

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of Sundance 2014

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 27, 2014 - 2:14pm

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The instant-response nature of our media has forced a bizarre question on nearly every minute of the Sundance Film Festival — “Is it a GOOD year?” Journalists and festival goers talk in hushed tones about the first time they saw beloved Sundance films like “Clerks,” “Bottle Rocket,” “Winter’s Bone,” or “Beasts of the Southern Wild” and wonder if there’s anything this year to compare. Personally, I had a spectacular year. I didn’t reach the peaks of “Before Midnight” or “Upstream Color,” two films that made my top ten for all of 2013, but I saw a dozen films that could play some role in my top 11-30 at the end of this one. After a horrible Saturday, in which I liked only one of five films and was ready to go home, I basically had few valleys from there, never dipping below a C and seeing several films that I’m sure you’re going to love. I also adored the variety in this year’s best of Sundance. Two documentaries, two foreign films, and works from filmmakers both new and established in my top ten. These are the best that I saw.

Note: While I ended up viewing over 30 films via link or on the ground, I didn’t get to “Whiplash,” “Love is Strange,” “Dear White People,” or “Listen Up Philip.” Those seem to be the most-praised works that could have impacted the list below.

Runner-ups: You really need to see “The Babadook,” “Cold in July,” and “Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter,” and “Dead Snow: Red vs. Dead” is a blast. It’s a display of what a strong Sundance it was that none are in my top ten.



Boyhood

Photo credit: Sundance

10. “Boyhood”

Writer/director Richard Linklater’s incredibly ambitious work — he filmed this story of growth from boy to man over 12 years — seemed to be the most universally adored film at this year’s Sundance although I think those who proclaim it perfect have blinders to a few of the narrative issues. I love the film in its minor beats — scenes that feel improvised and casual — but some of the plotting of the first half is melodramatic junk. The film recovers with about two hours to go, so it’s easy to forgive and there’s so much ambition here — what makes up a man’s formative years? It’s the small things, the days you don’t even know are going to be the most memorable, that matter. Linklater is one of our best filmmakers and he topped most critic’s polls two years in a row with “Before Midnight” and now this one. I’d be fine with him going for a

hat trick in 2015.



Nymphomaniac, Vol. 1

Photo credit: Sundance

9. “Nymphomaniac, Vol. 1”

It’s a difficult film to judge as it feels like half an experience but I’ll never forget the secret screening on Tuesday night of Lars von Trier’s latest oddity, a film equally obsessed with minutia like the details of fly fishing and cake forks as it is with oral sex. Starring a uniquely-assembled group that gets Shia LaBeouf and Christian Slater into a movie with Stellan Skarsgard and Charlotte Gainsbourg, “Nymphomaniac” is a riveting two hours about a woman who sees sex as a conquest to the degree that she can no longer gain pleasure from it. I have some issues with the execution but the ambition, again, is stunning and there may be no film in the first half of this year that I want to see more than “Nymphomaniac, Vol. 2”.



Ida

Photo credit: Sundance

8. “Ida”

Pawel Pawlikowski’s examination of faith challenged by history is arguably the most beautiful film I saw in Park City this year with the kind of striking, black-and-white cinematography that could be framed and sold in a gallery. While the slow pace and striking visuals can be hypnotic to the point of feeling dull at times, “Ida” ends in a haunting manner, lingering with me longer than many of the films I’ve seen since it ended. Agata Trzebuchowska subtly sketches a woman on the verge of a major commitment to her religion faced with the truth about her past. Tragic, moving, and truly memorable, I expect Music Box Films to have an arthouse hit on their hands when this is released later this year.



The Skeleton Twins

Photo credit: Sundance

7. “The Skeleton Twins”

Those of you who have loved Bill Hader on “SNL” and in small roles in films like “Superbad” over the years probably hoped that he would have a breakout role to move him to the forefront of late-night alumni who graduated to film. Here’s the film you’ve been waiting for. Hader is spectacular as a gay man dealing with loss and depression, and he’s perfectly balanced by career-best work from Kristen Wiig as his sister. Funny and tear-jerking in equal measure, Lionsgate could have a hit on their hands if they market this one well. It’s one of the few films that balances the halves of the hybrid “dramedy” in a way that both feel satisfying.



