

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of Sundance 2013

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 24, 2013 - 7:11pm

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CHICAGO – The general consensus in Park City this year was that the overall quality of films presented to critics, industry, and paying audiences was near the highest it's ever been. There seemed to be a lack of true stand-outs — I heard people say “There's no Beasts of the Southern Wild” repeatedly — but the overall picture was a pretty one. I have to say that it was easy to find ten films from this year's fest that I thoroughly recommend, some of which will likely find their way into my best-of-year lists in eleven months. In alphabetical order and with details on when you can see them, these were the best that the Sundance Film Festival had to offer in 2013:

Honorable Mentions: “C.O.G.,” “Fire in the Blood,” “No,” and “S-VHS.”

All synopses courtesy of Sundance.

“After Tiller”



After Tiller

Photo credit: Sundance

Written by: Greg O'Toole, Martha Shane, & Lana Wilson

Directed by: Shane & Wilson

Synopsis: Since the assassination of Dr. George Tiller in Kansas in 2009, only four doctors in the United States continue to perform third-trimester abortions. These physicians, all colleagues of Dr. Tiller, sacrifice their safety and personal lives in the name of their fierce, unwavering conviction to help women. But for some in the pro-life movement, these doctors are “murderers” who must be stopped.

Review: One of the most emotionally wrenching experiences of Sundance 2013, Shane & Wilson carefully re-humanize four men & women who have become icons for the pro-choice movement and demons for the pro-life one. The fact is that they're just people with concerns, questions, and beliefs. “After Tiller” can be a tough experience to watch as much of it consists of pregnant mothers describing the fetal abnormalities that will make their unborn child's life absolute Hell (and how that led them to such a horrible decision) but it's an important film, the kind of work that takes the political and makes it personal again. There's no release date here but if the right studio picks it up, it will likely play arthouses by the end of the year. If not, it could go to HBO (who loves to pick up Sundance docs).

“Ain't Them Bodies Saints”



Ain't Them Bodies Saints

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Rooney Mara, Casey Affleck, Ben Foster, and Keith Carradine

Written and Directed by: David Lowery

Synopsis: Bob Muldoon and Ruth Guthrie, an impassioned young outlaw couple on an extended crime spree, are finally apprehended by lawmen after a shootout in the Texas hills. Although Ruth wounds a local officer, Bob takes the blame. But four years later, Bob escapes from prison and sets out to find Ruth and their daughter, born during his incarceration.

Review: David Lowery's Sundance Lab-produced drama drew comparisons to Cormac McCarthy and Terrence Malick and I think those obvious inspirations set me up to expect just a bit more from it. The film lacks the weight of its influences but is nonetheless a haunting, well-performed, beautiful piece of work. Sure, it falls short of "Badlands," but so do most movies that work from the Malick script. I'm haunted by what does work about "Saints" including its stellar trio of central performances, gorgeous cinematography, and evocative score. It hasn't been picked up yet but I'm sure a studio will do so soon. Maybe Focus?

"Before Midnight"



Before Midnight

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy

Written by: Hawke, Delpy, & Richard Linklater

Directed by: Richard Linklater

Synopsis: We meet Celine and Jesse nine years after their last rendezvous. Almost two decades have passed since their first encounter on a train bound for Vienna, and we now find them in their early forties in Greece. Before the clock strikes midnight, we will again become part of their story.

Review: One of my absolute favorite films of the last few years and the best thing anyone involved has done to date, "Before Midnight" is a stunning drama about the cost of love. The fact is that most romantic dramas that end on a beautiful, heartfelt note like the end of "Before Sunset" don't consider what happens next. "Midnight" is about how a decision to leave your family for another woman has repercussions even if it was clearly the right one. It's about the intermingling of love, regret, passion, and annoyance that are part of every relationship and it is an absolute masterpiece. Sorry to report that this one has no firm release date yet either although there's a bidding war going on in Park City with Lionsgate reportedly in the lead. If they pick it up, I would expect a Fall release. Stay tuned to the site and our Facebook page for updates.

“The Gatekeepers”

The Gatekeepers

Photo credit: Sundance

Written and Directed by: Dror Moreh

Synopsis: Director Dror Moreh filters the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1967's Six-Day War through the keen perspectives of all six living former heads of the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency. In remarkably candid one-on-one interviews, the men reflect on lessons learned and reveal the lasting impact of their actions on the peace process—for better or for worse.

