

2015 Sundance Diary: 'Listen to Me Marlon,' 'Pervert Park,' 'Seoul Searching' & Festival Wrap-Up

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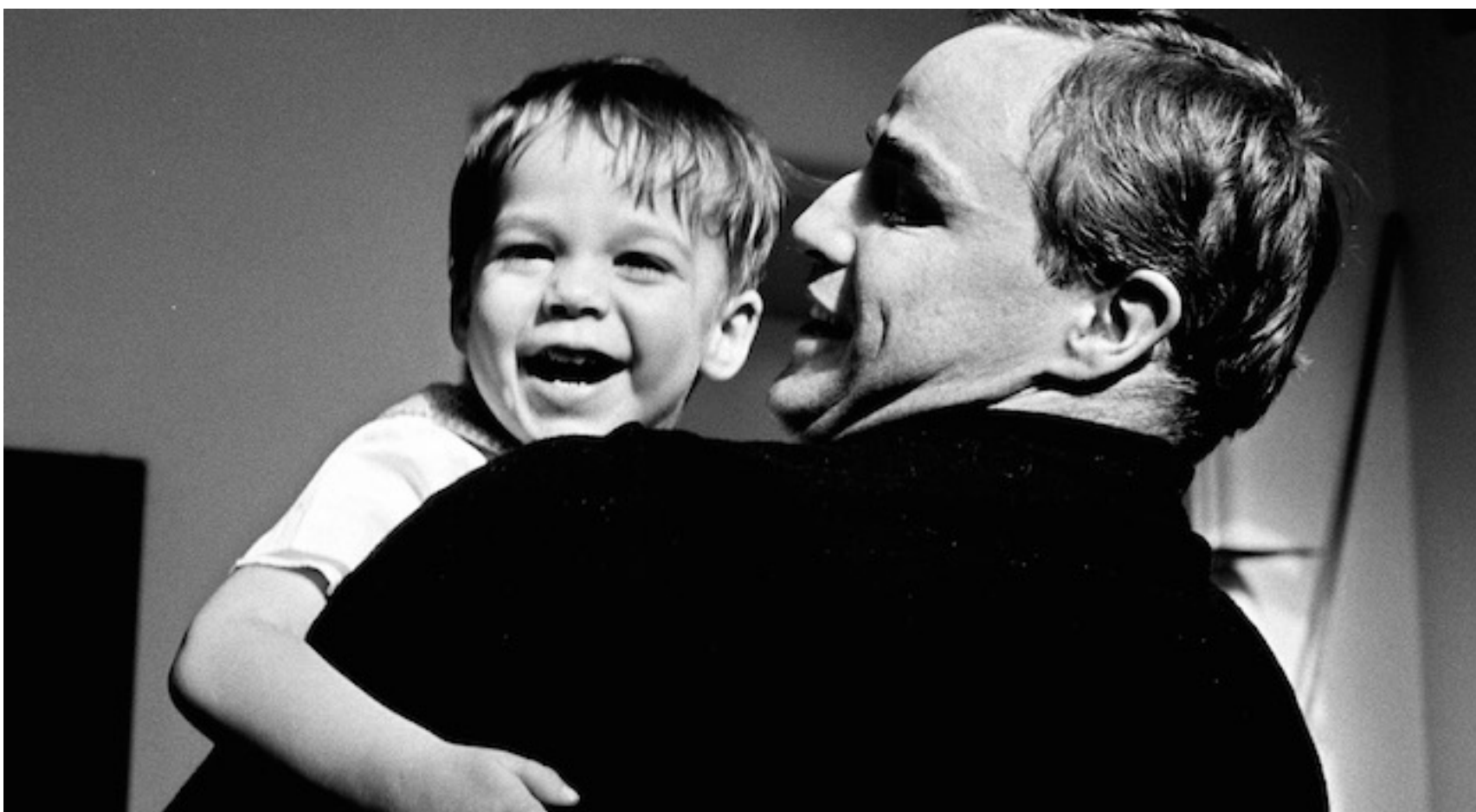
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PARK CITY, Utah – This is the last batch of Sundance reviews I've got to offer. A tad late, but I couldn't let these films go uncommented on, especially with their special offerings for those who seek them out. I hope that each of these films finds an audience. Aside from "Listen to Me Marlon" (which will be debuting on Showtime soon), I have also recommended both of these films for the third annual Chicago Critics Film Festival, the next fest for your radar, which takes off May 1-7, 2015 at the Music Box Theater.

Nonetheless, below are reviews for documentaries "Listen to Me Marlon" and "Pervert Park," along with a take on a personal favorite, the narrative film "Seoul Searching." After that, you'll find a brief recap of my Sundance experience, along with very brief words on a few other movies I saw.



