



EVENT: THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

FESTIVAL DATES: January 28 – February 3, 2021

Seven of us streamed films offered virtually by the Sundance Film Festival. We reviewed and rated the films we individually selected to watch. Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Trailers and descriptions of all festival films: www.festival.sundance.org

DATE: February 7, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

CODA (children of deaf adults) Score: 5 (Adriane)

A feel good, perfect film from story, to cast, acting, filming, and everything in between, CODA was the biggest winner of the top four prizes in the U.S. Dramatic Competition category: the grand jury prize, the audience award, the directing prize, and a special grand jury prize for best ensemble. Well deserved!!

The location is Gloucester, Massachusetts, a fishing village. High school student, Ruby (Emilia Jones), whose parents and brother are deaf, helps her family in their struggling fishing business. She gets up at 3am to work the boat with her family and then goes to school. We see her joyously belting out songs on the boat, while no one hears her. At school she has one best friend, but others make remarks about her smelling like fish. A teen boy sees her staring at the bulletin board to sign up for activities and coaxes her to sign up for choir. In her first class, she is self-conscious and afraid to join in and respond when the teacher asks her to sing something. But she later goes to him and explains she is afraid because she doesn't think she is any good. She sings a part of a song for him and he recognizes she has potential. He starts to mentor her and eventually encourages her to try for a scholarship to Berkeley School of Music. Meanwhile there are escalating conflicts between her needing to go to choir practice and the family needing her to help on the fishing boat and saying they wouldn't survive if she left and went away to college. The family dynamics are very authentic and I really liked that her family was such a loving, caring family even with her older brother's teasing. The Mom (Marlee Maitlin) and Dad are terrific as their characters and they have a fun, often humorous relationship. True to the spirit and meaning of the film, the mom, dad and brother are deaf actors.

Emilia Jones learned sign language and also took singing lessons for her role. She has a fabulous voice! The actor who plays the choir teacher was outstanding! Both in his performance and the character was such an inspirational role model for teachers who recognize the potential of a fearful, self-conscious student and then provide the direction, support, and mentoring to help the student develop her/his potential and shine.

Of course, there are some dramatic events that underscore the reason the family is struggling to survive and why they need Ruby and how hard it is for her to choose between her dreams and her family. Everything about the film is exceptional especially its authenticity, humor, and a heartwarming ending.

The only nit picky weakness was the teen boy who she performs with at the class recital. His character was a bit weak as was his performance including his singing, but maybe that was on purpose to really let Ruby shine. I would have preferred a bit more engaging performance from him.

A few days after the festival, Apple TV paid \$25 million for CODA in bidding war with Netflix, and Amazon. (Note the film is based on a 2014 French film, La Famille Bellier about a deaf farming family with a hearing teenage daughter. The film is available to rent on Apple TV). Link to interview with film maker/writer/director Siân Heder, and cast: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyjuNTIPiU>

HIVE Score: 5 (Karen H.), 4 (Adriane)

HIVE, written and directed by Blerta Basholli (her directorial debut) was the 2nd biggest winner, receiving the top three prizes in the World. Dramatic Competition category: the grand jury prize, the audience award, and the directing prize. Based on a true story, the setting is a small village in Kosovo during the late 1990s after the war ended in 1999. The village experienced a massacre that took the lives of 240 people with many more still missing. Fahrije, a single mother, lives in limbo not knowing if her husband is alive or dead. He is "missing" as are the husbands and sons of many other women in the village. They each struggle to survive in the male dominated, controlling, culture amidst insurmountable prejudice. They are expected to wait in continual expectation of their breadwinner-husbands' return, subsisting on paltry welfare handouts, because to take a job or set up a business is looked on not only as a subversion of the natural order, but as a sign of disrespect to the husband and possibly loose morals. Despite blatant, wide spread male condemnation, that escalates to a man in the café throwing a rock at her, Fahrije, (an outstanding performance by Yllka Gashi), who is strong-willed, defiant and determined, commits the "sin" of learning to drive and getting a driver's license as the first step to starting a business as way to earn some money for her family. She cares for her father-in-law, a teenage daughter, and a younger son, each disapproving of her perceived independence and the shame such transgression brings on the family. Fahrije makes a batch of *ajvar* (a roasted red-pepper condiment popular in the region) and with her friend brings jars to a supermarket manager to sample. He agrees to stock her homemade *ajvar*, an impressive accomplishment that emboldens other women in the village to help her increase production. Their path is shaken with some violent obstacles, providing tension and drama in the film but the message is clear about women overcoming insurmountable barriers to assert their right to independence and respect and at the same time, the film exposes how restrictive, and suppressive those cultures are. In the interview with the director and cast following the

film's premiere at Sundance, the real Fahrije explained that the violence she experienced was actually much worse than shown in the movie.

