

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Sundance Film Festival 2015 Highlights Ten Narrative Features

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, January 21st, 2015

Eighty-two narrative features will screen at the **2015 Sundance Film Festival**. Those eighty-two films were selected from a pool of four thousand one hundred and five feature length submissions, Sundance programmers relate — which is staggering to consider.

From among those eighty-two, here are some highlights: **Ten Narrative Features** that I am eagerly anticipating seeing during the Sundance Film Festival, which kicks off next Thursday, January 22.

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*"A Walk in the Woods," directed by Ken Kwapis, Sundance Film Festival 2015, Premieres.  
Photo by Frank Masi, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

### ***A Walk in the Woods*** – The Sundance Founder! & An All Star Cast

*A travel writer sets out to hike the Appalachian Trail with a long-estranged high school buddy to discover some roads are better left untraveled ...*

Robert Redford, Nick Nolte, Emma Thompson, Mary Steenburgen, Nick Offerman, Kristen Schaal, in nature — I'm in. I am so grateful to Robert Redford who has done more for independent cinema in this country than anyone I can name. Redford has commented that his only regret in spearheading the festival is that he has "lost a lot of my own career time endorsing and sponsoring Sundance. Probably more time than I ever dreamed, but I believed in it, so I did it." I am happy to see that the Sundance kid is setting aside time to grace the silver screen once again. We are always the better for it. Redford has the Midas touch.



*"Ten Thousand Saints," directed by Shari Springer Berman, Sundance Film Festival 2015, Premieres.  
Photo by Linda Slatter Kallerus, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

### ***Ten Thousand Saints*** — Nostalgia! – The East Village in the Era of CBGB

*Based on the acclaimed novel, the story of three lost kids and their equally lost parents as they all come of age in New York's East Village during the era of punk and gentrification that exploded in the Tompkins Square Park Riot of 1988.*

Ethan Hawke is an actor with a track record for sniffing out interesting projects. I am curious to see what attracted his attention and to revisit the haunts of my youth. Adapted by Shari Springer Berman (*American Splendor*) and Robert Pulcini with Asa Butterfield (*Hugo*) in the lead.



*"Last Days in the Desert," directed by Rodrigo Garcia, Sundance Film Festival 2015, Premieres.  
Photo by Rodrigo Garcia, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

***Last Days in the Desert*** – An Intimate Collaboration!  
Director Rodrigo Garcia & Actor Ewan McGregor

*Ewan McGregor as Jesus – and the Devil – in an imagined chapter from the 40 days in the desert.*

A spare meditation on family and mortality from director Rodrigo Garcia, who previously directed *Albert Nobbs* and produced HBO's *In Treatment* series. Rodrigo Garcia is the son of Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*). And who better to tackle the son of God and Lucifer than the facile Ewan McGregor (*Trainspotting*, *Star Wars*). In light of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, it feels good to celebrate freedom of expression, as well as freedom of religious imagination.

***\*\*A Walk in the Woods*, along with *Ten Thousand Saints*, and *Last Days in the Desert* are three of **eighteen films** in the 2015 Sundance line-up of **Premieres**.**



*"99 Homes," directed by Ramin Bahrani, Sundance Film Festival 2015, Spotlight.  
Photo by Ramin Bahrani, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

***99 Homes*** – The Director! – Ramin Bahrani

*A father struggles to earn back the home from which his family has been evicted — by working for the greedy broker who is the source of their trouble.*

From the director of *Goodbye Solo*, *Man Push Cart*, *Chop Shop*, and *At Any Price*, Bahrani is one of the most original and compelling indie film voices today. He crafts character-driven morality tales centered directly atop our cultural faultlines. Featuring Andrew Garfield, Laura Dern, and Michael Shannon.

***\*\*99 Homes* is one of **nine films** in the 2015 Sundance **Spotlight** program.**



*"I Smile Back," directed by Shari Springer Berman, Sundance Film Festival 2015, US Dramatic Competition.  
Photo by Linda Slatter Kallerus, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

***I Smile Back*** – The Comedienne! – Sarah Silverman

*Suburban housewife, Laney Brooks does bad things. Will her last ditch efforts at redemption*

succeed?