Listen to Me Marlon



'Listen to Me Marlon'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

In film nerdery, there's the director-focused "auteur theory." But in recent years there has been the development of the star-based "star-teur theory," in which the roles chosen and performances given by actors lead to a type of authorship in their work. "What makes Tom Cruise films specifically Tom Cruise projects?" etc.

The star-teur theory is given an exciting boost with “Listen to Me Marlon,” a documentary that does more than celebrate the life and work of legendary actor Marlon Brando. Directed by Stevan Riley, who previously condensed the history of James Bond into the exciting doc “Everything or Nothing,” this slightly-experimental documentary constructs an impression of the actor from various pieces. Used in the process are photos, videos, but also an endless array of perfectly-mixed recordings that allow the actor to provide a voice-over to his own story. (This tactic is used similarly in “What Happened, Miss Simone?” and with similar effectiveness). In its boldest way of presenting Brando, the actor is also created digitally, as thousands of dots, as if he were languishing in a computer. It’s no Tupac hologram, it’s something else, something weirder, and something of strange modern art.

Riley executes some extremely impressive puzzle-piecing with this documentary, in which the audio recordings of Brando are matched poetically with those of his different performances, both popular and lost to the trash bins of film history. It creates a vivid impression, at times poetic, as it explores Brando’s perspective on his different roles and the landmark choices that he made throughout an equally dramatic personal life. With the film set to arrive to Showtime in the near future, “Listen To Me Marlon” is an exciting, informative and at-times wondrous account of the actor’s career.



Pervert Park



‘Pervert Park’

Image credit: Sundance Institute

Winner of the festival’s special jury award for “Impact,” “Pervert Park” is quite like the Steve James doc “Stevie,” in that it treats with humanity the American citizens who have been outright demonized for sexual offenses. Nonetheless, this (curiously Swedish) doc about a legal haven for convicted sex offenders remains necessary. At its very basic, it reminds viewers that these societal villains are people too, albeit with complicated combinations of mental illness, bad judgement, and sometimes even extremely poor luck (as with some tales from Florida’s sting operations).

Directed by Lasse and Frida Barkfors, “Pervert Park” is a swift (77 minutes in total) examination into the structure of this community, and the citizens that make it a full establishment. The park has a sense of order, in which different convicted offenders do their part to contribute to the small neighborhood, while respecting their strict probation in the outside world. (For example, one gentleman can only do his shopping at a certain time of day on Saturdays, for two hours.)

When listening to the subjects, the film’s camera often doesn’t break away from confessions, in which residents share the life-changing crime that has placed them in this ostracized environment. Outside of these incredibly personal moments, “Pervert Park” shows them in simple B-roll footage existence, walking around their neighborhood, hanging out with friends, all of them living in a quiet nook, trying to create the most normal existence possible.

The Barkfors’ film observes their inner trauma, and their current conditions, with a vital compassion. It doesn’t allow the distance from its subjects that might make the movie easier to approach (even its title forces you to look), but this humane intimacy becomes crucial. “Pervert Park” offers an awareness for viewers, either as enlightenment or reminder, into the complicated existence of other human beings, especially those we want to instinctively forget.



Seoul Searching



'Seoul Searching'

Image credit: Sundance Institute

Of the many films that I saw at Sundance this year, none were as radiant, or as one-of-a-kind, as director Benson Lee's "Seoul Searching." It's a movie that vogues to its own storytelling rhythm, laughs with its polarizing sense of humor, and is deeply motivated by a sincere cause to explore identity in a world where America is no longer the only melting pot. It was originally packaged as a John Hughes-type movie amongst festival buzz, which is an easy sell. But the heart of Lee's film pumps too loudly to be taken as just a nostalgic coming-of-age movie.

"Seoul Searching" focuses on a summer camp in Korea in the mid-1980s, in which 18-year-olds from around the world are flown in to learn what it means to be Korean. (A tough cause; what's even the explicit definition of being American?) The film's hook to explore identity is kind of mind-blowing, especially when other Sundance films like "A Walk in the Woods" and "The Bronze" walk a very fine line between personalities and caricatures: the young men and women are introduced as walking ideas of fads, as Korean kids who have adopted distinct images of pop culture into their direct identity. For example, there's the main punk kid Sid (Justin Chon), who dresses like Sid Vicious and wants to be just like him, especially in the eyes of everyone else. The same goes for the young woman who dresses up like Madonna (Jessika Van), and tries to carry a pop star's presence among the school. Or there are the three kids that dress up like RUN DMC, or the young man (Albert Kong) who acts like R. Lee Ermey, constantly dressed like he's in bootcamp, buzz cut and all.

