

90FLYING HIGH, SUNDANCE '18

By Harlan Jacobson

PARK CITY, UTAH—



Crystal Moselle's *Skate Kitchen* is almost the perfect Sundance film.

First, it is written, produced and directed by a woman—one of some 45 features at Sundance directed by women this year of the 120 spread out over nine main sections, including US and international feature and documentary competitions. Second, it's characters and milieu are quintessentially young, mostly broke and minority born. Thirdly, it's proudly no-budget.

It's central character, Camille, is an 18-year-old white Hispanic suburban girl who has outgrown her single-parent mom, leaves her modest Long Island home and heads to New York City (*Lady Bird*, anyone?) with her skateboard to find her way. Camille streams in at a Manhattan skate park, first with a pack of girl skaters, including two black girls and a working-class, white lesbian who wears her baseball cap backwards and acts like a plumber who talks like a wrench.

In the overall scheme of things, Crystal doesn't know where she fits and what glide path to take among the confusing ones littered with obstacles on her way toward her American future. Girl skateboarding is by itself a social statement in the young male skateboarding milieu, as the gender packs stay separate, until Camille cuts a sisterhood boundary and crosses over to skate with the boys. That's a big deal. It's both a victory and a betrayal, but it's not where Crystal's adolescent investigation ends.

Skate Kitchen's dialogue is streetwise, imagistic and so hot current it couldn't be scripted. You're there in the pack, carving turns around Manhattan's crosstown corners, taking bumps, slopes, curbs and rails, riding among the fresh beauty of faces who believe in the future, their pretty bodies arcing out over the edge of their boards.

What's amazing, if unconscious, about *Skate Kitchen* is that it's the de facto great granddaughter of *Downhill Racer*, the 1969 Michael Ritchie film in which the then 32-year-old Robert Redford played an interloper who crashed his way onto the US Olympic Ski team. With very little dialogue and lots of boot-level skiing, the film served notice on officialdom that the postwar generation, for whom merit and truth replaced groupthink, had arrived.



Downhill Racer set Redford up for stardom. The paycheck—meager by what they would become later-- gave him just enough bucks to buy a mountain in Utah, stealing it away from a higher corporate bidder in exchange for a personal concession Redford made to the owner—lifetime rights to stay put. Redford turned the rock into Sundance, and now at 82, moving stiffly, reciting a script he knows by heart about the evolution of Sundance and the independent film spirit, he still shows up at the festival in a glistening black leather motorcycle jacket and faded skinny jeans, with a full head of tousled, improbably blond hair.

There were plenty of Introverted, fundamentally voyeuristic characters watching their small planets break apart in the films here at Sundance this year. Many of them, of course, don't look like white boys. Rachelle Vinberg's compelling Camille is only one. But on the exact opposite end of the American spectrum is actor Paul Dano's directorial debut film, *Wildlife*, adapted by Dano with Zoe Kazan from Richard Ford's 1990 novel.



Set in 1960 in Great Falls, Montana (Dano shot for only four days in the state, shooting the rest in Oklahoma), the story is told from the point of view of its central character, Joe Brinson, a 14-year-old boy watching the marriage of his parents, played by Carey Mulligan and Jake Gyllenhaal, crash over the old school rocks of money and moxie. Joe's dad is a country club golf pro with an easy swing and a smile who gets the boot at work over a trifle that's a stand-in for class power. Dano captures the despair of Ford's novel, often overlooked in Ford's canon of sports and money guys in his Frank Bascombe novels, perhaps because its major character is a forest fire eating the landscape 40 miles away. "What about this fire concerns you, America?", is the question in Ford's novel, and Dano's film watches young actor Ed Oxenbould as Joe, often silent, just over there by the kitchen door, a working class white rabbit of a kid, pale eyes and hair, watching the impossible postwar American Dream turn to ashes—a theme running through US fiction for decades.

Skate Kitchen is the sort of Sundance film that could win a prize if it had been set in the competition, but instead occupied the Next section, comprised of films that look and feel like they were made on skateboards. Maybe it's the product of Sundance, at 33, no longer being a kid. Maybe it's just the vintage year in which a vein of classicism runs through the selection. The tumult in the US and the world is apparent, but the films on display here in Park City seemed more measured this year, more structured and reality-based—not as in the reality TV show brain of *President Tweet*—but as in stories rooted in biographies, close to the bone fiction rooted in childhood, news events and the social and political issues that take turns generating headlines and those damn tweets.



Noticeable at Sundance '18 were films that had an old-fashioned feel to their narratives. The characters traveled conventional paths, the camera found them where you'd expect them, and the soundtracks here and there italicized the moment. 2018 was not a great year here, but not a bad one. US film distributors were acting cautiously, however, stung by high-cost failures in 2017, like *Patti Cake\$*, which set the festival on fire in January '17 and fizzled in July. The festival ended its 10-day run Saturday night, Jan. 28, with awards streamed at www.sundance.org.

