

Film Feature: Preview of the 2015 Sundance Film Festival

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CHICAGO – This Thursday marks the beginning of the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, and yours truly will be in attendance to cover the fest for HollywoodChicago.com. Last year, the Park City, Utah event introduced the world to its 2014-defining sensations like “Whiplash” and “Boyhood”. Those titles followed in the paths of indie landmarks such as “sex, lies and videotape,” “Clerks,” “Hoop Dreams,” “American Movie,” “Memento,” “Frozen River,” “Winter’s Bone,” and “Fruitvale Station,” among many others.

In pursuit of new favorite films for a new year, I’ve composed a relatively solid schedule so that I can devour as much diverse Sundance goodness as possible. Narratives, documentaries, white supremacists, nasty babies, Neil Hamburger, Chiwetel Ejiofor, stolen cop cars, and much, much more are all in play. But with hopes that everything I witness is the next “Boyhood”-like zeitgeist, I’ll be sure to report back here on what’s worth, and not worth, seeking.

What follows is a list of anticipated films in alphabetical order, their synopses ripped straight from the festival’s program (with pictures courtesy of the Sundance Institute). With much to see and never enough time to do it, here’s some titles — coasting on hunches, projections, and perhaps even wrong ideas — that I am most excited to experience at this year’s fest.



A Walk in the Woods



'A Walk in the Woods'

Sundance Synopsis: An aging travel writer sets out to hike the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail with a long-estranged high school buddy. Along the way, the duo face off with each other, nature, and an eccentric assortment of characters. Together, they learn that some roads are better left untraveled.

Director: Ken Kwapis

Cast: Robert Redford, Nick Nolte, Emma Thompson, Mary Steenburgen, Nick Offerman, Kristen Schaal

This choice is a bit personal. As in, I'm not sure I'd be welcomed back into the Allen household if I took my newbie self to Robert Redford's festival and didn't see the world premiere of his new film, which is nonetheless an adaptation of Bill Bryson's work, a family favorite. Nonetheless, I'm a huge "All is Lost" advocate, the film that Redford previously made about man vs. nature. This one is directed by Ken Kwapis, you know, the Hollywood player behind titles like "Dunston Checks In" and "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants."



The Amina Profile



'The Amina Profile'

Sundance Synopsis: During the Arab revolution, a love story between two women, a Canadian and a Syrian American, turns into an international sociopolitical thriller, spotlighting media excesses and the thin line between truth and falsehood on the internet.

Director: Sophie Deraspe
Documentary

This is definitely a wild card curiosity compared to some others on the bunch. As far as I've looked, this one doesn't even have an IMDb page yet. But never underestimate the temptation of something that smells like previous viral documentary breakout "Catfish."



Beaver Trilogy Part IV



'Beaver Trilogy Part IV'

Sundance Synopsis: A chance meeting in a parking lot in 1979 between filmmaker Trent Harris and a young man from Beaver, Utah, inspired the creation of an underground film that is known as Beaver Trilogy. But the film itself is only part of the story.

Director: Brad Besser
Documentary

A brief glaze over this synopsis conjures memories of "American Movie," one of the finest docs about the billions of filmmakers out there, the eccentric movie-lovers with cameras who don't have the luck that leads to success in such a competitive industry. That's all I the prep I need for this one; its goofy title is a plus.



The Bronze



'The Bronze'

Sundance Synopsis: In 2004, Hope Ann Gregory became an American hero after winning the bronze medal for the women's gymnastics team. Today, she's still living in her small hometown, washed-up and embittered. Stuck in the past, Hope must reassess her life when a promising young gymnast threatens her local celebrity status.

Director: Bryan Buckley

Cast: Melissa Rauch, Gary Cole, Thomas Middleditch, Sebastian Stan, Haley Lu Richardson, Cecily Strong

"The Big Bang Theory" star Melissa Rauch hasn't exactly caught my critical eye with her work on that certain CBS show. But perhaps this anti-"Foxcatcher"-sounding dramedy will confirm that there is always hope, and life, outside a laugh track. It should be noted that this film is set to premiere on Opening Night of Sundance.

★ Cop Car



'Cop Car'

Sundance Synopsis: Two 10-year-old boys steal an abandoned cop car.

Director: Jon Watts

Cast: Kevin Bacon, James Freedson-Jackson, Hays Wellford, Shea Whigham, Camryn Manheim

It's not so much the star power of Kevin Bacon that influenced me to make this one a top priority, but the synopsis. Two kids yank a title vehicle? Doesn't sound that far off from the bizarre 1987 comedy "Big Shots," which featured a duo of rebellious, horrendously stereotypical

tykes who stole a car with the dead body in the trunk, all within the desire of creating a comedy that was too weird for kids AND their parents. That was a golden find on Instant Netflix one day, from many years ago, and I haven't seen anything like it since. Until this Saturday maybe, with "Cop Car."



