

2015 Sundance Diary: 'A Walk in the Woods,' 'Eden,' 'Z for Zachariah' & 'Knock Knock'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on January 26, 2015 - 2:43am

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PARK CITY, Utah – There are too many films and not enough time between shuttle shuffles and line waiting to cover the festival day by day. So, in pure improvised festival-going fashion, I'll now be posting reviews for material that I see, but necessarily in viewing order. Enjoy!



A Walk in the Woods



'A Walk in the Woods'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

A human being who looks better at his current age than I ever will in my entire life, Robert Redford has a sprightly screen presence that has carried him through thick and thin, even brutal storms that live-or-die on his charisma (AKA "All is Lost," one of the best films of 2013). For his next adventure, Redford goes softer than a survival story, but nonetheless into an amusing jaunt with "A Walk in the Woods."

Based on the nonfictional accounts by New Hampshire writer Bill Bryson, Redford embodies the author as an amusing smart-ass, who confronts questions thrown at him involving his life and death with shrugging sarcasm. One day he simply decides to hike the Appalachian Trail, despite the protests of his wife (played by Emma Thompson, who gets in a few playful bits too). She insists that he take on such an impossible journey with someone else. Bryson ends up journeying with his old pal Stephen Katz (Nick Nolte as a gargling, drifter Santa). With both of them relatively inexperienced in camping, and Katz working with a bad leg, they begin their expedition in Georgia, slowly, very slowly finding their way up north.

"A Walk in the Woods" gets a good deal of mileage out of a well-assembled cast. A comedic Redford is a welcome tour guide for Bryson's journey, and Nolte provides a neat opposite to him, albeit with his own can-do spirit that makes him a likable lug. The two have an efficient buddy relationship that doesn't get bogged down in anything artificial, and when Nolte peels back the layers on the drunk, womanizing, chaotic Katz in the third act, it more or less works. This goes for a self-righteous moment in which Bryson remarks about loving information, or when he tries to compare the trail to life. "A Walk in the Woods" moves past these moments before they really start to get stale.

The story never oversteps any of its emotional bounds. Even side characters are treated with a refreshing restraint (maybe in the wake of Day One’s awful “The Bronze,”) and make Kristen Schaal’s peppy super-hiker and others examples of how colorful characters are best built from personality, not simple caricature.

Contributing to its hit-and-miss humor, “A Walk in the Woods” has a wackiness that proves to be its most troublesome trait, with its questionable “boys will be boys” raunchy lunges. But as with its schmaltzy stuff, the movie is too efficiently casual to be bogged down in these elements, allowing its centerpiece of Redford & Nolte to be the memory one will take away from the film most.

★ Eden



‘Eden’

Image credit: Sundance Institute

Director Mia Hansen-Løve’s “Eden” is a hip-as-hell “Boogie Nights” through the rise and fizzle of the French house music scene. It is a movie that shows how films can be best when they are bigger than sturdy facts, experiences not events. A loving take on what was once “the modern disco,” the film expertly presents the feels and sounds of the historical music movement that inspires it, soaking viewers in a lasting atmosphere.

There seems to be one character who provides a center of some sorts, the consistent benchmark. In a simpler plot synopsis, outside of simply saying that “Eden” is about the French house scene, the movie follows a DJ named Paul (Félix De Givry) working in a different scene, playing shows of burgeoning sizes. In the meantime, he falls for different women (which includes Greta Gerwig, which is where her supporting part begins and ends). His love interests move in-and-out of his life like this duo called Daft Punk that provide a little in-joke throughout. “Eden” jumps forward in time in its process, and Paul parallels the scene’s arc, his passion feeding the movie.

What’s so special about the film is how it contains an entire music scene. It vividly collects people and their passion for music into a thoroughly pulsing package, albeit with a seductive soundtrack. And even when patches of the film seem little more than parties of people dancing, “Eden” feels alive for eschewing dry details of the period, or bogging itself down with an undeniable immediately defined narrative. Blissfully edited and rich in the experiences that one remembers more than names or dates, “Eden” is a heartfelt memory with passion that reaches well beyond its scene.