The characterization of these students teases the idea of a simple joke, but "Seoul Searching" never loses grasp of the complications within identity. It has a great amount of fun with the idea that young people would walk around like they're in pop culture costumes, and the nostalgia of it, but Lee's film hits to the very core of what it means to identify with something. Even more so, it brilliantly conveys how when we don't understand ourselves, we try to be most recognizable to something else when in the gaze of others. "Seoul Searching" is an excellent coming-of-age film about how people become characters.

Lee's film takes course overs the entire summer, and is broken up into different episodes. Along with exploring personal and racial identity, "Seoul Searching" goofs around with what it means to be 18, like when three young men sneak into a dance club, or when they have a whiskey chugging contest on their first night at camp. Some parts aren't as funny as others, and there are a few bits that drag, and a couple of character strands that go nowhere. But a movie that has some rough patches brings it on home in a triumphant, hard-worn third act, that goes right to the core of Lee's message — it's a film for opposing generations, with younger trying to understand the older, and vice versa. One storyline that involves a Korean-American girl confronting the mother who gave her up for adoption 16 years ago has a gentle yet walloping effect, the tragedy of the conditions that separated them expressed vividly in their performances. Treading but never falling into melodrama in the same way it never sells out its concept, Lee cuts deep with what he shares about the darkness in older generations, and roles that have been harmfully perpetuated.

A film that should have been a sensation like the festival's 2014 breakout hit "Dear White People," "Seoul Searching" is a thoroughly thoughtful comedy that bursts with pride. It's ballsy in comedy and endlessly vibrant. For whatever imperfections it may have, I love this movie.



Recap

Aside from the titles that I was lucky to cover while at Sundance, there were a handful of other films that are worth mentioning. In the future, be on the lookout for director Ariel Kleiman's quietly disturbing "**Partisan**," in which an excellent Vincent Cassel plays a man who creates a quite utopia out of his one-man patriarchy. I look forward to fleshing out my thoughts on this film in a second viewing, as I admit this one was victim

to the very real notion of festival fatigue.

Nonetheless, another film that you should definitely keep on your radar is “**Sleeping with Other People**,” which has recently gotten distribution from IFC Films. One of the funniest films I saw at the fest, this romantic comedy from “Bachelorette” writer/director Leslye Headland invigorates the genre, but gives its sexual politics a bit of a shove. “Sleeping with Other People” is an assuredly progressive, if not polarizing entry, about a man and woman (Jason Sudeikis and Alison Brie, both high in charm here) who try to preserve their one healthy friendship by not letting their penchant for promiscuity in the way. Headland’s film whips up endearment for its cheaters and manipulators, tactfully creating a movie about the specialness of love, nonetheless with characters who would previously be ostracized in earlier romantic comedies before it. In a hilarious and formal script, sex is talked about openly, and Brie’s lead is distinctly never slut shamed. The film is inspired by rom-com standards like “When Harry Met Sally,” and certainly continues the spirit of its famous restaurant scene, in which raunchiness doesn’t come off as cheap. Instead, it’s opens the viewer up to these characters, and genuinely so.

And that about brings my 2015 Sundance Film Festival odyssey to a close. I had a great time trying to see the films of which I hope many influence the scene of the upcoming year, especially with 2014 about to wrap up its Oscar night third act. I’m not a big list person, but for the sake of sharing my two cents of the best I saw at the fest, here’s a top ten of titles I recommend looking out for most. Seriously, the new Joe Swanberg movie is really, really good.

1. “Digging for Fire”
2. “Don Verdean”
3. “Seoul Searching”
4. “Entertainment”
5. “Eden”
6. “The Amina Profile”
7. “Sleeping with Other People”
8. “Results”
9. “What Happened, Miss Simone?”
10. “Pervert Park”

And lastly, here’s the roundup of reviews for the films I saw. I hope you check them out (well, a majority of them) when they come to a theater (or VOD system) near you.

- ★ [Read our 2015 Sundance coverage of ‘Digging for Fire,’ ‘Entertainment’ & ‘Results’](#) [22]
- ★ [Read our 2015 Sundance coverage of ‘What Happened, Miss Simone?’, ‘The Bronze’ & ‘The Amina Profile’](#) [23]
- ★ [Read our 2015 Sundance coverage of ‘A Walk in the Woods,’ ‘Eden,’ ‘Knock Knock’ & ‘Z for Zachariah’](#) [24]
- ★ [Read our 2015 Sundance coverage of ‘Don Verdean,’ ‘The Mask You Live In’ & ‘Me & Earl & The Dying Girl’](#) [25]



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