Digging for Fire



'Digging for Fire'

Sundance Synopsis: The discovery of a bone and a gun sends a husband and wife on separate adventures over the course of a weekend.

Director: Joe Swanberg

Cast: Jake Johnson, Rosemarie Dewitt, Orlando Bloom, Brie Larson, Sam Rockwell, Anna Kendrick

"Drinking Buddies" writer/director Joe Swanberg's new prowess of scooping up big stars for unassuming projects continues — it seems — with this mystery (?) that also involves a more concrete promise of relationship exploration. Based on a script co-written with his "Drinking Buddies" star Jake Johnson, this synopsis at least boasts more movement than Swanberg's entire previous film, "Happy Christmas" (which also starred Anna Kendrick). Maybe a certain Pixies song will come into play too?



Don Verdean



'Don Verdean'

Sundance Synopsis: Biblical archaeologist Don Verdean is hired by a local church pastor to find faith-promoting relics in the Holy Land. But after a fruitless expedition, he is forced to get creative in this comedy of faith and fraud.

Director: Jared Hess

Cast: Sam Rockwell, Jemaine Clement, Amy Ryan, Danny McBride, Leslie Bibb, Will Forte

I am an unabashed member of the virtually non-existent cult based around "Gentleman Broncos," an unjustly ostracized entry from Jared Hess, the director of "Napoloen Dynamite." Granted, that movie is made for maybe three people, and I feel lucky to be one of them. But one can imagine my excitement then when I heard about Hess' "Masterminds," which is set to be released later in 2015. A studio gave Hess money, and he's working on a script co-written by Jody Hill ("Observe and Report") and Danny McBride ("This is the End"). This excitement was oddly elevated when I heard about "Don Verdean," a *second* film from Hess that will play in 2015. A new gem? Another cult favorite? More jokes involving thrift store costume design, and maybe a great soundtrack? I'm there. This is my most anticipated film of Sundance.



The End of the Tour



'The End of the Tour'

Sundance Synopsis: This story of the five-day 1996 interview between Rolling Stone reporter David Lipsky and acclaimed novelist David Foster Wallace explores the tenuous yet intense relationship that develops between journalist and subject. The two men bob and weave,

sharing laughs, and also conceive and reveal their hidden vulnerabilities.

Director: James Ponsoldt

Cast: Jesse Eisenberg, Jason Segel, Anna Chlumsky, Joan Cusack, Mamie Gummer, Mickey Sumner

Director James Ponsoldt is on the rise to making something huge. His second film “Smashed” starring Mary Elizabeth Winstead gave alcoholism an earnest reflection, nonetheless experienced by a charismatic grade school teacher. His followup to that was the even sturdier high school recollection “The Spectacular Now,” which provided further evidence of the voltage within now-superstars Miles Teller and Shailene Woodley. It also offered an excited but unglamorous look at emotional growth in the time of high school, becoming one of the finest entries of its kind. Here's hoping that a nonfictional focus only furthers that honest perspective on destructive identity, nonetheless with a David Foster Wallace embodiment by Jason Segel that could make-or-break a film. Also, this might be a good teaser for how Ponsoldt will do with that kicked-around “Rodham” project based on Hilary Clinton’s life.



Entertainment



'Entertainment'

Sundance Synopsis: En route to meeting with his estranged daughter, in an attempt to revive his dwindling career, a broken, aging comedian plays a string of dead-end shows in the Mojave Desert.

Director: Rick Alverson

Cast: Gregg Turkington, John C. Reilly, Tye Sheridan, Michael Cera, Amy Seimetz, Lotte Verbeek

This one's billed under Sundance's exploratory “Next” category, though it could argued its creative forces aren't that new. The director is Rick Alverson, who previously gave a blank-face to the mega-ironic “The Comedy” starring Tim Heidecker (of “Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!”). Now, Alverson returns with a story co-written by Heidecker and Gregg Turkington. Here's thinking that Turkington will do some variation on his almighty Neil Hamburger character (judging by the picture) similarly to Heidecker playing against his usual fun-loving wackiness in “The Comedy's” intentional non-hilarity.



Experimenter



'Experimenter'

Sundance Synopsis: "Experimenter" is based on the true story of famed social psychologist Stanley Milgram, who in 1961 conducted a series of radical behavior experiments that tested ordinary humans' willingness to obey authority by using electric shock. We follow Milgram from meeting his wife through his controversial experiments that sparked public outcry.

