

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

SUNDANCING

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, January 20th, 2016

I am heading to Park City, Utah, for the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, and the sense of anticipation is palpable. The eleven days and nights that I will spend watching films at the festival will be among the most inspiring, illuminating, and exhausting of my year.

It was a stroke of genius really, Robert Redford timing the festival at the very start of the New Year — a week and a half that might otherwise be considered part and parcel of “the post-holiday travel slump” – a film festival in the cold heart of winter, in such a snowy wonderland as Park City, Utah.

I love traveling there. Salt Lake City is a short jaunt by plane from the Bay. I am always surprised upon arrival at the airport to be greeted by a sea of enthusiastic faces joyfully waiving signs — fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers, awaiting the return of sons and daughters who have just completed lengthy Mormon missions overseas.

A van whisks me from the airport to my digs at the family run Chateau Apres. Clean, charming, and ideally located, Chateau Apres plays host to many journalists, volunteers, first-time festival enthusiasts, as well as, the initiated old-timers. Over breakfast at the Chateau Apres in 2014, I had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with the eloquent film consultant Bob Hawk — who, this year, I remark, is the honored subject of the documentary premiere *Film Hawk*, which enlists film greats Kevin Smith, Edward Burns, Rob Epstein, Barbara Hammer, and Kimberly Reed in his tribute.



Kevin Smith and Bob Hawk, "Film Hawk."

Documentary Premiere, Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

I count 80 narrative features, plus 3 from the Sundance collection, and 41 documentary features, for a total of 124 curated feature offerings – staggering. I am aiming to see at least 30 of these.

Opening night is the easy part. The unifying event. Everyone selects from among four features and a program of shorts.

This year, the opening night narrative features include: **Belgica**, in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition — two brothers partner on what is destined to become the hottest bar in town, an intoxicating ascent set to the eclectic sounds of Belgian band Soulwax, from writer/director Felix van Groeningen (*Broken Circle Breakdown*); and **Other People**, in the U.S. Dramatic Competition — fresh off a break up with his boyfriend, a struggling comedy writer moves from New York City back to his Sacramento childhood home to aid his sick mother, from writer/director Chris Kelly.

The opening night documentary lineup features: **Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You**, in the Documentary Premiere category — "All in the Family," "Maude," "Good Times," "The Jeffersons" — the film promises a definitive chronicle of Lear's life, work, and achievements, for a dynamic portrait of Norman Lear, who at 93, remains as vital and engaged as ever, from directors, Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing (*Jesus Camp, 12th & Delaware*); and **Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang**, in the World Cinema Documentary Competition — most famous for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, Chinese superstar artist Cai Guo-Qiang uses firework drawings to explore the connection between the human and the cosmic, destruction and creation, the eternal and the fleeting. The film captures for posterity the brilliance of an artist whose work is by its nature completely ephemeral, from director Kevin Macdonald.



Norman Lear, "Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You."

Documentary Premiere, Sundance Film Festival. Photo by Omar Mullick, courtesy of Sundance Institute.



Adam Bakri and Maria Valverde, “Ali & Nino.”

Premiere, Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

I pour over the program of film offerings in an attempt to carve out a tentative schedule for the remaining ten days of the festival. So many titles arouse my curiosity! To provide you with a teaser:

In the category of Premieres, *Ali & Nino* captures my attention. From director Asif Kapadia, with whom I had the honor of speaking regarding his [Academy Award nominated documentary, *AMY*](#), and written by Christopher Hampton (*Dangerous Liaisons*), *Ali & Nino* depicts a Christian-Muslim love story set in Azerbaijan at the outbreak of the Great War. I want to see how this master of documentary, Kapadia, makes the transition to narrative storytelling. I am also curious about *Complete Unknown*, the first English language feature film from Sundance award winning director Joshua Marston (*Maria Full of Grace*). The formidable acting ensemble of *Complete Unknown* includes Rachel Weisz, Michael Shannon, Kathy Bates, Danny Glover, and Michael Chernus, and recounts a tale of a curious meeting between a party host and a guest.



*Logan Lerman and Sarah Gadon, “Indignation.”
Premiere, Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

I have reserved a ticket for Taika Waititi’s comedy, ***Hunt for the Wilderpeople***. I adore Waititi’s humanistic sensibility and expect that this tale of a child and his foster uncle on the run in the New Zealand bush will be most enjoyable. Also, ***Indignation***, from Academy Award-nominated screenwriter and first time feature director, James Schamus. The drama is based on a novel by one of the greatest writers of our time, Phillip Roth. Set during the Korean War, Marcus Messner is relieved to escape the draft with admission to a Christian university in Ohio, where the Jewish atheist will find himself at a crossroads.

