

## 2014 Sundance Diary, Day 6: Wrapping it Up with a Twisted Double Feature

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 23, 2014 - 3:08pm

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Park City was abuzz on the final day with guesses as to what the secret screening known as “Film X” would be on Tuesday night. Could it be Wes Anderson’s “Grand Budapest Hotel”? Maybe “Foxcatcher,” which was almost done in time for awards season and so may be now? “Snowpiercer”? The new Kevin Smith? “Star Wars, Episode VII”? There was a frontrunner and when we saw the 18 and over sign out front of the Egyptian, it was clear — we were in for Lars Von Trier’s “**Nymphomaniac, Vol. 1**”. My final night in Park City included this truly fascinating film from the controversial auteur and a well-crafted boogeyman story from a new talent. A perfect double feature to encapsulate the Sundance experience — the work of a veteran and a promising newcomer.

A beaten woman named Joe (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg and, in flashbacks, Stacy Martin) is found in a dark, snowy alley by a kind man named Seligman (Stellan Skarsgard). She refuses to go to the hospital and tells her companion her life story: That of a nymphomaniac. Divided into five oh-so-Von-Trier chapters, “Nymphomaniac, Vol. 1” gets us through half of Joe’s story of a life in which she compares her vagina to an automatic door: It opens for anyone who stands in front of it. Shia LaBeouf plays a man who flits in and out of her life multiple times, Christian Slater nicely sketches her father, and Uma Thurman steals the movie as an “other woman” to one of Joe’s conquests.



Nymphomaniac  
Photo credit: Magnolia

How does one even begin to describe “Nymphomaniac”? How many films have combined an analysis of cake forks and fly-fishing with full penetration? Von Trier tells his story of a woman numb to the pleasures of sex by balancing the titillating elements of his narrative with the mundane. Joe is a sexual creature who uses her looks and willingness with her body not to achieve happiness but almost as a challenge. Von Trier’s film is playful and sometimes hilarious in its approach to sexuality, fighting against judgment of its lead character at every turn.

The problem is that the film is a bit difficult to unpack in this form. This is not like “Kill Bill” or “Che,” which had natural dividing points to split them in two. There is something of a narrative divide here but it feels more like just watching the first half of “Melancholia” and trying to figure where it’s going. It would be interesting but incomplete. For now, I’m fascinated and thrilled by the adventureness of the filmmaking but all of the strengths and flaws of the first volume could be weakened or ironed out by the second.



The Babadook  
Photo credit: Sundance

More straightforward was my final film of Sundance 2014, the highly-buzzed ghost story “**The Babadook**”, a startling debut from writer/director Jennifer Kent. From the “nothing is scarier than parenthood” subgenre that includes films like “The Shining” and “The Orphanage,” this is an immensely-satisfying horror flick; the kind that makes you look under the bed and sleep with a night light on. AND it’s from a female writer/director, something that the horror genre could use a whole lot more of. It was a great way to end the fest.

A fantastic turn from Essie Davis is the centerpiece of “The Babadook” as the Australian actress plays Amelia, a single mother who became such on the night her son Samuel (Noah Wiseman) was born. Her husband died in a car accident on the way to the hospital, making Samuel’s birthday a tragic memory. As his latest one arrives, Samuel and Amelia find a book called “The Babadook” and learn of a boogeyman in the closet who is coming to get them. And then he does. It’s a straightforward scare flick with some incredibly terrifying moments and a subtext of how our grief and fear for the future can manifest into creatures of the night. I have some minor issues with the way the narrative unfolds — more than some who hyped the film up for me in Park City — but there’s so much to like here. I love ending a fest with a work from a filmmaker who I can’t wait to see work again.

I’ll be back next week with a top ten.



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