

2015 Sundance Diary, Day 1: 'What Happened, Miss Simone?', 'The Bronze' & 'The Amina Profile'

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- [2015 Sundance Film Festival](#) [2]
- [Bryan Buckley](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Liz Garbus](#) [5]
- [Melissa Rauch](#) [6]
- [Nick Allen](#) [7]
- [Nina Simone](#) [8]
- [Sophie Deraspe](#) [9]
- [Sundance 2015 Coverage](#) [10]
- [Sundance Film Festival](#) [11]
- [The Amina Profile](#) [12]
- [The Bronze](#) [13]
- [What Happened, Miss Simone?](#) [14]

PARK CITY, Utah – The 2015 Sundance Film Festival is well underway in Park City, Utah, a snow-adorned mega village where everything looks like ski lodges, even the movie theaters. The festival occurs in a place that transforms for the cause of movies. Park City's gymnasiums, libraries, and conference rooms are modified with seats and screens to celebrate the thrill of uniting people in the same darkness ready to experience a film.

Last night was the first day of screenings (though different films were offered), and I viewed two titles of opposing worth, of which is described below. The first is a documentary that should be coming to Netflix in the near future, "What Happened, Miss Simone?" Not long after scarfing down some late dinner in the festival's Yarrow Hotel (which has turned its conference room into a movie theater essentially), I endeavored into "The Bronze," an underdog comedy starring Melissa Rauch of "The Big Bang Theory," and executive produced by Jay & Mark Duplass. Which films had me recognizing my sleepiness? Find out below.

Included in this entry is also a review of the internet thriller "The Amina Profile," which will start playing at Sundance tomorrow night.



What Happened, Miss Simone?



'What Happened, Miss Simone?'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

"What Happened, Miss Simone?" does not necessarily ask what she did to herself, as the phrase might suggest. Once the brilliance of Simone is presented, the title (from something once written to her by Maya Angelou), takes on the significance of what we have done to her

instead.

This documentary from Liz Garbus goes through the expected biological detail, from Simone's days as a young classical pianist who was discriminated against, to the way in which she incorporated this incredible technique, and an extinguished voice, to offer viewers a performance that feels like no other. Every time "What Happened, Miss Simone?" takes a break to show footage of Simone, it's warranted. She is continually fascinating, her swirling piano fingers, and especially her voice, functioning at a level that is her own; we are outsiders to her world.

In its conveyance of Simone's story, Garbus' film uses expertly-mixed audio interviews to make her a clean voiceover part to her own story, using snippets from a previous interview. Handwritten notes from Simone as well provide a stark presentation of her psyche, as remnants of a call for help that wasn't heard.

"What Happened, Miss Simone?" is a prime example of the difference between artificial footage and the real deal, a testimony to the truth that is only found about a person when we look them in the face and watch where their eyes go. It is bumpiest when it uses fake footage to cover Simone's early years, with goofy reenactments - these are the moments that tempt to make "What Happened, Miss Simone?" a more typical documentary.

This is part of the surging greatness in Garbus' film, a documentary that takes Simone's already enrapturing performance and puts them into a vivid context. The film's bookending footage, of a performance later in her life, provides a completion of the doc's picture of Simone. To Garbus' incredible luck, the director works with concert footage that features close-ups of her face (why would a decent concert cinematographer do that, unless they were planning on making this doc decades ago?) It's a blissful moment in an otherwise shattering documentary, one that presents brilliance but aptly shows how we led towards extinguishing it.



The Bronze



'The Bronze'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

If any new comedy could prove that sturdy images of arrested development are only achieved with creative sophistication, the failure of "The Bronze" is an unfortunate good example. A star vehicle for Melissa Rauch of "The Big Bang Theory" (who co-wrote the screenplay), this film from director Bryan Buckley wants to be a wiseass, dirty-mouthed crowd-pleaser about growing out of glory days, but it has no vitalizing tact.

In this comedy (regarding desired genre, but not last night's audience reception) Rauch plays Hope Ann Gregory, a local town hero and former gymnast who won the bronze medal a decade ago at the Olympics, and nonetheless with an injured foot. Years later, though she isn't doing gymnastics anymore, she tries to live in the importance of a celebrity that left long ago. Her single mailman father (Gary Cole) babies her, and the town does too, with Hope able to exploit the locals' appreciation for free Sbarro, shakes, and even pills.