I am interested to see the wickedly inventive, naughty Sarah Silverman carry what sounds like a dark, provocative drama. Amy Koppelman and Paige Dylan adapted the script for Silverman based on Koppelman's novel. The film features Josh Charles, Thomas Sadoski, Chris Sarandon, Mia Barron, and Terry Kinney.



*"The D Train," directed by Jarrad Paul and Andrew Mogel, Sundance Film Festival 2015, US Dramatic Competition. Photo by Hilary Bronwyn Gayle, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

### ***The D Train* – The Comic! – Jack Black**

*At Dan's twentieth high school reunion, a wild night takes an unexpected turn.*

From *Bernie* to *School of Rock*, Jack Black never fails to fascinate. I can only imagine the comic chemistry with actor James Marsden, who plays the "most popular" guy from those bygone days, whom Black sets out to court.



*"The Stanford Prison Experiment," directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez, Sundance Film Festival 2015, US Dramatic Competition. Photo by Steve Dietl, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

### ***The Stanford Prison Experiment* – The Story! — Historic Import**

*A reimagining of the historic social experiment conducted by Phillip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971. What happens when you put good people in an evil place?*

When twenty-four students were randomly assigned to be "prisoners" or "guards" in a mock dungeon located in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford, the shocking results illuminated human susceptibility to authority and the capacity for cruelty. The experiment remains one of the seminal investigations of the period. It is surprising that this event which has become a core fundamental of psychology curricula today has never been previously dramatized. If director Kyle Patrick Alvarez, screenwriter Tim Talbott, and cast that includes Billy Crudup, Ezra Miller, Michael Angarano, Tye Sheridan, Johnny Simmons, and Olivia Thirlby have got it right, this could make for some powerful and significant cinema indeed.

***\*\*I Smile Back, along with The D Train, and The Stanford Prison Experiment are three of sixteen films in the 2015 Sundance U.S. Dramatic Competition.***



*"Umrika," directed by Prashant Nair, Sundance Film Festival 2015, World Dramatic Competition. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

### ***Umrika* – Character! — A Compassionate Son**

*When a village boy discovers that his brother who is supposed to be in America has gone missing, to spare his mother from suffering heartbreak, he composes letters to her on his brother's behalf, while searching to find him.*

The premise of this film strikes a resonant chord — Cyrano de Bergerac, in defense of "mom."

The film transports us to India to unravel an intercultural mystery. Featuring Suraj Sharma and Adil Hussain (two actors who appeared together in *Life of Pi*) in a screenplay developed by director Prashant Nair (*Delhi In a Day*) at the Sundance Scriptwriters Lab. In Hindi with English subtitles.



"*The Second Mother*," directed by Anna Muylaert, Sundance Film Festival 2015, World Dramatic Competition. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Sundance Institute.

### ***The Second Mother* (¿Que Horas Ela Volta?) – Premise! – A Comedy of Manners**

*A loving nanny to a wealthy family in Sao Paulo, Brazil, is visited upon by the daughter she left behind some thirteen years ago. When her biological daughter challenges her mother's servitude; disruption ensues ...*

What happens when economic realities foster trading one family for another? I can imagine the psychological aftershocks of this fertile premise. When a rough cut of Ana Muylaert's fourth feature, *The Second Mother*, screened at Locarno Festival's Carte Blanche last August, the social satire created quite a stir. In Portuguese with English subtitles.

**\*\**Umrika* and *The Second Mother* are two of twelve films in the 2015 Sundance World Cinema Dramatic Competition.**



"*Nasty Baby*," directed by Sebastián Silva, Sundance Film Festival 2015, NEXT. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

### ***Nasty Baby* – Playful Pairing – Actor-Director Sebastián Silva & Actress Kristen Wiig**

*A gay couple try to have a baby with the help of their best friend, Polly, while clashing with their confrontational neighbor, "The Bishop."*

Silva has a delightful and off-beat sense of humor as recently evidenced in *Crystal Fairy & the Magical Cactus*. I am interested to see what colors he pulls from Wiig who made a big splash just last year at Sundance in the off-kilter *The Skeleton Twins*.

**\*\**Nasty Baby* is one of ten films in the 2015 Sundance Next line-up.**

### ***Sundance Film Festival Program Guide***

### ***Sundance Film Festival 2015 – Official Website***

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