Reviewer, Karen, liked the appearance of the movie, the view into the place where they lived, how the rooms were, the shadowiness of their lives, the plot, especially seeing a woman (underdog) overcoming difficult circumstances. and the sisterhood of other women coming to her aid. "I liked how the movie just plowed into the story, not bothering to fill us in on the background of the Kosovo/Serbian war or the massacre that occurred in that village. We the viewers just had to piece together the backstory. One negative: I couldn't understand what happened when she went to see the remains of her husband. Were they his or not?" Fahrije says they are not his jacket and watch, but DNA has indicated they are so either Fahrije is in denial or, given the sloppiness of the agency responsible, they are mistaken about the DNA, which is another jab at the patriarchal culture.

IN THE SAME BREATH (documentary) Score: 4.5 (Susan)

In the Same Breath is a documentary that was made by the same filmmaker, Nanfu Wang, who made One Child Nation in 2019. Her mother lives 2 hours away from Wuhan, China. She is married to an American and they have a 3-year old son. They live in America, but they were visiting her mother just as the pandemic was starting last year. Her husband and son left China first and then she followed. Luckily, no one in her family got sick.

In the Same Breath is a sobering documentary about how the authoritarian Chinese government glossed over the seriousness of the coronavirus and took down social media posts and pleas for help to create an unrealistic picture of the extent and danger of the virus. She has some amazing footage she was able to grab and save before social media posts were taken down and additional footage and interviews taken by an assortment of photographers and journalists. I don't know if you've heard about a Chinese citizen journalist, Chen Qiushi, who disappeared after going to Wuhan to see the situation for himself and had half a million followers on social media. He tried to remain objective about the situation and made one last video in early February 2020 and then disappeared (the Chinese police were after him for exposing too much about the situation). He is also shown in In the Same Breath interviewing one of the citizens of Wuhan whose father died of Covid after going into the hospital for heart surgery and then being exposed to and contracting Covid while in the hospital. She also compares the response of the US government to the virus, which had similarities in terms of downplaying the danger. The opening scenes of the New Years 2020 celebration in the city of Wuhan are awesome - it's a large city with tons of high-rises and the tall buildings were all lit up in coordinated colors and patterns for a new years light show that went on for several minutes. I would watch the movie for just that spectacle alone!

Here's what I liked/didn't like about the film:

1. I liked that Nanfu Wang was in a unique position to document and present the early days of the pandemic from on the ground in Wuhan and that she did a great job of presenting it. I worry that she/her mother could be in danger from her actions because of the scope and reach of the authoritarian Chinese government.
 2. I liked her objectivity and comparisons she made to reactions in the US
 3. I liked the opening scene showing the spectacular New Years celebrations in 2020 and 2021
- There wasn't anything that I didn't like.

MISHA AND THE WOLVES (documentary) Score: 4.5 (Marian), 4 (Adriane), 4 (Sharon)

We meet Belgian immigrant, Misha Defonseca, in the early 1990s, as she tells her incredible story of surviving the Holocaust to a captivated congregation at her temple. She said that she had been separated from her parents at seven years old and placed in the care of a Catholic family who might be able to keep her safe from the Nazis; she said they rechristened her "Monique". She was so young and traumatized, she couldn't even remember the last name of her family. But not happy in her foster family, and determined to find her parents, she stole away in the night and began walking across war-torn Europe, armed with nothing but a pocket knife, toward Germany. Here's the part that is hard to believe: She became accepted by pack of wolves." A member of the congregation who owned a tiny publishing company, recognized this as a possible profitable business opportunity to share Misha's story, if she approved. This opens Pandora's box.