Hope's free rides become endangered when her father starts to say no to her, taking away her allowance, and no longer turning the other way when she steals mail. Worst of all, a new gymnast talent named Maggie (Haley Lu Richardson) threatens to distract the town away from Hope's fleeting importance. A naive prude that film treats to be eleven-teen years old, Maggie is the opposite of Hope, but is blindly enamored with the bronze medalist. They are united by the script in their juvenile attitudes, but Maggie is the more disturbing - indeed for its lack of creativity in its naiveté and in the way that the story simply wants to put her down. The movie's bad spirit becomes plainly mean - why even bother?

"The Bronze" then lurches with a first-time driver's distrust of the acceleration pedal, until it reaches Hope's unlikely mentorship with Maggie. This happens because the gym coach they both had has killed herself, and told Hope to make Maggie a champion to earn money in her will. It should be noted that as "The Bronze" gets wackier with its assembly of standard parts, these components don't enhance its sobering lack of wit.

Working with what she co-wrote herself, Rauch's performance is either damned by takes that find her attacking all of her dialogue head-on as if she was trying to beat it, or Hope was always meant to be malnourished in spirit or presence. The joke is that she is vulgar, and cocky. Fin. "The Bronze" takes about an hour for this lead character to feel like the illusion of a refection of a real person, and it arrives at a time with both Yankee Candle product placement and another Sbarro shoutout (re: Sbarro - please send food. Breadsticks preferably.) There is a completeness within Rauch taking on this character, but it's gone in a few glimpses on her face, albeit in the movie's one successful scene.

"The Bronze" doesn't just want an edginess with its vulgar humor, it also wants something distinct in its tone. It only becomes a dark comedy that has no understanding of the nuance needed to make losers funny. Making losers of both its filmmakers and audience members, "The Bronze" shows that outrageous comedy does not guarantee surprise, or even a single laugh.



The Amina Profile



'The Amina Profile'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

This documentary is initially an international love story in the time of the internet. Sandra, a Canadian woman, connects with a woman named Amina, who lives in Damascus, Syria, during the nation's time of horrific conflict. With the two exchanging messages and emails everyday, quickly heating up to a passionate online relationship, Sandra has a first-hand account of Amina's involvement with protests in Syria, and is the second follower on Amina's blog "A Gay Girl in Damascus." When Amina writes about her father defending his gay daughter to officials, Amina becomes a media sensation.

Director Sophie Deraspe's tight documentary is an investigation into what Amina is like in the real world, as it throws viewers into an investigation that wants to hold this important figure accountable for who she claims to be on the internet. Deraspe wisely recognizes that this sensation also has the heartbreak of Sandra in jeopardy, and makes her the interviewer as she corresponds with those who have pieces to previously unasked questions concerning Amina, most specifically representatives of Syria and/or gay/lesbian backgrounds. A narrative that begins with a love story progressively assumes multiple sociological layers, while offering a sensational mystery; Sandra meanwhile remains its crux of truth.

Deraspe's film has too many left-turns to ruin its tactful shuffle with a careless reveal in this write-up, but "The Amina Profile" is nonetheless always even more than could expect it to be. While the story writes itself with unbelievable true-life drama, Deraspe grabs hold of its narrative and fleshes out its central characters who are in the middle of a worldwide sensation that is bigger than a country, bigger than protests, and bigger than love. As the film world struggles to sharply engage social media culture, "The Amina Profile" is an incredible topping to this list, as it diagnoses specific, dangerous flaws within a world that is so intricately connected.

With political causes and socioeconomic layered richly on top of each other, "The Amina Profile" becomes as at-once heartbreaking as it is eye-opening, without bursting the sensationalism that swells throughout the story. One of the doc's final scenes, in which Sandra achieves full truth about Amina has a brilliant coda of pure theater, captured with the reality that popular fiction would probably only stumble over itself in the process. A devastating bow on a tight package, the moment is handled with excellent tone. The movie uses its unbelievable passages to push hard truth about an accessible world of questionable identities.



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[Read our 2015 Sundance coverage of 'A Walk in the Woods,' 'Eden,' 'Knock Knock' & 'Z for Zachariah'](#) [16]

★ [Read our 2015 Sundance coverage of 'Digging for Fire,' 'Entertainment' & 'Results'](#) [17]

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



[18]

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