Review: This Oscar nominee hits Chicago theaters on February 22nd and it's a stunner, a movie that was reportedly inspired by Errol Morris' "The Fog of War" and deserves to stand by that masterful work. Candid, revealing, and honest in ways that I just don't believe the equivalent King-makers in the United States would ever be, the men who comprise the majority of Dror Moreh's complex documentary are people that I won't soon forget. I actually had a chance to see this pre-fest but it played at Sundance and, even though I've seen dozens of films since, I haven't forgotten it. I won't for some time. "Searching For Sugar Man" or "The Invisible War" seem the likely choices for Oscar but I won't be slightly upset if "The Gatekeepers" takes the prize.

“Kill Your Darlings”

Kill Your Darlings

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Daniel Radcliffe, Dane DeHaan, Ben Foster, Jack Huston, Michael C. Hall, Elizabeth Olsen, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Kyra Sedgwick, and David Cross

Written by: John Krokidas & Austin Bunn

Directed by: Krokidas

Synopsis: While he is attending Columbia University in 1944, the young Allen Ginsberg's life is turned upside down when he sets eyes on Lucien Carr, an impossibly cool and boyishly handsome classmate. Carr opens Ginsberg up to a bohemian world and introduces him to William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. Repelled by rules and conformity in both life and literature, the four agree to tear down tradition and make something new, ultimately formulating the tenets of and giving birth to what became the Beat movement. On the outside, looking in, is David Kammerer, a man in his thirties desperately in love with Carr. When Kammerer is found dead, and Kerouac, Burroughs, and Carr are arrested in conjunction with the murder, the nascent artists' lives change forever.

Review: Possibly the most pleasant surprise of Sundance 2013 is this striking dramatic debut with one of the best ensemble performances you'll see all year. (Sony Pictures Classics has picked up the film with a release date TBA.) Radcliffe, Hall, Huston, and Foster are great but the movie belongs to Dane DeHaan as the star of "Chronicle" gives a performance reminiscent of young Leonardo DiCaprio or River Phoenix. He's going to be a MASSIVE star and likely award winner someday. This is just the warning shot.

Click through to the next page for the second half.

“Mud”



Mud

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Tye Sheridan, Matthew McConaughey, Sarah Paulson, Michael Shannon, Ray McKinnon, Joe Don Baker, Jacob Lofland, Reese Witherspoon, and Sam Shepard

Written and Directed by: Jeff Nichols

Synopsis: Ellis and Neckbone are best friends approaching the twilight of their youth. While exploring, they stumble upon the hiding place of charismatic outlaw Mud (played with controlled charm by a well-cast Matthew McConaughey), who takes a quick liking to the boys and recruits them to his cause: the search for true love and a clean getaway.

Review: I adored Jeff Nichols' "Take Shelter" and so I'm hesitant to say that the writer/director's follow-up is better but it's certainly arguable that it's as good. It's a more epic piece with the feel of a great, lost young adult novel about coming-of-age. With great performances from its entire cast (especially another nomination-worthy turn from McConaughey), "Mud" is a striking, memorable drama about how children deal with divorce and the shattering of the illusion that all men are chivalrous and all women want to be saved. It's a smart, well-acted flick that also simply looks great. Some things fall flat when they leave Park City, playing better there in the thin mountain air. I expect "Mud" to do the opposite and be one of the more acclaimed films to emerge from Sundance 2013.

“Upstream Color”



Upstream Color

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Amy Seimetz and Shane Carruth

Written and Directed by: Carruth

Synopsis: Kris is derailed from her life when she is drugged by a small-time thief. But something bigger is going on. She is unknowingly drawn into the life cycle of a presence that permeates the microscopic world, moving to nematodes, plant life, livestock, and back again. Along the way, she finds another being—a familiar, who is equally consumed by the larger force. The two search urgently for a place of safety within each other as they struggle to assemble the loose fragments of their wrecked lives.

Review: The big WTF movie of Sundance 2013 is Shane Carruth's long-awaited follow-up to 2004's "Primer." Any concern that the time since "Primer" might have mellowed or mainstreamed this daring filmmaker is shattered within minutes of this daring piece of work. I've seen a number of dramas that could be called "more poetry than prose" (think "The Tree of Life") but few science fiction films that warrant that description. "Upstream Color" is a thematic piece, a visual commentary on control, identity, and even love. Some will hate it (the last half-hour has almost no dialogue) but others have already fallen head over heels in love with its undeniable originality. I'm not sure I've wrapped my

brain around “what it all means” but I’m not sure I ever will. I’m increasingly sure I adore this movie. It will divide audiences around the country when Carruth self-releases the film in April.