Reviewer, Marian, asks, "Who is Misha? Is she the 7-year-old Jewish orphan who escapes the Nazis by walking through the woods and "making friends" with wolves? Her story gained international attention through a best-seller book, plans for a movie, speaking engagements etc. Or is she lying? Did she craft her story simply out of greed? or shame for the truth? Does she herself even know? We meet her in her mid-60s or early 70s. We meet a Holocaust survivor and others who research her story, travel to her childhood village, and try to ferret out the truth. Many twists and turns in this movie, and interviews including Misha, her would-be publisher, neighbors in her town (outside Boston, as I recall), and others. I didn't believe Misha's story from the start, though maybe I've just seen too many expose documentaries! Could have been a little shorter." Reviewer Sharon says "Amazing story telling, so many twists and turns, Didn't know which way it was going to go. Wanted to believe it and not at the same time. Misha /Monica quite the actress!" The person who impressed us the most was the elderly true Holocaust survivor who thought the story sounded suspicious, and diligently researched Misha's life through public historical records that contradicted what Misha was fabricating. Indiewire was critical of Sam Hobson's film, accusing him of spinning a sleek yarn with no substance in the same way as Misha did: "Hobkinson is too seduced by the dark power of his own storytelling to offer much deeper insight into how Defonseca may have abused her own. Exploiting now-familiar techniques of documentary misdirection in the service of easy suspense, "Misha and the Wolves" wastes a golden opportunity to interrogate the slippery nature of historical truth (and a Herzog-worthy heroine along with it), opting instead to spin a self-satisfied yarn that offers little insight into anything beyond our natural tendency to believe the most ecstatic truths."

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOY IN THE WORLD (documentary)

Score: 4.5 (Marian)

Highly-acclaimed director Luchino Visconti searches the world for "the most beautiful boy" to play the role of Tadzio in the 1971 movie adaptation of "Death in Venice." The movie's theme is the objectification of beauty, shown in the longing by a dying old man for a beautiful young man. The boy he chooses, Björn Andrésen, suffers the rest of his life as he tries to come to terms with how he was then celebrated, exploited, and not allowed to develop his own self-identity during the crucial teen years. In short, his life was far from normal. In this movie, we see him as an older man, mid-60s or so, who lives in squalor, and we learn of his life and relationships (often through interviews with significant others) until the present time. The documentary could have been a little shorter. Also, a little confusing when we meet a new person, even with an introductory title, maybe because of non-linear organization.

JOCKEY Score: 4 (Sharon)

An aging jockey aims for a final championship, when a rookie rider arrives claiming to be his son. Reviewer Sharon, loved the actor Collins Jr. "I thought he absolutely deserved the Special Jury Award for Best Actor that he received for his performance as the aging and failing Jockey. Great portrayal of the life of the racing world. All performances note worthy. Director of photography did a masterful job. The film was like a sunset, captured all the beauty of the desert at twilight. Beautiful film (Photography and emotional portrayals)."

MARVELOUS AND THE BLACK HOLE Score: 5 (Karen W.)

Writer and director Kate Tsang described "Marvelous and the Black Hole" as a "coming-of-age" film about a teenage delinquent (Miya Cech) who befriends a kid's party magician (Rhea Perlman) who helps her navigate her dysfunctional family and inner demons with the help of sleight of hand magic. The movie, which premieres at this year's virtual Sundance Film Festival, is inspired by relationship's Tsang with her grandfather. Reviewer Karen W. says, "Rhea Perlman is terrific as a magician who meets a teenager acting out after the death of her mother. As they spend time together the teenager finds some much-needed purpose. The teenager's family is really struggling without the mother and their different coping methods were realistic and realistically portrayed. During the post film interview, the Sundance hostess had excellent questions and I really enjoyed learning how the actor playing the father was added to the cast just one day before filming as the previously selected actor dropped out for a family emergency. The cast was very affectionate with each other in the interviews."

Night Of Kings Score: 4 (Adriane)

Shortlisted for best international feature film, Night of Kings focuses on storytelling as a diversion for prisoners in an Ivory Coast prison where the inmates choose a "Dangoro" (king) to run the prison while the guards keep minimal watch behind their reinforced chamber. According to ritual, Blackbeard, the current Dangôro, must take his own life when he is no longer healthy enough to govern. He walks with an oxygen tank to aid his breathing indicating the time is very near. Realizing his rivals are plotting to overthrow him, Blackbeard seizes upon this special night, when the moon turns blood red, to create a diversion and retire on his own terms. Blackbeard asks a new arrival, a bit fearful young man, dubbed Roman, to tell him a story. After Roman hesitatingly tells him about an incident, the only thing he could think of on the spot, Blackbeard appoints him "story teller" and he must begin his story. Roman's only ally is a lone, crazy white inmate named Silence who signals to him to keep continuing his story because once he stops he will be killed. I liked the originality of the story, the characters and performances. Reviews explained that in a country where elections are bloodier and corrupt, and where the transition of leadership is seldom peaceful, Blackbeard's plan is a poetic allegory, commenting on real-world Ivorian history. During the past 20 years alone, this troubled nation has undergone two civil wars, resulting in the overthrow of a corrupt president (Laurent Gbagbo, who refused to accept the results of a popular election) and the outbreak of street violence. The story was a bit removed for me but I enjoyed the storytelling theme. Many of the cellmates start pantomiming what Roman is saying including dancelike moves and chants reflecting the African storytelling tradition and offers the prisoners (and viewers) a figurative escape from the dark, claustrophobic cell block environment. Wanting to survive long enough to see the sun rise again, Roman keeps inventing ways to prolong the story saying he had omitted this earlier and then launches into a spin-off of the story gradually becoming more confident and animated. The ending is vague in its meaning as we see him dazedly stumbling into the yard in the final scene, a full-fledged storyteller.

