2021 Sundance Film Festival Wrap

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

The 2021 Sundance Film Festival has come and gone leaving a wake of thought-provoking art from filmmakers, writers, and artists dispersing towards larger audiences with seminal works of bold, intimate stories across various categories, with Grand Jury Prizes bestowed upon *CODA* (U.S. Dramatic), *Summer of Soul (â?¦Or, When The Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* (U.S. Documentary), *Flee* (World Cinema Documentary) and *Hive* (World Cinema Dramatic). *CODA, Summer of Soul (â?¦Or, When The Revolution Could Not Be Televised), Hive, Writing With Fire*, and *Ma Belle, My Beauty* won the Audience Awards presented by Acura.

The awards ceremony marked a key point of the 2021 Festival, where 73 feature-length and 50 short films â?? selected from more than 14,000 submissions â?? were showcased online via the Festivalâ??s custom-built online platform, as well as in 28 Satellite Screen locations across the United States.

This yearâ??s jurors, invited in recognition of their accomplishments in the arts, technical craft, and visionary storytelling, carefully watched work and deliberated extensively before presenting awards; this yearâ??s feature film jurors were **Julie Dash**, **Cynthia Erivo**, **Hanya Yanagihara**, **Ashley Clark**, **Joshua Oppenheimer**, **Lana Wilson**, **Zeynep Atakan**, **Isaac Julien**, **Daniela Vega**, **Kim Longinotto**, **Mohamed SaÃ¯d Ouma**, and **Jean Tsien**. **Kate and Laura Mulleavy** served as co-jurors for NEXT. Shorts jurors were **RaÃºl Castillo**, **Tacita Dean,** and **Inge de Leeuw**. A newly-created award, the Jonathan Oppenheim the **Editing Award** for **U.S. Documentary,** was created to memorialize the late editor and joins the **Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award** for **U.S. Dramatic** as a prize named for a member of the Sundance artistic community. This yearâ??s **Audience Awards** were presented by Sundance alumni **Alison Brie, Shira Haas,** and **Diego Luna**.

The seven-day festival, which took place both online and in-person in 20 cities across the country from January 28 through February 3, reached a total audience 2.7 times larger than at the typical 11 day, Utah edition, despite the shorter duration and with fewer feature films (73) than the festivalâ??s typical 120 features.