★ Knock Knock



'Knock Knock'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

Before introducing “Knock Knock” on Friday night, director Eli Roth publicly declared that it was a turning point in his career as a director, but also that for the film’s star, Keanu Reeves. “Knock Knock” does indeed present both of them in different lights, but the wacky work of Reeves definitely outshines the vision of Roth, who is most concerned with fulfilling any fetichisms possible.

Roth riffs a main idea or three from Michael Haneke’s “Funny Games,” but in his interest in showing mantraps, replaces Haneke’s dorky dudes with two hot chicks, bro. The pawn in Roth’s somewhat-funny game is Reeves, who is different from his previous roles in “John Wick” and others from the start - he’s not playing a loner like usual. He is playing a super average, even dorkier dad who speaks fondly of his former DJ days, and everyone tells him to cut his hair. Reeves’ steps into big trouble when his kindness to the two ladies (Lorenza Izzo and Ana de Armas) drenched in rain and looking for company, leads to a damning temptation.

The shenanigans that follow in Roth’s story are him rolling around in shocking filth, a gesture that can prove to be all that he has when “Knock Knock” is stuck as a game. Here it’s sex and degradation for the sake of showing it. In the spectrum of his two “Hostel” films, the movie features the mantrap device where sexual fantasy leads to dehumanizing ruin. It’s the horror genre’s notion of punishing promiscuity to the extreme and “Knock Knock” only confirms that the book of Roth thinks this propulsion is unavoidable.

While Roth’s previous presentations of that punishment have felt pointlessly mean-spirited, “Knock Knock” is firmly within the bounds of wild comedy, and Reeves proves a great putz. In a role that will further stoke the fires of a career that continues to have an appeal, Reeves hurls himself into the film’s fire with a Nicolas Cage-like zeal. He has a tangent in the third act defending his choices, and it’s the new absurdity that “Knock Knock” could use more of, which Reeves advancing further than Roth in terms of what they can offer audiences.



Z for Zachariah



'Z for Zachariah'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

Director Craig Zobel made one of the most compelling films of 2012, "Compliance," as set in the back of a fast food restaurant. Based around a prank phone call, "Compliance" was whipped up to be a frightening examination of human power dynamics.

With his followup, Zobel wants to go bigger with scope, but even smaller with cast. This film takes place in post-apocalypse, after something terrible has wiped out a lot of people, leaving the world to this film's cast that totals three. It starts with Ann ("Wolf of Wall Street's" Margot Robbie, with Southern accent), who navigates a ghostly dystopia in a biohazard suit, avoiding radiation. In time, while on the road she meets another human named John (Chiwetel Ejiofor). Initially freaked out by the sight of another, they start working together. Agreeing that mixing natural urges of sex would completely change their efficient dynamic, they harvest plans of hope, and begin to work towards returning to civilization.

And then the movie's main conflict arrives, a third beating heart named Caleb (a scruffy Chris Pine, with jolting eyes more than ever). In comparison to John's diplomatic relationship with Ann, he is more aggressive about what he wants, disarms notions of being a real threat with good ol' boy manners and a winking sense of humor. The three begin to work together on plans to restore electricity, while their love triangle becomes a dance of low-fi mind games.

Strip away that whole apocalyptic setting, and the dramatic bare bones aren't strong enough to whip up desired tension. It's a story about dynamics, involving ownership and human needs and wants. But it could be told just as same at a modern party, with two men politely disagreeing over who has power dibs on another human being.

There are so many pieces at play in "Z for Zachariah," but nothing lands. Zobel keeps the story as low-fi as possible, and what could make this film interesting regarding civilization stakes or intimate relationships withers away in the process. What doesn't help is that Zobel doesn't stick the landing on certain climactic shifts in the third act, making them plainly cheesy or just unsuccessfully misleading. Despite sporadic glimpses of goodness from its cast, the film is too restrained from its full potential, where it hardly feels like it exists.

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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.



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