

2013 Sundance Diary, Day 5: Coming-of-Age Stories Dominate the Fest

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 23, 2013 - 11:48am

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PARK CITY, Utah – Perhaps it's due to the success of the Sundance hit "Beasts of the Southern Wild" and its story of a girl who was forced to grow up too soon or just the fact that it's a common theme of independent cinema but coming-of-age stories dominated this year's Sundance Film Festival. My final diary piece (although I'll be back with a few wrap-up features) includes the one coming-of-age flick that will be the biggest crowdpleaser and box office hit from the fest, Nat Faxon & Jim Rash's "**The Way, Way Back**". This very funny, sweet, '80s-esque comedy was already picked up by Fox Searchlight for at least \$10 million and the studio has another "Little Miss Sunshine" or "Juno" on their hands.

Written and directed by Nat Faxon & Jim Rash (Oscar winners for their work on "The Descendants" and known to many as Ben from "Ben & Kate" and Dean Pelton from "Community," respectively), "The Way, Way Back" is a familiar tale well-told. Liam James from "The Killing" stars as Duncan, a kid dragged on a summer vacation with his mom (Toni Collette) and her horrible new boyfriend (Steve Carell). They party at a summer house with other immature adults including Rob Corddry, Amanda Peet, and a scene-stealing Allison Janney. Meanwhile, Duncan meets a cute girl (AnnaSophia Robb) and even gets a job at the local water park, where he meets a totally different group of adults that includes Sam Rockwell, Maya Rudolph, Faxon, & Rash.



The Way, Way Back

Photo credit: Sundance

We've certainly seen this comedy before (the movie is incredibly reminiscent of '80s comedies like "The Flamingo Kid" and "The Sure Thing") but it's all about the execution here. The performances are solid throughout but Rockwell steals it, doing a riff on the characters Bill

Murray played in movies like “Stripes” — the fast-talking, smart guy who really has a bigger heart than he likes to let on. The kids are all quite good as well. In fact, the film sags more when it turns back to the adults than with the charming kids. That’s the best word for “Way, Way.” It’s charming. I expect it will be the most profitable film of Sundance 2013.



Upstream Color
Photo credit: Sundance

As familiar and comfortable as “The Way, Way Back” will be to most viewers, Shane Carruth’s “**Upstream Color**” will divide and annoy them. Carruth’s first film since his 2004 breakthrough “Primer” is a puzzle...or maybe it’s not. It’s a film that’s nearly impossible to recap in this capsule format but I’ll try. A woman (the excellent Amy Seimetz) is force-fed a maggot that allows someone else to control her through instruction somewhat like hypnosis. Drink this water and it will be all you need. Write out every page of “Walden” long-hand. Empty your bank accounts to me. From here, “Upstream” gets even weirder and even becomes something of a love story. The film has been very divisive at Sundance but I think I adore it. It’s daring, gorgeous, beautifully shot, and thematically fascinating. It will aggravate thousands of people around the world (if you thought “The Master” was hard to follow or all style over substance, stay FAR away) but I’m fascinated by a sci-fi film that’s more philosophy than science. It’s “The Tree of Life” meets “Altered States”.

My final four movies don’t challenge to the degree of “Upstream Color” or satisfy to the degree of “The Way, Way Back” but they’re worth mentioning nonetheless. The best of the group is Kyle Patrick Alvarez’s “**C.O.G.**,” the first film adaptation of a work by the great David Sedaris. Jonathan Groff (“Boss”) gives a fantastic turn as Samuel, a Yale kid trying to find himself after an undefined conflict with his family by going to work on an apple farm. He’ll get down with the masses and learn a thing or two about people unlike him. Denis O’Hare, Corey Stoll, Dean Stockwell, and Casey Wilson co-star. The lesson of “C.O.G.” is simple — people aren’t what you think they are in any town and any social strata — but it’s a well-executed piece, especially the great supporting performance by O’Hare. One can sense that this was an essay and not a complete story as it feels a little too slight for its own good but it’s worth seeing for the clever dialogue and strong performances. I eagerly anticipate with Alvarez does next.



Big Sur
Photo credit: Sundance

Speaking of anticipation, Michael Polish has produced a lot since he broke through with “Twin Falls, Idaho” and “Northfork”. He returned to Sundance with a film that the press notes claim was filmed in 2010, another Jack Kerouac story (after the great “Kill Your Darlings”), “**Big Sur**”. Jean-Marc Barr plays a late-in-life Kerouac, as fame and alcoholism eats at the solitary writer who has become a cultural icon. He retreats to a cottage at Big Sur, where he tries to come to terms with his role, his future, and his drinking problem. Kate Bosworth, Josh Lucas, Stana Katic, and Radha Mitchell co-star. “Big Sur” is beautiful with stunning cinematography by M. David Mullen and a gorgeous score but the film isn’t dramatically engaging on any level. With more narration than dialogue, it’s like going to a pretty slide show with someone reading Kerouac’s work. There’s no emotional attachment in any way.

More successful is Alexandre Moors’ “**Blue Caprice**,” a film that takes a unique angle on the real story of the Beltway snipers that terrorized D.C. in 2002. Tequan Richmond stars as Lee Boyd Malvo, who we meet in Antigua as his mother is abandoning him and he’s becoming

drawn to the charismatic John Allen Muhammad, played perfectly by Isaiah Washington, who does career best work here. Muhammad becomes a father figure to Malvo and it's slowly revealed that the new patriarch is deeply unstable. How Malvo and Muhammad go from Antigua to random killings is handled lyrically and slowly, almost more like "Ballast" than the thriller you might be expecting. I found the approach didn't fully fit the material. I left asking myself what I had learned or why the film was made but I can't fault Washington's work and Moors has a great eye. Like "C.O.G.," "Blue Caprice" is a film that didn't quite work for me but made me eager to see what its creator does next.



Prince Avalanche
Photo credit: Sundance

Finally, there's a former darling of Sundance, returning to the festival somewhat bruised and battered after the awful year he had in 2011 ("Your Highness" & "The Sitter"). David Gordon Green returns at least somewhat to his roots with "Prince Avalanche," a film that plays almost like a Samuel Beckett play set in the Texas woods. Two men (Paul Rudd & Emile Hirsch) are fixing the signs and repainting the lane markers that were destroyed in the previous year's fire. They wander a barren landscape, argue, joke, talk about girls, read, and generally don't do much of anything. Green is playing with genre here (the film straddles comedy and drama...which will make it a very difficult sell) but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that it also bored me in ways that I don't think were matched at Sundance 2013. The two actors are quite good but I never cared much about them or anything they were saying. Festivals are hard for a film like "Prince Avalanche" in that exhaustion starts to set in when you cross two dozen movies and being tired doesn't work for a film that's almost all dialogue.

That's it for the diaries but I'll be back with a recap of this year's best films and performances. Don't miss it.

[Read all of Brian Tallerico's coverage from Sundance 2013!](#) [13]



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