“The Way, Way Back”



The Way, Way Back

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Liam James, AnnaSophia Robb, Sam Rockwell, Steve Carell, Amanda Peet, Allison Janney, Toni Collette, Maya Rudolph, Rob Corddry, Nat Faxon, & Jim Rash

Written and Directed by: Nat Faxon & Jim Rash

Synopsis: The Way, Way Back tells the story of 14-year-old Duncan’s awkward, funny, and sometimes painful summer vacation with his mother, Pam, her overbearing boyfriend, Trent, and his daughter, Steph. Although Duncan has a tough time fitting in and finding his place, he does find an unlikely ally and mentor in Owen, a carefree employee at the local water park where Duncan gets a job. Over the course of the summer, as his mother drifts further away, Duncan—with encouragement from Owen—begins to open up and come into his own.

Review: The most crowd-pleasing film of Sundance 2013 has already been picked up by Fox Searchlight with a late Summer release being eyed. Think “Little Miss Sunshine”. And I expect this very funny, very sweet comedy to have similar results with audiences and possibly even awards-giving bodies. Faxon & Rash’s directorial debut (they already won an Oscar for writing “The Descendants”) produced the most audience response I heard in Park City by some stretch. Laughter and applause. When the history books are written, I expect this to be the most profitable film of this year’s fest. It certainly doesn’t break any molds but it’s a familiar tale told with enough heart and wit to work. And it includes one of Sam Rockwell’s most engaging, hysterical performances. He’s reason alone to see it.

“We Are What We Are”



We Are What We Are

Photo credit: Sundance

Starring: Ambyr Childers, Julia Garner, Bill Sage, Michael Parks, Wyatt Russell, Nick Damici, and Kelly McGillis

Written by: Damici & Jim Mickle

Directed by: Mickle

Synopsis: A seemingly wholesome and benevolent family, the Parkers have always kept to themselves, and for good reason. Behind closed doors, patriarch Frank rules the roost with a rigorous fervor, determined to keep his ancestral customs intact at any cost. As a torrential

rainstorm moves into the area, tragedy strikes and his daughters Iris and Rose are forced to assume responsibilities that extend beyond those of a typical family. The most important task the girls face is putting meat on the table— but not the kind that can be found at the local supermarket. As the unrelenting downpour continues to flood their small town, local authorities begin to uncover clues that bring them closer to the secret that the Parkers have held closely for so many years.

Review: The best horror movie of this year's fest is Jim Mickle's remake of the 2010 film about a family of cannibals whose carefully structured life falls apart after the death of the matriarch. The Parkers have their own religion, one that requires regular murder and ingestion to keep away sin. Rather than going the gore route, Mickle plays it smart, shooting "We Are" like a southern gothic or a David Lynch film. He told me the film's inspirations were Robert Altman's "3 Women" and "Martha Marcy May Marlene," which should make clear that his approach is different than the blood & guts route that 99% of his peers would have taken. Choosing tension and atmosphere over the grotesque, Mickle allows for actual performance (Julia Garner is going to be a huge star some day) and Del Toro-esque composition. It's one of the best American horror movies of the last few years. It's been picked up by the small eOne, which concerns me a bit as it could mean straight-to-DVD, but hopefully they can get this flick a theatrical release. It deserves it.

"When I Walk"



When I Walk

Photo credit: Sundance

Written and Directed by: Jason DaSilva

Synopsis: It all started on a family vacation. In 2006, the 25-year-old, vital, handsome, talented Jason DaSilva was on a beach with his family when, suddenly, he fell down and couldn't get back up. Doctors told him he had multiple sclerosis, and it could lead to loss of vision and muscle control, as well as a myriad of other problems. Jason decided to exercise more, but the problem just got worse. So he turned to his mom. She reminded him that he was a fortunate, privileged North American kid who had the opportunity to pursue the things he loved most—art and filmmaking. So Jason picked up the camera, turned it on himself, and began filming the slow, difficult decline of his body and the miracles he encountered along the way.

Review: Finally, there's the first film I saw on my first full day at the fest (which turned out to be the best...saw 40% of this list on that day), a powerful documentary about the failure of the human body and the triumph of the human spirit. DaSilva was a talented documentarian before he was struck down with Primary Progressive MS, a disease that ate away at everything he loved and yet couldn't kill his spirit. This was the best doc at Sundance 2013 and, surprisingly, still hasn't been picked up. I'm sure it will get to you soon, either in theaters or, more likely, on HBO. We'll keep you informed. With all the major names and stars at Sundance this year, I love that one of the people I won't soon forget is Jason DaSilva, a man I didn't know before taking off for Park City but that I won't forget now that I've left. That's what makes Sundance great — the familiar and the new in one fest: Sam Rockwell & Jason DaSilva, Rooney Mara & Julia Garner, Julie Delpy & Amy Seimetz. They share the stage in Park City and remind us why we love film in the first place.



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