

2014 Sundance Diary, Day 4: Emotions Flow Over Busy Festival

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 20, 2014 - 7:45pm

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It's funny how things start to pair up over festivals. You'll notice themes across at least two films, maybe more. Could just be the exhaustion. The six films I've seen since I last filed a diary definitely partner nicely and yet one can also trace through lines through them, despite their completely different genres. Let's get going...

The first pair are related by being so completely distinct in the history of film. There's Steve James' **"Life Itself"**, a documentary about the most important film critic of all time, and Richard Linklater's **"Boyhood"**, a film with a production process like no other. These films represent a pair of experiences that I've never had before and likely will never have again. My personal connection to "Life Itself" made the world premiere an emotional, powerful night, and "Boyhood" the next morning took 12 years to make. The fact that after thousands of films, I can still have moments in a darkened theater that feel like none I've had before is why Roger loved the movies in the first place and passed that love along to me.



Life Itself

Photo credit: Sundance

I must admit that my approach to "Life Itself" leaves critical thought almost impossible. I was not only inspired by Roger to do what I do but had the honor of knowing him, all too briefly, in Chicago. I was at his funeral and memorial. And I contribute to RogerEbert.com. To say that he's a major reason why I'm here typing this right now would be an understatement. And so watching "Life Itself" has the feeling of being at a tribute for a loved one. My response is a heartfelt one above all else.

Having said that, I do think I can try and step back and look at the work, and tell you that this is a comprehensive memorial to not just a legend but a man. We see Roger from every angle, just as the great newspaper reporter he was would have wanted. There's a bit of his youth, a bit

of his drinking years, a bit of his writing, a bit of his TV work, and so on. And there's a lot of his love affair with Chaz Ebert. We also get to see every side of Roger, including the immense pain he felt in the final years, and yet he was still able to flash his signature thumbs up sign. Up to the end, Roger was passionate about everything in his life — his wife, his family, his friends, and the movies. And "Life Itself" captures that passion. It's not just a eulogy but a celebration.



Boyhood

Photo credit: Sundance

If Roger is one of the reasons so many of us write about film, few independent filmmakers have inspired the writers and directors of the Sundance Film Festival like Richard Linklater. He brought his latest to Park City last night, premiering the highly-anticipated "**Boyhood**", a remarkably ambitious accomplishment. For 12 years, from 1st grade through 12th, Richard gathered his small cast to chronicle the trajectory from boy to man. Ellar Coltrane plays Mason Jr., son of Mason (Ethan Hawke) and Olivia (Patricia Arquette), who have split before the first scene. Mason is shuttled between the two parents with sister Samantha (Linklater's own daughter Lorelei). Over 12 years, Linklater and his cast hit the beats of a young male life. We see so many of the "firsts" — drink, crush, girlfriend, etc. — along with many of the minor and major beats with his family, from the day his alcoholic stepdad nearly killed him to when dad tried to explain sex to him. To say it's ambitious would be an understatement and "Boyhood" adds up to a touching portrait of a life — it's not the entire years that we remember but often just brief moments within them.

It's not without its flaws. Some of the first half lurches wildly in terms of narrative, particularly in patches with a poorly-conceived and performed alcoholic stepdad character. Narrative has never been Linklater's strength. He's a character/dialogue master, and these awkward passages when the film seems pressed to force melodramatic story on us don't work. It's interesting to watch Linklater the filmmaker grow over the course of the film and you're going to have go through the "Bad News Bears" years. However, the good far outweighs the bad. I may be the only person who wanted even less narrative, to just hang and grow with these characters in ways we've never seen on film before. It's unique but imperfect, kind of like your life.



Appropriate Behavior

Photo credit: Sundance

The next pair? How many times have you seen two films with female Iranian protagonists (from female directors) in one day? Ana Lily Amirpour's "**A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night**" and Desiree Akhavan's "**Appropriate Behavior**" fit that bill for me yesterday and both hint at major things to come from their writer/directors even if I was frustrated by both narratives. The better of the two is Akhavan's film, which she also co-wrote and stars in as Shirin, a bisexual Iranian who has not come out to her conservative family, even as they have likely questioned the status of her "roommate" Maxine (Rebecca Henderson). The film opens at the end of that relationship and flashes back through it. Akhavan is stellar — it's a star-making turn — but the script hits too many of the same single-girl-in-the-city relationship comedy beats to feel fresh enough to stand above the overcrowded genre. I really like Akhavan but want to see her do something that doesn't feel this familiar.

Nothing about Amirpour's film feels familiar, that's for sure. Billed as cinema's first Iranian vampire western, the black-and-white film is gorgeously shot. It's a dark, moody piece about a girl who, well, it's not much of a spoiler to say that the title is a bit of a bait and switch in that

“The Girl” (Sheila Vand) is the “villain” of the piece. She’s a vampire, biting off fingers and devouring men whole. Meanwhile, Arash (Arash Marandi) owes money to a notorious crime lord and deals with a junkie father (Marshall Manesh). The two cross paths in this atmospheric genre-jumping adventure. It’s visually strong but just too narratively thin and thematically weak for this viewer. The clever visuals aren’t backed up by anything although I could EASILY see that change for Amirpour’s next film. I’m excited to see what that is.



Dead Snow: Red vs. Dead
Photo credit: Sundance

Which brings us to our final pair — two VERY different zombie flicks. The first is a quiet, dark, brooding piece called “**Jamie Marks is Dead**” and the second is, well, none of those things and it is the glorious “**Dead Snow: Red vs. Dead**”. The more-serious “Marks” features a star-making turn from Cameron Monaghan (“Shameless”) as Adam McCormick. Adam’s classmate Jamie (Noah Silver) is found dead one morning and, well, most of the school doesn’t care. Known as “Mooney Marks,” Jamie was bullied and ignored. No one saw him except for the genuinely sweet Adam. And, of course, now no one can see his ghost other than Adam and Gracie (Morgan Saylor). Also starring Liv Tyler & Judy Greer, and based on the book by Christopher Barzak, “Jamie Marks is Dead” doesn’t quite work narratively, too often drifting when it should be pushing forward, but writer/director Carter Smith has a unique eye in terms framing and light, setting a tone that’s well-sustained even if I wish it was more interesting.

Speaking of tone, the one for “Red vs. Dead” probably contains a curse word and body part in it. Tommy Wirkola has taken whatever you liked about the first movie and blown it up, reminding one of what Sam Raimi did with “Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn.” Oh, you liked that? Well, get a load of THIS. The film is gore-filled from first frame to last. It’s ridiculous horror-comedy that really works, in no small part due to the involvement of Martin Starr as the leader of a group called the Zombie Squad, who come in to save the world from Nazi zombies. Funny, crazy, SO bloody, and, yes, smarter than people will give it credit for, this is the kind of midnight movie that Sundance was made for. It’s a blast.

I hope I can say the same about something in my next dispatch, which will include “Calvary,” “Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter,” and “20,000 Days on Earth.”



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