Phillipe Lecoteâ??s

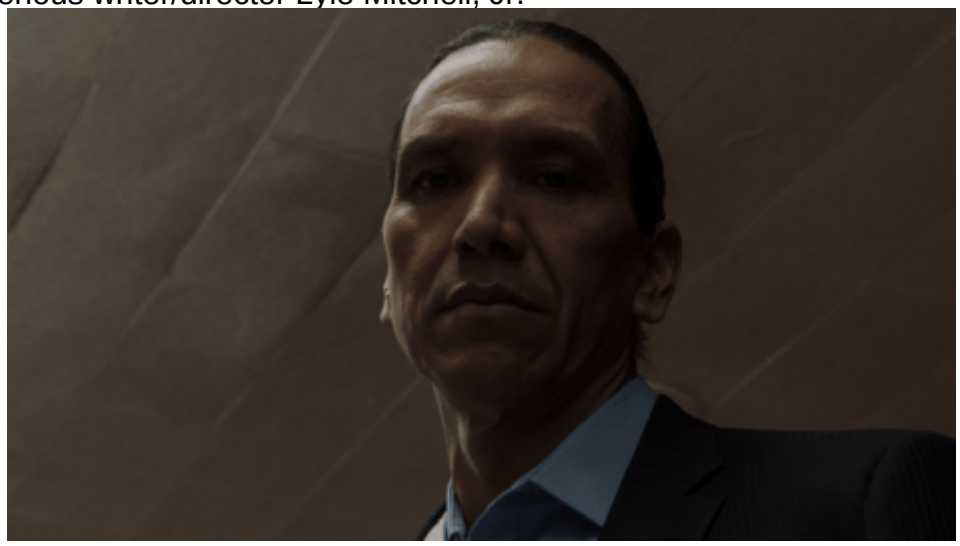
Night of the Kings

The 2021 Sundance Film Festival delved deeply into the past with the transporting Ahmir â??Questloveâ?• Thompsonâ??s militant-esque documentary *Summer of Soul (Or When The Revolution Could Not Be Televised)*, an exploration of the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, a series of summer concerts radiating a wholesale reevaluating Black History, culture, fashion, and music, taking place a mere 100 miles from the much more heralded Woodstock that was held on Max Yasgurâ??s dairy farm in Bethel, New York, Jamila Wignotâ??s *Ailey,* a moving and insightful, poetic ode to Alvin Ailey and his Alvin Ailey American Dance Company (AAADC) and school for nurturing black artists and expressing the universality of the African-American experience through dance that fused theatre, modern dance, ballet, and jazz with black vernacular, creating hope-fueled choreography that continues to spread global awareness of black life in America, and *Judas and the Black Messiah*, a late addition of a Warner Brothers production to the Premiere category. Starring Daniel Kaluuya and LaKeith Stanfield, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, was a richly told story of the leadership, revolutionary activism, and eventual assassination of Black Panther Fred Hampton at the age of 21. A powerful addition to the social revolution films of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Shaka King's "Judah and the Black Messiah"

Providing a voice to those most often unheard from in major studio productions, a plethora of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color projects was screened including:

Wild Indian from Lyle Mitchell Corbine, Jr., (a member of the Northern Wisconsin Bad River Tribe), reveals that Makwa, a young Anishinaabe boy, has a rough life. He often appears at school with bruises he says he got falling down, but no one believes him. He and his only friend, Ted-O, like to escape by playing in the woods, until the day Makwa shockingly murders a schoolmate. After covering up the crime, the two boys go on to live very different lives. Now, as adult men, they must face the truth of what they have done and what they have become. An extraordinary effort in his feature debut from Indigenous writer/director Lyle Mitchell, Jr.



Lyle Mitchell Corbinâ??s

Wild Indian

Faya Dayi from Mexican-Ethiopian Director, Jessica Beshir, creates a lyrical journey tying the psychologically stimulating euphoric plant, khat, analogous to the use of coca leaves in South America, to the indigenous land and to the Ethiopian people who have worked the khat fields for generations. Meanwhile, a new generation seeks a more fulfilling life in faraway locales despite the loneliness and isolation it brings. Elevated and euphoric storytelling by Beshir as she delves into Ethiopian culture. Exceptional work.

Jessica Beshirâ??s Faya Dayi

First Date, the first feature from directing duo, Manuel Crosby and Darren Knapp, is a genre mishmash of a teenage crush manifesting itself in a date night of fantastical proportions led by a vengeful cat lady, exacerbated by a criminal gang, and culminating in two cops keeping an eye out for the teen couple out for an innocent date. A first date of epic proportions with more twists and turns than a hurricane-style rollercoaster. Virtuoso performances from Tyson Brown and Shelby Duclos.

Manuel Crosby and Darren Knappâ??s First Date

In the NEXT category and interracial, a polyamorous, relationship-driven dive into the complexities of sexual fluidity and triangulation from New Orleanian Marion Hill*, Ma Belle Ma Beauty*, promised to deliver a respite from the COVID blues complete with an acoustic guitar soundtrack. A triumphant success! Keep an eye on this one as it is sure to gather more heat and momentum as Hill delivers a resounding film.