Blind

Photo credit: Sundance

6. “Blind”

The best mind game of the fest was the directorial debut of the writer of “Reprise” and “Oslo, August 31.” A writer has gone blind and her memories of the world around her have started to fade. She can no longer visualize that which she used to know so well. How does the shift from memory to imagination impact a relationship and the sanity of a woman who spends too much of her time sitting in her apartment, drinking wine? Great performances drive this narrative high-wire act, a film that isn’t easy to unpack or even follow at times but becomes an incredibly powerful examination of dealing with the unimaginable by the final act. Few films are this narratively original and yet emotionally relatable at the same time.



The Overnights

Photo credit: Sundance

5. “The Overnights”

In a small town named Williston in North Dakota, a modern Deadwood has sprung up. Men who have been beaten by the depression have come from all over the country looking for work. None of them have a place to live. Enter Pastor Reinke, a community leader who begins the “Overnights” program, allowing these men to sleep in his parking lot or even his church floor. The fact is that some of them are criminals and violence rises in the community. At what point is charity too dangerous to the innocent people around you? Pastor Reinke is one of those unforgettable documentary characters, a man who may not be as charitable or forthcoming a person as you first assume him to be. He’s fascinating and Jesse Moss’ film about him becomes an examination of how much the recession has impacted the entire country, bringing out the good and bad sides of all of us.



Blue Ruin

Photo credit: Sundance

4. “Blue Ruin”

This wonderful thriller has made the fest rounds for some time now, even playing at the Chicago International Film Festival, but I didn’t catch up with it until Park City, and so it qualifies. With echoes of the Coens’ “Blood Simple” in its precision, dark humor, and bursts of violence, this tale of a vagrant (a great Macon Blair) starting the cycle of vengeance when a man from his past is released from prison, is wildly entertaining. It’s coming out soon here in Chicago and it will surely hit a sweet spot for those looking for a little blood and guts with their independent drama. Smart, bitterly funny, and incredibly well-made.



Hellion

Photo credit: Sundance

3. “Hellion”

My most emotional response in Park City came in the form of Kat Candler’s dissection of the impact of grief on parenthood in her excellent “Hellion,” with a great turn from Aaron Paul and a stunning breakthrough from the young Josh Wiggins. The latter plays Jacob Wilson, a young man on the verge of being torn from his family due to his criminal behavior after the loss of his mother. As he watches his younger brother on the precipice of himself being taken away, Jacob has to pull himself from the quicksand of the unimaginable grief of not having your mother around any more. Paul is stellar here and I don’t think Candler got the credit she deserved for telling such an admittedly-familiar story in such a believable way. I may be biased given how close I am to my sons (and this being a story about fathers & sons) but I can’t deny my response to the film. It’s a powerful one.



Calvary

Photo credit: Sundance

2. “Calvary”

John Michael McDonagh’s drama is a philosophically dense, challenging examination of the need for faith in an era in which the institution of religion is becoming less essential. Brendan Gleeson does what could be career-best work as a Father in a small town who is told that he will be murdered in about a week. Through conversation with his parish and those who gave up church for the pub long ago, “Calvary” becomes not unlike a sermon. McDonagh spins his themes, sometimes in ways that can lose the viewer, but brings them all back together in such a powerful manner that it didn’t even really hit me until the shuttle home. And then I was practically overwhelmed with emotion. Faith, vengeance, forgiveness, and sacrifice — “Calvary” is the kind of challenging film that rewards discussion and examination. Fox Searchlight snagged it quickly and I hope they can get it to as large an audience as possible. It’s a great film.



Life Itself
Photo credit: Sundance

1. “Life Itself”

I’ll be the first to admit to the fact that it’s impossible to separate my personal history with Roger Ebert with the way I responded to a film about him but I still think that I can accurately discern, even with the emotions I brought to it, that Steve James has made a fantastic film. He approaches his subject in a way that would make Ebert, who was himself a “newspaperman,” proud. He approaches him from all angles — a little history, a little Russ Meyer, a little Siskel, a little Chaz, etc. It creates a comprehensive look at a life driven by passion, not just for movies but for life itself.



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Source URL (retrieved on **Apr 24 2024 - 10:56pm**):
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