CRYPTOZOO (animation) Score: 3.5 (Adriane)

Winner of the NEXT Innovator Award, Cryptozoo by Dash Shaw (director) and Jane Samborski (animation director), is a feature length, animated film with unique, very creative, animation techniques that shift vividly throughout the story to complement what is happening. One published reviewer noted that the techniques are "wholly unique from any other animated film." One of the main characters, Lauren, has created a sanctuary, (Cryptozoo) for mythological creatures, or cryptids (an animal that has been claimed to exist but never proven to exist), and is searching for the Baku, a dream-eating cryptid who, if falls into the wrong hands, could spell doom for all of humanity. But as the story progresses, we see the Cryptozoo evolve into a business oriented venture with marketing, and food stands and retail shops on its premises. Another female character who we meet with her boyfriend at the beginning of the film as an almost a modern Adam and Eve couple, reappears later and wondering why all the cryptids are in cages, releases them all. I enjoyed the animation which was sometimes wild and chaotic but also a bit raw or rough, and I thought the film had an important message.

FIRE IN THE MOUNTAINS Score: 3.5 (Adriane), 3.5 (Sharon), 2.5 (Mona)

The story is about a mother who toils to save money to help build a road in a remote Himalayan village to take her wheelchair-bound son for physiotherapy but her husband believes that a shamanic ritual (Jagar) is the remedy and takes the money she has saved to pay for the ritual. I liked the strong, intelligent female mother, Chandra, and the actress who played her was exceptional. The location in the Himalayas had very picturesque views in contrast to rustic, basic living arrangements in the village including the "homestay" she rents out. The insight into her struggle as a female and a mother in this traditional, poor, culture was very enlightening, and sadly showed the prevalent corruption. She repeated pleas with the local minister, asking when the road to the hospital will be built. She carries her son on her back, walking for miles up and down steep terrain, to the doctor clinic, where evidently they have not been able to help the boy. She does all the work while the husband believes their life is cursed, drinks, and doesn't do anything, except meet with a shaman who has him prepare for

the Jaguar ritual to remove the curse. He does have a soft side as the teenage daughter says to him, "You can be charming when you are not drinking." All the men we see are conservative unsympathetic, backwards, including those who hold influential religious and legislative positions. We see the conflict between more modern attitudes and traditional shamanistic beliefs. The end poses lots of unanswered questions. Unexpectedly Chandra shows up late to the Jaga ritual, but then becomes almost possessed by the music and ritualistic dancing, it's like she can't be the strong, composed head of the family anymore, her strength has been sapped, and she succumbs to the Jaguar. At the climax she has fallen to the ground and her extremely concerned son gets up and runs over to her. Is this meant to show how shamanistic beliefs are deceiving? Or that they cured the son? There were a few other times when the boy walked when no one else was looking so we wondered if he was pretending? Sharon thought he was seeking attention because his sister was the exceptional student, popular, and a completely modern social media teen. I would have given it a 4 if these questions would have been resolved.

Mona had a similar reaction but felt the plot was disjointed and confusing with a vague ending.

Sharon thought it was an ambitious film, using lots of locals and non-professionals. "I was pulled me in to the family drama. I felt the fatigue and drudgery of the Mom but also loved her character - she would do anything to help her child. The family was dysfunctional to say the least." During the QA with the filmmaker, Ajitpal Singh, discussing his directorial debut, said that the film was very personal based on his sister's illness when her husband refused to take her to a hospital.

R#J Score: 3.5 (Sharon)

Very contemporary Romeo and Juliet. Feuding families fueled by social media. Took me awhile to get into it, very millennial sort of film. Great performances, visuals, creative script and delivery.