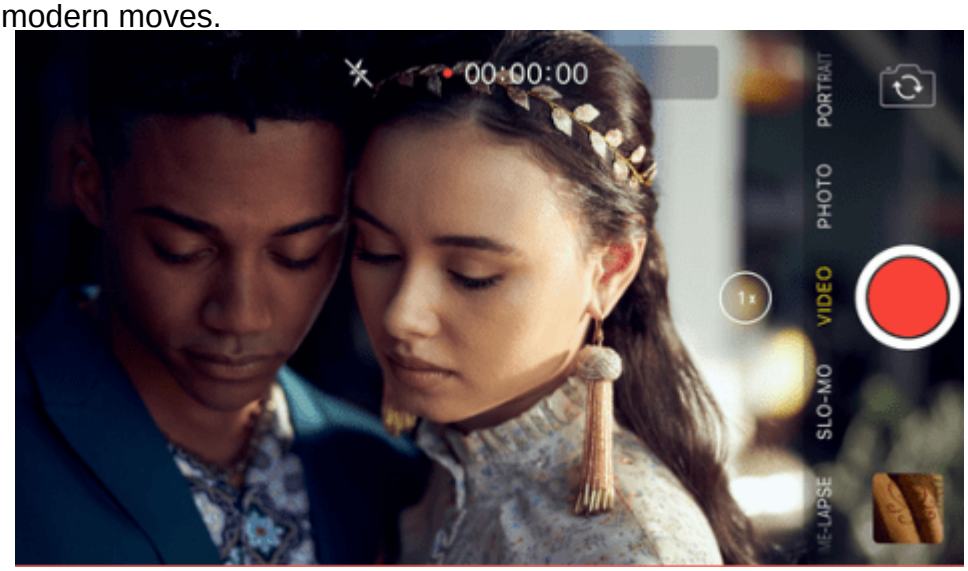
Marion Hillâ??s Ma Belle, Ma Beauty

The hopeful, *My Name is Pauli Murray*, a documentary about a pioneer of human rights, a civil rights activist attorney and Episcopalian Priest wrapped into a single woman and drawn from a massive personal archive of photos, interviews, and written documents, illuminates Pauli Murray and her trailblazing legal foresight that influenced landmark civil rights cases and gender equality legislation and transformed our world. Lots to see and learn here with significant historical importance. Told eloquently.

Phillipe Lecoteâ??s

Night of the Kings

Phillippe Lacoteâ??s second feature, *Night of the Kings*, set inside the Ivory Coastâ??s MACA prison illuminates the multi-layered complexity of being an anointed an inmate storyteller while the horde of inmate listeners serve as a chorus performing song and dance routines adding a cinematic spectacle to the storytellerâ??s imaginations. One of my favorite films of the festival incorporating classic themes with modern moves.



Cary Williamsâ?? R#J

R#J, a modern-day retelling of the Shakespearan Romeo & Juliet the Houses of Capulet and Montague, utilizing black and brown bodies and told through text messages and smartphone screens in the social media language of GIFâ??s, the sharing of Spotify playlists sharing and Instagram accounts,

the GenZers use their cell phones to document the eruptions of violence plaguing their respective communities as they plead for peace and a way to escape their star-crossed destiny. A brilliant approach capable of enticing young viewers to Shakespeare.

Rebecca Hallâ??s

Passing

Passing, a psychological thriller and debut feature from Rebecca Hall, delves into repression, obsession, and the lies people tell to protect their carefully constructed realities through the lives of two African-American women, Irene (Tessa Thompson) and Claire (Ruth Negga) who can â??passâ?• as white though they have chosen to live on opposites sides of the color line. Adapted from Nella Larsenâ??s acclaimed 1929 Harlem Renaissance novel, Hall provides experiential insight into the pursuit of happiness and authenticity by those navigating the grinding tensions of American racism. Another well-constructed character portrayal from Thompson grounded in truth while Negga slithers her character onto the pinnacle of the narrative arc almost undetected.

Ted Passon and Yoni

Brookâ??s Philly D.A.

Philly D.A., a powerful look at a civil rights attorney, Larry Krasner, and his ascent to become the District Attorney in Philadelphia, while repeatedly calling out discrimination and corruption in Americaâ??s most incarcerating major city. In June 2018, Krasner made an unprecedented request for a comprehensive list of police officers who had lied while on duty, used excessive force, racially profiled, or violated civil rights, an unprecedented move in order to spotlight dishonest police officers and check their future courtroom testimony. Directors Ted Passon and Yoni Brook vigorously bring to life the people impacted and incensed by the failings of the system as well as those fighting to maintain the systemâ??s status quo in the first two episodes of the forthcoming docuseries. Quite compelling.