Manchester By the Sea, from director/screenwriter Kenneth Lonergan, was sold out before I was able to snag a ticket, but I am hoping to waitlist my way in. Lonergan’s *You Can Count On Me* (2000 Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize Winner) remains in my estimation, one of the most perfectly nuanced films ever made. In *Manchester By the Sea*, Casey Affleck plays a loner who has suddenly and unexpectedly been named guardian to his 16-year-old-nephew.



“Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures.”

Documentary Premiere, Sundance Film Festival. Photo by Robert Mapplethorpe.

Courtesy of Sundance Institute.

I flip through the guide to consider documentaries, and I notice a preponderance of documentaries devoted to celebrities of interest. In addition to the Norman Lear and Bob Hawk documentaries, the 2016 Sundance lineup includes: *Becoming Mike Nichols*, *Eat that Question – Frank Zappa in His Own Words*, *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, *Maya Angelou And Still I Rise*, *Michael Jackson’s Journey from Motown to Off the Wall* (directed by Spike Lee), *Nothing Left Unsaid: Gloria Vanderbilt & Anderson Cooper*, *Linklater – dream is destiny*. Further, there are documentaries devoted to: Steve Gleason, the former NFL defensive back in coping with his fatal ALS diagnosis (*Gleason*), journalist James Foley who was executed by ISIS (*Jim*), Anthony Weiner documenting the mayoral campaign that was marred by scandal (*Weiner*), and filmmaker Howard Brookner, who after his death, is rediscovered by his nephew (*Uncle Howard*). *Author: The JT LeRoy Story*, concerns the unmasking of literary celebrity JT LeRoy, the fictional avatar through which Laura Albert channeled her creativity for over a decade.



Shin Sang ok, Kim Jong-il, and Choi Eun-hee, “The Lovers and the Despot.”

World Cinema Documentary Competition, Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

Under the heading of “reality is stranger than fiction,” a number of documentary titles stand out: ***The Lovers and the Despot***, movie-obsessed dictator Kim Jong-il kidnaps a celebrity director and his actress ex-wife and forces them to make films until his captives engineer an escape. ***NUTS!*** is billed as the mostly true story of Dr. John Romulus Brinkley, an eccentric genius who built an empire with his goat-testicle impotence cure and a million-watt radio station.



"The Land of the Enlightened."

World Cinema Documentary Competition, Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

The World Cinema Documentary Competition affords one the opportunity to intimately traverse the world: in the company of twenty-somethings in their summer of love in Warsaw, Poland (*All These Sleepless Nights*), digging up Soviet mines with gangs of young boys in war-tormented Afghanistan (*The Land of the Enlightened*), working the streets with 50 to 80-year-old prostitutes in the La Merced neighborhood in Mexico City (*Plaza de la Soledad*), or investigating the truth behind competitive endurance tickling that a reporter from New Zealand travels to Los Angeles to uncover (*Tickled*).

There are a great variety of issue oriented documentary films with subjects that include: online bullying (*Audrie & Daisy*), religious cults (*Holy Hell*), climate change (*How to Let Go of the World (and Love All the Things Climate Can't Change)*), gender identity (*Suited*, HBO), and two documentary films in the 2016 program that speak to the phenomenon of mass shootings. The U.S. Documentary Competition film, *Newtown*, addresses the aftermath of the worst mass shooting of schoolchildren in American history. The Documentary Premiere *Under the Gun*, from filmmakers Stephanie Soechtig and Katie Couric, explores the critical question: "Why have our politicians failed to act?"

From director Werner Herzog comes *LO AND BEHOLD: Reveries of the Connected World*. Herzog's musings are always original, insightful, and provocative. I anticipate the pleasure of an idiosyncratic meditation on the nature of the Internet from this cinematic master.

What is it that you are curious to see, Cultural Weekly readers? If you let us know, we will do our best to report back.

[Here is the link to the full program of offerings.](#)

Top Image: Stef Aerts, Tom Vermeir, and Boris Van Severen, "Belgica." U.S. Dramatic Competition, Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.



Harley Quinn Smith and Lily Rose Depp, “Yoga Hosers.”

Premiere, Sundance Film Festival. Photo by Allan Amato, courtesy of Sundance Institute.

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