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# Sunshine Superman Soars at TIFF

Tod Hardin · Wednesday, September 17th, 2014

I'll cut right to the chase on this, with a slight disclaimer to follow. Few, if any documentaries exceeded the heights of *Sunshine Superman* at this year's Toronto International Film Festival.

The disclaimer? Ok, I didn't see every single documentary offering at the festival.

However, I'm quite comfy with my claim about the stellar effort put forth by first-time feature film director Marah Strauch. I base this on three things: 1) My own viewing of the film; 2) My experience in previously running what was once one of the largest documentary film festivals in the US (Detroit Docs); and 3) My numerous conversations – both during and post festival – with filmgoers, film industry insiders and fellow members of the film industry press.

The infectious smile of Carl Boenish

*Sunshine Superman* is the culmination of eight years of hard work to bring the life of a rather unique character to the big screen. It's the endearing story of Carl Boenish, father of the BASE Jumping Movement, and the great love shared between he and his wife Jean – and the love they both shared for jumping off cliffs and other fixed objects (with a parachute, mind you).

It's a story that will make you laugh, cry and sit in awe of the majestic beauty experienced by those brave enough to jump off of **B**uildings, **A**ntennas, **S**pans and **E**arth (thus, the BASE acronym). It's told through 96 minutes of interviews, reenactments and the breathtaking 16mm footage that Boenish and others shot of their daring leaps of faith throughout the 70s and early 80s – and done so in-step with a soundtrack of period specific songs that seem to hit all the right notes at all the right times.

Boenish was an electrical engineer by trade and he began dabbling in cinematography in the 1960s, going so far as to work with John Frankenheimer on the 1969 Burt Lancaster and Gene Hackman parachuting vehicle, *The Gypsy Moths.*

He was quirky and a bit nerdy. He was spiritual, had an infectious smile and lived life to a level that most of us can only aspire to. He was also a polio survivor, which may explain much about the man, and yes, he had one hell of a set of Sasquatch-sized testicles.

I'm sure all of that played into the unassuming Jean falling for this unlikely pioneering daredevil. It's actually the emergence of Jean in the story that, in my opinion, really took this film to another

level. On the surface she is plain and initially comes off as a bit boring, but audiences soon learn that there is much more to this strong woman than meets the eye … a woman, by the way, who would go on to establish herself as the premier female BASE jumper in the sport.

From Yosemite's El Capitan and the skyscrapers of LA and Houston, to the intimidating yet majestic spires of Norway's mountainous terrain, we are taken on a thrill ride, with Jean and Carl leading the way and their merry band of BASE jumpers offering layers of depth that make this film a bit more special.

As seems to happen far too often in the world of extreme sports, this beautiful dual love story would eventually come to a tragic end in 1984. On a national television show, hosted by David Frost and a very young Kathy Lee (Gifford), Carl and Jean set a world record for highest BASE jump, this time off of Norway's ominous Trollveggen – or Troll Wall – (the tallest vertical rock face in Europe). Elation would soon turn to sadness, when despite his wife's objections, Carl decided to jump off another section of Troll Wall the following day – a section they had previously deemed to be unsafe to jump from. Carl would not make it home that day. Why he chose to make the jump and what actually caused his fatal accident are mysteries to this day.

It's interesting to note that I saw this film at an industry screening at the festival. These screenings are notorious for early walkouts and offering very little audience reaction. That wasn't the case here. I don't believe I saw a single person leave early and there were indeed moments of laughter, sadness and clapping exhibited by the industry peeps there. Another reason to believe that this may not just be one of the best documentaries at the Toronto International Film Festival, but quite possibly one of the best docs period in 2014.

On that note, I'm happy to report that Magnolia has picked up theatrical distribution rights for North America, so get your butt to the nearest theatre when it's released … even if you have to jump off a building to do it (parachute in hand, of course).

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