



Britta Sjogren thought the Sundance Film Festival was pulling her leg.

STAFF PHOTO BY KEITH GREENE

# Sundance, no kidding

## Major film festival honors Triangle's Britta Sjogren.

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**B**ritta Sjogren is modest about her talents. When she received a call this past January, informing her she'd just won the Grand Jury Prize for Short Film at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival, she was incredulous. "I literally did think they were pulling my leg," she says.

Now, plenty of budding filmmakers enter their films at festivals all over the world and receive awards. But Sundance is a biggie. In fact, for young, independent filmmakers these days, it just may be the biggest. It's got cachet, as they say, and directors that do well there, whose films create a buzz, are often inundated with offers (witness Ed Burns' career since "The Brothers McMullen"). But these circumstances usually apply to feature films, and Sjogren's film, "a small Domain," is an 18-minute short.

But Sjogren took an opposite course than most neophytes: She made a feature first, before she made "a small Domain," back when she was still in school. Her "Jo Jo at the Gate of Lions" premiered in competition at Sundance in 1992. That film was made on a \$30,000 budget, financed entirely from student loans and credit cards. "When you're a student you tend to repress the inevitable obligations of financial duress, so it didn't come home to haunt me until after I graduated," she says. "But I know a lot of people who have as much debt as I do but don't have a feature film."

Originally from Corvallis, Ore., Sjogren has lived in Chapel Hill for a little more than a year. She's an instructor in the Department of Communication Studies at UNC, teaching courses in film history, production and screenwriting. She was schooled in the land of Hollywood, getting her B.A. in humanities at the University of California-Berkeley, where she says she "had inchoate desires to make films but it took a while to recognize that and do something about it." She went on to earn a master's and master's of fine arts from UCLA, where she's also finishing up a dissertation for her Ph.D. Her films, though, aren't anything like the assembly line products that come out of Hollywood.

"a small Domain," which won awards at two other festivals in addition to Sundance, is about the last two days in the life of a 95-year old kleptomaniac as she ritually prepares for her suicide on the anniversary of her marriage to her husband, who's been dead for many years. While that may sound like depressing subject matter, this spare, haunting film is actually quite beautiful, metaphorically connecting the cycle of birth and death with an uncanny attention to detail.

The film was inspired, in part, by Beatrice Hays, who plays the woman in the film. Sjogren met Bee when working on her feature film. "I needed these old hands, and I was looking for a mature woman, in her 80s or 90s, and a friend knew her. She was a delight to work with, very energetic, often the last one to leave, and she told me a lot of things about her life, especially her marriage. I found it very inspiring, her philosophical position on life and her energy."

The two developed a lasting friendship. Bee is 95, and her husband, Ted, has been dead for more than 35 years. In observing Sjogren's creative passions, Bee told her, "You're just like Ted, he wanted to sing." Sjogren convinced Bee to let her use a home recording Ted made in the 1930s of the song "Think on Me," which ends "a small Domain" on a melancholy note.

Sjogren's surprise about the film's Sundance award is genuine. "This was such a personal project and I literally just made it out of love for Bee and to do something creative," she says. "It's a film that's quite dear to my heart ... students use shorts as a calling-card type film, to show that they know

how to make a film ... I've never been interested in making a short like that. To me it's its own art form."

As for independent film vs. Hollywood, the "art vs. commerce" argument, Sjogren is philosophical. "As long as there's an independent spirit to filmmaking, it doesn't much matter where the money comes from, if a film has originality and creativity. Of course, filmmaking is always a risk, and it is very different when it's just you against the world than when it's you and 100 others and a corporation."

Sjogren's influences include the directors Jean-Luc Godard and Carl Dreyer. Godard's "My Life to Live" and Dreyer's "The Passion of Joan of Arc," especially, inspired "Jo Jo at the Gate of

Lions."

"Dreyer's naturalistic spiritualism, I find it very evocative and cinematic. To me that's pure cinema." Other strong influences are the Belgian director Chantal Akerman, Martin Scorsese, "and of course Hitchcock. Nobody can get away from Hitchcock, he's the master."

Future plans include teaching, which is "immensely rewarding," and starting production on her next film, a feature for which she's already written the script. Called "Claire's Bones," it will be produced by Andrea Sperling ("The Living End," "The Doom Generation"), whom Sjogren met at Sundance, and she plans to start shooting next May when school lets out. But she'll never stray from her first love. "I'm a cinephile. I try to learn from what other people have done. I like nothing better than to watch movies."