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Sundance comes to a close with impressive award-winners

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jan. 31, 2013 NCR Today
Sundance Film Festival 2013

Editor's note: Sr. Rose Pacatte spent Jan. 17-27 at the Sundance Film Festival. Read all of Sr. Rose's Sundance entries here[1].

The 2013 Sundance Film Festival came to a close with an impressive list [2] of award-winners. Of these, I saw and reviewed seven of them: "Circles" (review below), "The Square [3]," "Who is Dayani Cristal? [4]", "Crystal Fairy [4]," "Ain't Them Bodies Saints? [3]" and "Upstream Color [5]."

According to the Sundance website [6], "The 2013 Sundance Film Festival presented 119 feature-length films, representing 32 countries and 51 first-time filmmakers (including 27 in competition), and 65 short films. These films were selected from a record 12,146 submissions (429 more than for 2012), including 4,044 feature-length films and 8,102 short films. 103 feature films at the Festival were world premieres."

With this post, I would like to complete the reviews for the films I was able to see and have not yet written up or mentioned.

"When I Walk" [7]
Documentary directed by Jason DaSilva
80 minutes

One day, when 25-year-old filmmaker Jason Da Silva was at the beach on a family vacation, he collapsed on the sand. He had been recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, but this was the first time his body had given out on him. It was a swift journey to a wheelchair and a special scooter for the handicapped.

This personal film, filmed and edited with help from his indomitable "think positive thoughts" mother and his new wife, Alice, documents Jason's journey with secondary-progressive MS, arguably the worst form of MS a person can get. I have MS of the relapsing-remitting variety for now, and if I find MS a physical and spiritual mystery and a challenge on every front, I now have a sweet, funny, brave and bold champion whose response to the unknown future of a fickle, exhausting, humiliating illness gives me courage.

When Jason and Alice move to Brooklyn, he becomes acutely aware that there are no taxis that can accommodate wheelchairs or scooters; neither can any means of public transportation or most shops and restaurants. That sidewalks are in a bad way has caught the attention of New York City as well. So he and Alice began a project called AXSmap [8], a national database that anyone can contribute to and access, which shows places that are handicapped-accessible.

I got to talk with Jason after the film, and he told me his faith is very important to him and that his uncle is a permanent deacon in Toronto. This clip is from the question-and-answer session that followed the film:

Most spouses leave when someone is diagnosed with MS; the unknown is too much for them. In this case, Alice Cook, who met Jason after he was diagnosed, fell in love and married him. They are expecting their first child any day.

"Valentine Road" [9]
Documentary directed by Marta Cunningham
89 minutes

Oxnard, Calif., is a relatively small, largely upscale coastal community north of Los Angeles and south of Santa Barbara. On Feb. 12, 2008, Brandon McInerney, who had just turned 14 years old, joined his classmates at E.O. Green Junior High School in the computer lab, then stood and shot 15-year-old Larry King in the back of the head. King, who identified himself as gay and accessorized his public school uniform accordingly, died two days later.

As Valentine's Day neared, King had approached McInerney, and in front of his friends, asked the younger but much bigger boy to be his valentine. This incident evidently provoked McInerney.

Both boys came from difficult home situations. Brandon McInerney's parents were divorced, and he had once witnessed his father shoot his mother. At the time of the killing, McInerney was living with his father and grandfather, who owned several guns. King and his brother had been adopted, but Larry eventually settled in a group home under guardianship, where he finally thrived.

This story, deftly told by director Marta Cunningham, deals with intolerance of gay and lesbian students and the use of guns and violence to solve perceived problems. It questions the inability of schools to teach tolerance or come to an understanding of their role in teaching tolerance, as well as the inflexibility of California's justice system that tries young children as adults and administers long sentences.

When Larry King was taken off life support on Feb. 14, 2008, his heart was donated to a 10-year-old child. He is buried in a cemetery along Valentine Road. Brandon McInerney took a plea deal and will be released from prison at the age of 39. There are no winners in "Valentine Road" today, but perhaps there will be when more people see this film and we work together to make sure our children are always safe. Violence never solves anything, but respect for others surely does.

"There Will Come a Day" [10] ("Un Giorni devi Andare")
Feature directed by Giorgio Diritti, starring Jasmine Trinca, Pia Engleberth, Anne Alvaro
111 minutes; Italian with English subtitles

When Augusta (Jasmine Trinca) miscarries and her husband divorces her, she flees from her Italian home to the Amazon region of Brazil to join her aunt, a nun (Pia Engleberth), to minister to the people who live in the *favelas* along the river. Augusta questions her aunt's motivations for baptizing children when their parents do not understand why, and eventually sets out on her own, living with the people and renting a room. Back in Italy, her mother, Anna (Anne Alvaro), longs to hear from her daughter, who will not answer calls or texts. The sisters at the convent want Anna to help with an art project, and finally help her connect with Augusta by Skype. As the sisters pray the psalms thousands of miles away, Augusta lives out her anguish of loss and grief, trying to find answers by living and working with the poor who live on the outskirts of a large city.

