

2014 Sundance Diary, Day 3: Comedies with an Edge

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 19, 2014 - 4:00pm

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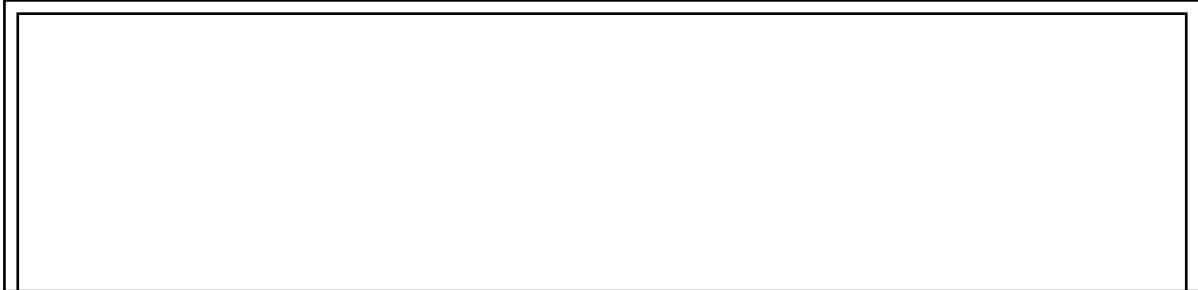
I’ve only seen three movies since my last dispatch — Sundance is about finding the time to write whenever you have it and it just comes earlier today than it did yesterday — but one was a true gem. So I’ll be brief.

I adore Craig Johnson’s emotional, complex dramedy, “**The Skeleton Twins**”, starring Kristen Wiig, Bill Hader, Luke Wilson, and Ty Burrell. It’s a film that gets to a genuine truth about how siblings can love and hate each other in the same moment that similar films have completely failed to capture. It’s a tearjerker that also contains some of the funniest scenes you’ll see all year. It hasn’t been picked up yet but this is the kind of film that could become a massive hit when it comes down from the mountain. I actually think it will play better among the masses than the Sundance cynical. It’s a great film.



The Skeleton Twins
Photo credit: Sundance

Bill Hader sheds any preconceptions you may have about him and what he’s capable of dramatically within minutes of his first appearance as Milo, a gentle, sweet, gay man who has learned that life does not always get better. He’s heartbroken, alone, unhappy with his career, and he slits his wrists in the tub. His relatively estranged sister Maggie (Wiig) travels from the other side of the country to bring him home for a few days to stay with her and husband Lance (Wilson, who hasn’t been this good since “Royal Tenenbaums”). Coming home opens some closed doors for both Milo and Maggie, a pair of fraternal twins with some deep emotional wounds and dangerous ways of hiding them. Hader is a revelation here, giving a performance that feels completely in the moment and real. And he’s matched by Wiig, who has simply never been better. Craig Johnson has given us characters we feel we know and that we root for through some pretty rough waters emotionally. And he’s given us the best lip-sync scene...well, maybe ever.





Cooties

Photo credit: Sundance

While I adore “The Skeleton Twins,” the other two films I’ve seen since last filing are a bit more problematic. It was fun to see “**Cooties**” with an audience on the ten-year anniversary of when “Saw” premiered in that same theater but the brilliant premise of the film isn’t really followed through on in a satisfactory way. The flick is basically “Recess of the Living Dead,” complete with homages to Master Romero and some make-up effects that would make Tom Savini proud. We worry so much about what might happen to our elementary school kids. What if it’s the chicken nuggets that turn them into mindless cannibals that we really need to worry about?

Elijah Wood plays a wannabe writer who returns home to Fort Chicken after a failed stint in the big city and takes a job as a substitute teacher. Of course, he has to fill in on the day the zombie apocalypse starts on a school playground. With a game cast filled out by Rainn Wilson, Jack McBrayer, Alison Pill, Nasim Pedrad, Leigh Whannell, and Jorge Garcia, “Cooties” starts with so much blood-soaked promise that it’s disappointing when it spins its wheels. The potential here is never fulfilled despite some clever ideas, Raimi-esque glee of gore, and a fun cast. They’re just not given enough to do as the film inexplicably shifts to love triangle comedy when it should be bashing in more heads with fire extinguishers. The horror works but it’s not frequent enough to overcome what doesn’t.



Infinitely Polar Bear

Photo credit: Sundance

And then there’s “**Infinitely Polar Bear**”, a film with one of my favorite actors in a promising set-up that frustrates me every time I even think about it. The great Mark Ruffalo plays a man named Cameron in 1978, who has two daughters and a supportive wife (Zoe Saldana). He’s also remarkably manic. He goes off on terrifying tirades, which are amplified by alcohol. Everything will be fine and then he’s running through the woods in his underwear or just disappearing. He’s a loving, kind man, who clearly can’t take care of himself too well, much less his children, and he’s forced to when his wife has the opportunity to become a much-needed breadwinner for the family. Can Cameron take care of his daughters without losing it again?

Phony. Everything about “Infinitely Polar Bear” feels phony to me. It’s unbalanced tonally, never settles on a point of view or narrator (is this one of the daughter’s memories?), and has almost no narrative rising action. It’s a series of incidents and just when you think one will impact, and give the film some drive, it’s discarded. Dramedy is a common term in Park City, meant to imply that a film achieves dramatic and comedic beats (as “The Skeleton Twins” does so deftly). Is “IPB” a drama? Comedy? Is there an option for None of the Above?

Back tomorrow with thoughts on two of the most anticipated films of the entire year - Steve James’ “Life Itself” and Richard Linklater’s “Boyhood.”

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