherworldly qualities could have to do with the dram of celebratory Jameson and 4 a.m. bedtime, after his deal was sealed.



**Gallery:** Photos from the Sundance Film Festival : A host of actors and directors are turning out for the Sundance Film Festival, which runs through Jan. 30 in Park City, Utah.

"I'm thrilled, dumbfounded, dizzy, everything," said Cahill, who began his career making films for National Geographic before moving to New York.

Adding to the thrill is that "Another Earth" is a collaboration with a fellow Hoya, Brit Marling. The film's star and co-writer has proved the sudden Sundance darling, not only for her striking performance in "Another Earth" but for her equally assured work in "Sound of My Voice," yet another speculative fiction film by yet another Georgetown alum, Zal Batmanglij. As with "Another Earth," Marling co-wrote "Sound of My Voice," a taut, superbly crafted drama about a cult leader who claims to be visiting modern-day Los Angeles from the year 2054.

Cahill and Marling were both economics majors at Georgetown and Batmanglij was studying anthropology when they met and began to collaborate on short films 10 years ago. (Batmanglij is

a Washington native, the son of Georgetown book publisher Mohammad Batmanglij and chef Najmieh Batmanglij; his brother is Vampire Weekend keyboardist Rostam Batmanglij.)

With two of the best-received films at Sundance, Marling has qualified as one of the "it" actresses of the festival - all the more surprising for someone who, even while making short films with Cahill and Batmanglij, didn't consider acting a potential career for her. "My idea of work at the time was more punitive, like that work should be difficult," she said. Then, after a summer working at an investment bank, "I thought, 'That's a really bad idea for how to live your life. You should really enjoy what you do.' " With accolades now following the blond actress from Park City to Los Angeles, it's safe to say she made the right choice.

"Another Earth" and "Sound of My Voice" proved bracingly ambitious, forward-thinking alternatives in a festival lineup that is still often dominated by derivative, dysfunctional family dramas and teen angst. And the resourcefulness and creativity of these two 2011 discoveries exemplify just what Robert Redford set out to champion when he founded Sundance years ago. As Redford explained at the opening news conference, Sundance is still primarily meant to be "a space and a place for independent voices. . . . We started on a shoestring, and that is our core, keeping that shoestring in place."

So this year's festival projected an understated vibe that felt far more relaxed than the financial-bubble years of yore. The trailers that preceded the 80-plus features playing here were simply an animated snowflake set to generically appealing music. The only festival-sponsored swag is a green plastic water bottle sure to fit right in with the dozens already on visitors' crammed shelves back home.

Make no mistake: Sundance remains a place where life-changing deals are made, a tradition started in the 1980s and '90s when such tiny films as "[sex, lies, and videotape](#)," "[Slacker](#)" and "[El Mariachi](#)" were picked up here, launching the careers of Steven Soderbergh, Richard Linklater and Robert Rodriguez, respectively.

Like pre-sold paintings lending a gallery opening valuable buzz, several of the festival's big draws arrived with deals already in place, including Tom McCarthy's funny, touching coming-of-age movie "Win Win," with Paul Giamatti, and Azazel Jacobs's funny, touching coming-of-age movie "Terri," with John C. Reilly. As portraits of father figures shepherding teenage boys through difficult times, both offer a refreshingly un-cynical view of adults keeping faith with the young people in their lives.

And in one case, a filmmaker sold a film he made back to himself for \$20. That was writer-director Kevin Smith, whose culture-war satire "Red State" attracted Westboro Baptist Church activists marching outside the world premiere. Smith inveighed against the current business model for film distribution (and the industry marketing budgets he called "obscene") and announced that he would take his movie on the road himself. (His message to a few acquisition execs who attended his premiere: I don't need you. And from the sound of their grumbling, they heard him loud and clear.)

It's a far cry from the breathlessness of 1994, when Smith's "[Clerks](#)" was bought here by Miramax, launching his career. This year also had its share of Cinderella stories, an early one being the taut Wall Street drama "Margin Call," starring Kevin Spacey and Paul Bettany, which was locked down early by Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions. Later, Fox Searchlight picked up the teen comedy "Homework," the drama "Martha Marcy May Marlene" and the remake rights to "The Bengali Detective." The Weinstein Co., meanwhile, announced Tuesday that they had acquired "The Details," a dark domestic comedy starring Tobey Maguire, Elizabeth Banks and Laura Linney. Paramount snagged "Like Crazy," Drake Doremus's sensitive young-love romance starring Anton Yelchin and Felicity Jones (another festival-minted star).

As diverting as the bidding wars are, the most rewarding experiences at Sundance this year were often to be found outside commercial constraints and conventional formats. It's a measure of how the medium has changed that Batmanglij and Marling first conceived "Sound of My Voice" as a serial Web feature, and the filmmakers hinted that they might continue the story in that format. "Sound of My Voice" was preceded by Lance Weiler's short film "Pandemic 41.410806,-75.654259," a futuristic horror film that serves as a companion to Weiler's "trans-media" installation "Pandemic 1.0." That work is an interactive computer-based piece that sends participants on a hunt through Park City in order to stop a fictional epidemic and was part of Sundance's New Frontier sidebar, which this year featured some of the best work at the festival.

In a program whose theme was the "Liberated Pixel," New Frontier programmer Shari Frilot chose work that integrated film with live-action performance, audience participation and immersive technologies. Her aim was to explore the edges of a medium that's beginning to push the confines of a two-dimensional screen.

So New Frontier audiences were treated to such groundbreaking works as Mark Boulos's "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air," in which projected images of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and Nigerian anti-corporate activists engage in a fascinating dialogue from across the room. Another luminous and literally multidimensional innovation was a gorgeous 3-D animated collaboration between choreographer Bill T. Jones and digital multimedia artists OpenEnded Group. And the ubiquitous James Franco, not content with a mere Oscar nomination, buffed his avant-garde bona fides with "Three's Company: The Drama," in which the actor re-created the set from the 1970s sitcom, projected episodes of the show and provided a voice-over narration giving the sex farce's famous double entendres and one-liners more shaded, subversive meaning.

By far the coolest piece in New Frontier - and maybe in all of Sundance - was Aaron Koblin and Chris Milk's "Johnny Cash Project." It's an interactive Web site where the artists enlist fans to submit hand-drawn individual frames from Cash's final music video. Set to the haunting strains of "Ain't No Grave," the video - which will continue to change as people send their drawings into the Johnny Cash Project Web site - aptly illustrates the song's message of everlasting life with images of unharnessed freedom and imagination.

As a transfixed group of viewers watched the chiaroscuro drawings morph into one another with uncanny grace and lyricism, the Sundance shoestring seemed stronger than ever.