Director: Michael Almereyda

Cast: Peter Sarsgaard, Winona Ryder, Jim Gaffigan, Kellan Lutz, Taryn Manning, John Leguizamo

Peter Sarsgaard is one of those actors who can sneak up on you, even if he bides a lot of time in supporting parts. This nonfiction account concerning issues of power and inhumanity certainly has a vivid contemporary curiosity as well.



Knock Knock



'Knock Knock'

Sundance Synopsis: Two beautiful young girls walk into a married man's life and turn a wild fantasy into his worst nightmare.

Director: Eli Roth

Cast: Keanu Reeves, Lorenza Izzo, Ana De Amras, Aaron Burns, Ignacia Allamand, Colleen Camp

Keanu Reeves' undying crowd-pleasing presence actually seems primed for an Eli Roth movie, especially with the actor coming into fuller form with the likes of his ass-kicking kung fu directorial debut "Man of Tai Chi." Roth is of course the other curious element, whose unappetizing cannibal horror story "The Green Inferno" seems to have dropped off the face of the Earth after previews were shown in 2013. Roth's humor has always been a challenge, from its gallows giggles in his grotesque "Hostel" movies, or even his brief appearance as the "Bear Jew" in "Inglorious Basterds." But throw in a post-"John Wick" Keanu Reeves, and this could be more than just another gnarly Roth joint.



Last Days in the Desert



'Last Days in the Desert'

Sundance Synopsis: Ewan McGregor is Jesus — and the Devil — in an imagined chapter from his 40 days of fasting and praying in the desert. On his way out of the wilderness, Jesus struggles with the Devil over the fate of a family in crisis, setting himself up for a dramatic test.

Director: Rodrigo Garcia

Not really sure what to do with a film of this background and synopsis but simply see it. I wasn't a big fan of Garcia's previous Oscar-nominated film "Albert Nobbs," but I remember being in emotional tune with his 2009 adoption story "Mother and Child." One can only wonder for now as to how his sensitivities about humanity from within those films will come into play with one of the stranger chapters of the Bible, nonetheless performed by the same actor.



The Mask You Live In



'The Mask You Live In'

Director: Jennifer Siebel Newsom
Documentary

Is there a “boy crisis” in America? Is our male population suffering due to our emphasis on power, dominance, and aggression? “The Mask You Live In” explores how our narrow definition of masculinity is harming our boys, men, and society at large and unveils what we can do about it.

Any film that provides an in-depth discussion on masculinity has my attention. And that these ideas are sponsored by a female director makes it even more enticing. Here's hoping that this one starts a huge conversation; everyday it seems like masculinity could use a “Blackfish”-type humbling.



Nasty Baby



'Nasty Baby'

Sundance Synopsis: A gay couple try to have a baby with the help of their best friend, Polly. The trio navigates the idea of creating life while confronted by unexpected harassment from a neighborhood called The Bishop. As their clashes grow increasingly aggressive, odds are someone is getting hurt.

Director: Sebastián Silva

Cast: Sebastián Silva, Kristen Wiig, Tunde Adebimpe, Alia Shawkat, Mark Margolis, Reg E. Cathey

“Saturday Night Live” legend Kristen Wiig has been on the hunt for indie comedies that take her to unexpected places, like “Girl Most Likely” or most recently “The Skeleton Twins.” Add “Nasty Baby” to this list, from Sebastián Silva, the director who made TWO unexpected Michael Cera movies in 2013, “Crystal Fairy & the Magical Cactus” and “Magic Magic.” Another title in Sundance’s “Next” category that seems both like a misjudgment, but nonetheless a promising sign.



People, Places, Things



‘People, Places, Things’

Sundance Synopsis: Will Henry is a newly single graphic novelist balancing being a parent to his young twin daughters and teaching a classroom full of college students, all the while trying to navigate the rich complexities of new love and letting go of the woman who left him.

Director: James Strouse

Cast: Jemaine Clement, Regina Hall, Stephanie Allynee, Jessica Williams, Gia Gadsby, Aundrea Gadsby

Director James C. Strouse’s humdrum “Lonesome Jim” and “Grace Is Gone” aren’t exactly the most memorable mopey films but they did feature notable turns from Casey Affleck and John Cusack, respectively. With an often-energetic Jemaine Clement now taking on Strouse’s lead, perhaps things will budge towards a special direction, even if the plot synopsis itself sounds kind of needy.



Results



'Results'

Sundance Synopsis: Two mismatched personal trainers' lives are upended by the actions of a new, wealthy client.