Camilla Nielssonâ??s

President

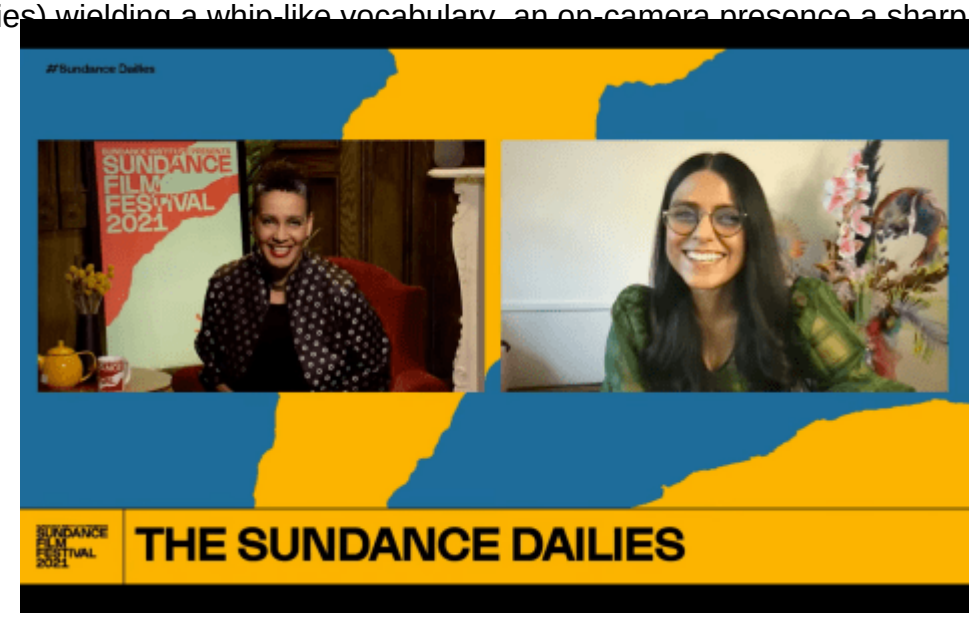
Anthropologist Camilla Nielssonâ??s *President* digs into the heart of testing democracy and the seemingly never-ending battle to keep it alive in Zimbabwe through free and fair elections. Nielsson explores the present situation through controversial politician Nelson Chamisa, who once uttered, â??God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,â?• and his Movement for Democratic Change political party as they challenge the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, the ruling party since Zimbabwe achieved independence in 1980. Seemingly the more things change in Zimbabwe, the more things stay the same.

Sundance Film Festival has a storied past. The genesis of the Sundance Film Festival grew from the 1978 efforts of Sterling Van Wagenen, head of Robert Redfordâ??s Production Company, and John Earle of the Utah Film Commission. The goal was to attract more filmmakers to Utah, to showcase American-made films, expose the potential of independent film, give the indigenous filmmaker a voice, and highlight the work of regional filmmakers working outside the Hollywood system. *Deliverance, Mean Streets, Streetcar Named Desire* and *Sweet Smell of Success* were a few of the films featured in the inaugural festival.

Festival Director Tabitha Jackson hosting The Sundance Dailies

Today, the Sundance Film Festival is being helmed by Tabitha Jackson, who previously served as the Director of the Documentary Film Program at the Sundance Institute. While Director of Documentary Film, Jackson launched and led a new pillar of work at the Sundance Institute â?? Impact, Engagement, and Advocacy â?? with the goal of reasserting the role of the independent artist as a dynamic progressive cultural revelatory force of the human condition. No longer desirous of having a separate American blackness or taking over the film industry with feelings of doubt in ever seeing art

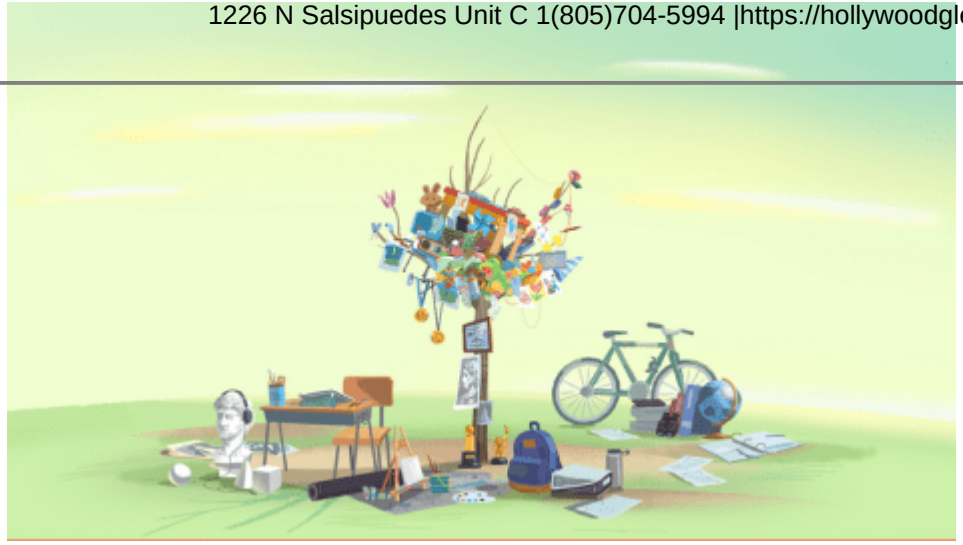
come to fruition on the silver screen. Jackson believes passionately in the arts as a public good and is taking Sundance into unchartered waters with her representation and support of African-American women filmmakers with stories featuring Africans and African-Americans. Jackson is also an award-winning commissioning editor, director, producer, writer, and morning show host (The Sundance Dailies) wielding a whip-like vocabulary, an on-camera presence a sharp sense of fashion.