Land Score: 3.5 (Sharon)

Robin Wright director and lead actor. Beautiful cinematography. a bit slow and contrived. Robin Wright playing herself, not a stretch for her character. Demian lead actor did a better job, more credible.

On The Count Of Three Score: 2 (Adriane)

This film had lots of pre-Sundance buzz describing the strong bond between two best friends who make a suicide pact. That raised a red flag for me that I pushed aside as more buzz expressed excited anticipation of the directorial debut of comedian Jerrod Carmichael who I was not familiar with and had I been, would have skipped this film. (He was not articulate in the QA, and I am sure I would not have found him a funny comedian.) He (Val) and Christopher Abbot (Kevin) star as the two young men in this pitch-black comedy. It did have some humorous scenes as the friends decide to fill their last day doing things they had always wanted to do. Acting was good and included stars Tiffany Haddish and Henry Winkler in small parts. But I adamantly think suicide not should be treated as a comedy and a film that, in a sense, glorifies it, is not worth viewing or producing.

First Date Score: 1 (Sharon)

I was looking for comic relief after Fire In The Mountains (depressing), but Firstt Date one was a dog! I rarely walk out of a film (in this virtual world, turn it off). I fell asleep and had no desire to pick it up again. Amateur film makers, poor plot, inexperienced actors (it showed). This film was an add on, not worth the price of admission.

Documentary Shorts:

When We Were Bullies Score: 5 (Karen W.)

My favorite, this short film was the reason why I selected this group of documentaries and I was not disappointed. A SF filmmaker chose a Berkeley actor as narrator for his previous film "The Smell of Burning Ants" about boyhood and aggression. When he met the narrator for the first time, they remembered each other from their elementary school in Sheepshead Bay NY. This film is about the shared memories of all the children in the class and how they picked on one child who was different.

A Concerto is a Conversation Score: 5 (Karen W.)

Shortlisted for best documentary short, this is the story of a young Black composer in Los Angeles talking to his grandfather about how the life choices of the grandfather allowed the grandson to have this unusual career. The grandfather was originally from the deep south and told the story of when he noticed racism as a child made the decision to move away. He picked Los Angeles to avoid snowy winters. He talked about the different racism in Los Angeles, but how he made a success of his life by buying the dry-cleaning company where he had his first job. The background music is lovely, the work of the young composer, and the two men are filmed listening to the piece in the beautiful Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. The composer is Kris Bowers and he is shown on IMDB with the "Green Book" team winning an Oscar for that movie. The grandfather is Horace Bowers, recently honored in Los Angeles for his efforts in the historic Central Avenue corridor. I looked him up on Google.

My Own Landscapes Score: 4 (Karen W.)

This is a dreamy animated film about a French military video game designer. According to the film, the French use video games to train the soldiers before they go to war, and then when they come home to help them deal with trauma after their war experiences. This game designer created the background landscapes for the games and now focuses on extremely detailed landscape work to soothe his post war anxiety and PTSD. At one point the designer says playing the game 10 hours a day could give him changed dreams, and that was what he was trying to accomplish. It is narrated by a woman with a beautiful hypnotic voice.

The Field Trip Score: 3 (Karen W.)

A documentary about a camera crew that attended an elementary school event where children are assigned typical workplace activities for a day. I think the crew captured what happened without very much explanation of what it could mean. The teacher's selection of assignments creeped me out with the Mexican children sweeping the cafeteria and the Asian boy running the calculator as the CFO of the pretend company.

Spirits and Rocks Score: 3 (Karen W.)

This is a beautiful black and white film about the impact of volcanic history on the villagers and landscape of an island in the Azores. Old footage of fearful people and rock explosions was blended in with current scenery shots.

To Know Her Score: 2 (Karen W.)

A combination of found footage and voiceover as a young cinematographer made sense of her family's 1980's home movie collection. I didn't like the movie because of the shaky camera style, but her interview after the screening was interesting. The movie was very meaningful to her and her family after the death of her mother. I could appreciate that.

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Films recommended by others not in our discussion group are:

- Summer Of Soul;
- Rebel Hearts;
- Together, Together;
- Sons Of Monarchs,
- Flee

As for the Sundance Film Festival, we were thrilled to be able to watch new films virtually since in-person is prevented because of the Covid Pandemic. The QAs following each premiere film screening were really helpful and it was fun to meet the film makers and cast. But the website and online process for purchasing and viewing needs improvement.



See you at the movies!

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www.filmdiscussiongroup.com