Director: Andrew Bujalski

Cast: Guy Pearce, Cobie Smulders, Kevin Corrigan, Giovanni Ribisi, Anthony Michael Hall, Brooklyn Decker

If you're looking for the last movie you'd expect Guy Pearce, Cobie Smulders, or Brooklyn Decker to star in, you can find director Andrew Bujalski's previous movie "Computer Chess" on Netflix. That mega dry anti-romp observed the different relationships between tech aficionados and the computers that they've engineered to be chess warriors. For his follow-up, Bujalski seems to be going full-Swanberg, by scooping a list of grade-A talents, and making them play indie ball with material that probably couldn't be mainstream if it tried. I'm always interested to see how and why low-key directors make the big leap with star power (aside from appeal), and this could be another intriguing case study.



Seoul Searching



'Seoul Searching'

Sundance Synopsis: "Seoul Searching" is a comedy set in the '80s about a group of foreign-born Korean teenagers who meet at a Seoul summer camp to learn what it means to be Korean. The three boys, from the U.S., Mexico, and Germany, then meet three girls who rock their world.

I put this one in my personal program simply for the director, Benson Lee. You may not know the name off the top of your head, but you might have seen or heard of the dance movies he made - "Planet B-Boy," and that documentary's feature adaptation, "Battle of the Year." I didn't love "Battle of the Year" but I am curious about anyone who makes a flashy narrative out of their doc. That's enough to make me curious about what they'll do when working on their own devices, nonetheless with a period coming-of-age film.



Tig



'Tig'

Sundance Synopsis: This documentary explores comedian Tig Notaro's extraordinary journey as her life unfolds in grand and unexpected ways, all while she is battle a life-threatening illness and falling in love.

Directors: Kristina Goolsby, Ashley York
Documentary

I don't follow Tig Notaro's comedy too closely, but her importance in the comedian scene isn't lost on me at all. While behind-the-curtain entertainer docs can definitely be hit-and-miss, my interest in better appreciating Notaro is a vivid factor.



Welcome to Leith



'Welcome to Leith'

Sundance Synopsis: A white supremacist attempts to take over a small town in North Dakota.

Directors: Michael Beach Nichols, Christopher K. Walker
Documentary

Sometimes a thoroughly bananas, strictly one-sentence summary says it all.



What Happened, Miss Simone?



'What Happened, Miss Simone?'

Sundance Synopsis: Classically trained pianist, dive-bar chanteuse, Black Power icon, and legendary recording artist Nina Simone lived a life of brutal honesty, musical genius, and tortured melancholy. This astonishing epic interweaves never-before-heard recordings and rare footage, creating an unforgettable portrait of one of our least understood, and most beloved artists.

Director: Liz Garbus
Documentary

Like “The Bronze,” this documentary has the coveted intrigue of an Opening Night designation; it very well could be the first film I see at Sundance. Maybe there’s something in this documentary that those who program are especially excited to share with the world — the Sundance powers that be wouldn’t start us on a flat note, would they?

★ **Z for Zachariah**



'Z for Zachariah'

Sundance Synopsis: In a post-apocalyptic world, a young woman who believes she is the last human on Earth meets a dying scientist searching for survivors. Their relationship becomes tenuous when another survivor appears. As the two men compete for the woman's affection, their primal urges begin to reveal their true nature.

Director: Craig Zobel

Cast: Margot Robbie, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Chris Pine

Another feature at the top of my Sundance checklist, this one seems ready to explode. First, director Craig Zobel previously composed an observation on power, with ruthless darkness and tension in 2012's "Compliance," as set within the back room of a fast food restaurant. One can only wonder what Zobel will do when applying that fearlessness to a post-apocalyptic world, nonetheless with a bigger budget and stars, like "12 Years a Slave" actor Chiwetel Ejiofor playing opposite Margot Robbie ("The Wolf of Wall Street") and Chris Pine ("Star Trek").



'Zipper'

Sundance Synopsis: Sam Ellis is a man on the rise — a hot shot federal prosecutor on the cusp of a bright political future. But what was meant to be a onetime experience with an escort turns into a growing addiction — a new demon threatening to destroy his life, family, and career.

Director: Mora Stephens
Cast: Patrick Wilson, Lena Headey, Richard Dreyfuss, Ray Winstone, John Cho, Dianna Agron

Another wild card choice to close out the list. This plot synopsis doesn't make "Zipper" sound like the most interesting film, but I know not to underestimate projects that Patrick Wilson chooses to be the center of. Now, time for me to start packing.

Nick Allen will be reporting on the Sundance Film Festival from Park City, Utah for HollywoodChicago.com starting this week. Be sure to follow him on Twitter at @nickallen_redux, and also at @hollywoodchi.



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