Sundance Festival

Director, Tabitha Jackson, left, with Programmer and Fashion Maven, Dilcia Barrera

Jacksonâ??s vision was reflected and affirmed with **The Power of Story,** inspired by the work of the late historian Howard Zinn (*A Peopleâ??s History of the United States*), bringing to life, through readings and songs, the voices of rebels, dissenters, and visionaries from our pastâ??and present; her own, Tabitha Jackson-led, Big Conversation, **The Past In the Present: A Personal Journey through Race, History, and Filmmaking**, a conversation about white supremacy, history, creative expression, and his personal journey from the Academy Award-nominated *I Am Not Your Negro* to his upcoming work *Exterminate All the Brutes*, which interrogates over 600 years of history, from the Native American genocide to the systemized enslavement of Africans, to Hitlerâ??s extermination of the European Jewsâ??a history to which our present is inextricably bound; and, legal scholar and civil rights advocate KimberlÃ© W. Crenshaw moderates **The Story of Us**, with Bryan Stevenson, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Viá»?t Thanh Nguyá» n, about the construction, dissemination, and deployment of the grand narrative of the United States, and the critical role of independent media in its retelling.



(VR) Namoo from

BoaBab Studios. Namoo, which means â??treeâ?• in Korean, collects meaningful memories in its branchesâ??from pacifiers, stuffed animals, books, and favorite scarves, to broken glasses and objects from times the man would rather forget.

Due to COVID-19, the Festival became a virtual format with the lineup for the 2021 Sundance Film Festival, taking place on the Sundance-built and robust online platform, going well beyond features and short films, episodic work, and the VR/XR of New Frontierâ??it also encompassed a curated program of free special events, conversations, and activations available to the global public. In addition, twenty-eight satellite locations across the nation screened 51 films. Nevertheless, *Namoo* from BoaBab Studios captured my attention and imagination. Namoo, which means â??treeâ?• in Korean, collects meaningful memories in its branchesâ??from pacifiers, stuffed animals, books, and favorite scarves, to broken glasses and objects from times the man would rather forget. A must-see â?? an unforgettable experience!

The 2021 Sundance Film Festival will long be remembered not just for the outstanding work screened from artists across the globe, it will also be remembered as Tabitha Jacksonâ??s first year as a festival director. for the re-imagined format and the massive and elaborate infrastructure created, assembled, and carried out in cyberspace to ensure the artistsâ?? energetic work remained paramount and in the forefront.

Moreover, it will be remembered for the re-imagined format and the massive and elaborate infrastructure created, assembled, and carried out in cyberspace to ensure the artistsâ?? energetic work remained paramount and in the forefront. for the auxiliary efforts with the impressive Zoom architecture, the filmmaker introductions, for the Sundance Dailies, for the New Frontier and its Chief Curator, Shari Frilot, and the Q & Aâ??s, conversations, and activations.

This rich storytelling environment known as the 2021 Sundance Film Festival offered the festival-goer and the filmmaker the opportunity of a profound filmic experience. As we march boldly forward together, the illumination of our deeply entrenched socio-political issues can ease the unneeded and unnecessary ills of our current human condition shedding light on our shared humanity and providing solutions that work for us all, individually and collectively. Thank you and farewell â??til next year. Stay healthy. Stay happy. Stay free!

Category

1. television

Date Created
February 4, 2021
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