There is much more going on in Giorgio Diritti's finely drawn and beautifully filmed odyssey of hope and faith that sees the world, family, community and human experience through the eyes of women who suffer as they give life and nurture others. As Diritti told a group of students at the Windrider Forum [5], he did not set out to write a religious script; his story began when he listened and saw the suffering of people that came out of a trip he made to Brazil several years before.

"Circles" [11] ("Krugovi")
Feature directed by Srdan Golubovic (Find the full cast here [12].)
110 minutes; Serbian with English subtitles

Of all the films at Sundance 2013, "Circles" remains my favorite. During the Bosnian War (1992 -1995), a Serbian Christian soldier, Marko (Vuk Kostic), rescues a Muslim shopkeeper in a small town from being kicked to death by three other Serbian soldiers -- then the soldiers turn on him and kill him. The film jumps ahead 12 years. The rescued man, Haris (Leon Lucev), now lives in Germany with his wife and daughters. When Marko's former girlfriend turns to Haris for help, he takes her in, putting his family at risk. Meanwhile, a young man turns to Marko's father for work to rebuild a church, but because the young man is the son of one of the soldiers who killed Marko, the father refuses. A Muslim doctor and friend of Marko must decide to operate or let die the leader of the soldiers who killed his friend so long ago.

The three stories move in concentric circles to conclude in a way that reminded me of the deeply moving 2002 Belgian film "Les Fils [13]" ("The Son") by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. But "Circles" is based on a true story, and the filmmakers said they hope this film will contribute to the desire for reconciliation among the peoples and countries involved in the Bosnian War. The symbolism of moving a church to the top of a mountain and rebuilding it there to make room for a nuclear power plant below reinforces the idea of how difficult it is to forgive, but that with grace, all is possible.

The performances are compelling, but Lucev's especially is award-worthy. "Circles" won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award.

"It Felt Like Love" [14]
Feature directed by Eliza Hittman, starring Gina Piersanti, Giovanna Salimeni, Ronen Rubinstein
82 minutes

In Eliza Hittman's debut feature film, a 14-year-old girl, Lila (Gina Piersanti), is on a sexual quest and spends the summer pursuing a sexual experience. Her father doesn't really understand that Lila is no longer a child, nor does he care what she does. So she follows an older girl, Chiara (Giovanna Salimeni), and observes her having several encounters. When Lila lets three young men know she is ready for something, she flees when they expose themselves, actually saving her from herself. Hittman's story is not improbable, but has an ineffable sadness about it. One wonders where Lila's mother is and how this young girl will find her way, and if she does, which way she will choose and why.

This is Hittman's second film at Sundance, and she is going through the paces to becoming a more than competent filmmaker -- however unappealing, even if real, her subject matter.

"Before Midnight" [15]
Feature directed by Richard Linklater, starring Ethan Hawke, Julie Delpy
108 minutes

Jesse (Ethan Hawke) sees his young adolescent son off at the airport after he spends the summer with his dad and his stepmother, Celine (Julie Delpy), on a Greek Island. Jesse and Celine met on a train in Europe several

years before and spent a day walking and talking around Vienna ("Before Sunrise [16]," 1995), then encountered one another again in France while Jesse was on a book tour ("Before Sunset [17]," 2004). Now they live together and have twin daughters. But Celine intuits that Jesse wants to move to Chicago to be near his son, which will mean she must leave an excellent job prospect in Paris to move there.

As with the first two films of Linklater's highly watchable trilogy, "Before Midnight" is seven or eight conversations about one thing: What will Jesse and Celine do next? The ability of Hawke and Delpy to keep up their conversations credibly and in a most engaging way, to enable very long, uncut takes by the camera, is rather noteworthy.

In the end, these are beautiful people working out their future together while acknowledging everything they know, hate and love about one another. It is a talkie from beginning to end, and could easily be adapted for the stage because the dialogue is clever and witty. But they really talk a lot.

"Rising from Ashes: The Impossible Triumph of Team Rwanda" [18]
Documentary directed by T.C. Johnstone
90 minutes

"Rising from Ashes" director T. C. Johnstone won the Spirit of Windrider Award [19] from the Windrider Forum on the last evening of the Sundance Film Festival. Johnstone got his start more than 10 years ago when he took a class in film and theology at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., and developed a "passion for transformative stories." Here, he follows European and American cycling legend Jock Boyer for seven years as he moves to Rwanda to develop a cycling team in view of the 2012 Olympics. This is a riveting documentary, narrated by Oscar winner Forest Whitaker, which tells the story of the Rwandan genocide, the 100 days in 1994 where a million people were killed because of race, and the team of young men who became Rwanda's hope. It is also Boyer's personal story of transformation and redemption.

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