The following are a few highlights from Sundance '18 you can expect to see over the course of the next year:



Biopics, **Colette**, with Keira Knightley doing a quite credible job as an inherently pre-feminist figure, more so than as a great French writer; and **The Happy Prince**, the last, mean days of Oscar Wilde, written and directed by Rupert Everett, who plays Wilde as a weary gay Christ on absinthe, exiled, spat upon, and reviled by the swells who once adored him.



Ophelia, imagine Hamlet told from the girlfriend's point of view. Claire McCarthy did, making brilliant use of Daisy Ridley in the title role, Naomi Watts as Queen Gertrude and her witch sister, Mechtild, Clive Owen as Claudius, and George Mackay as the Prince, a bit more frustrated footballer than brooding prince—but this is a feminist rethink, after all.



American Animals, written and directed by Burt Layton (*The Impostor*), based on the 2004 botched robbery of rare books, including first editions of Audubon and Darwin, from a university library in Kentucky. The kids are from good homes and are morons. Layton frequently cuts to the real morons who comment on the script and the actors' veracity in getting the absurdity right.



And Breathe Normally, A first film by Isold Uggadottir, an Icelandic female director freshly working the same side of the street as the Belgian Dardennes frères—mixing race, immigration, labor, family and gender when an African woman is stopped by a white woman passport control agent, barely staying ahead of the debt collectors herself, at Keflavik Airport outside the cold smoky bay of Reykjavik.



The Tale, by Jennifer Fox, was the talk of Sundance's opening weekend, with Laura Dern playing a university professor who at 48 becomes an unwilling detective in uncovering her childhood sexual abuse by the charismatic woman riding instructor and her lover. With Isabelle Nelisse, Jason Ritter, Common and Ellen Burstyn.



Leave No Trace, Debra Granik's first feature since winning Sundance 2010 with *Winter's Bone*, which made Jennifer Lawrence a star. A father and teen daughter live in the woods outside Portland, Oregon, until Eden comes to an end when the cops and child welfare agents show up. The demons that pursue one generation don't belong to the next. With Ben Foster and Thomasin Harcourt.



Ben Lewin's **The Catcher Was a Spy**, is the sort of old school biopic meant to leave one awe struck at the giants who once strode the Earth. Paul Rudd plays a cleaned-up Moe Berg, the Jewish catcher for the Boston Red Sox whose career spanned the 1920s and '30s. Mustered out of the game, Berg joins the Secret Service, which then sent him in 1944 into Germany to find and assassinate Werner Heisenberg, the Nobel Prize winning physicist heading up—or was that delaying? -- the Nazi atomic bomb project. The catcher went to Princeton, Columbia and the Sorbonne and spoke a dozen languages, including a not quite passable German he compensates for with charm and a certain Gay joie de vivre on the side. With Jeff Daniels, Guy Pearce, Paul Giamatti and Sienna Miller as Berg's vaguely confused lady in waiting.



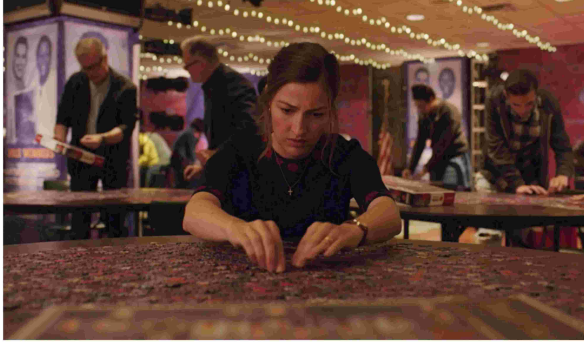
Multiple good docs, including **RBG**, about US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who showed up in park City to chat, film bios including *Jane Fonda in Five Acts* and *Robin Williams: Come Inside My Mind*.



Tim Wardle's *Three Identical Strangers* recounts the 1980 tabloid sensation of identical triplet brothers who at 19, having no prior knowledge of each other, stumble over one other living in the New York City metroplex but separated at birth by a New York City adoption agency. They have a blast for awhile, until they discover the dark side of the social services world.



And *The Oslo Diaries*, by the Israeli wife and husband team of Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan, focuses on secret negotiations during 1992-94 between Israeli and Palestinian non-governmental representatives meeting in Norway, who were inches away from a land for peace deal. But it's the Middle East, where nothing ever ends much less ends well.



In Marc Turtletaub's *Puzzle*, Kelly MacDonald is Agnes, a Connecticut housewife taking care of her auto mechanic husband and teen sons, going to Church, wheeling out her own birthday cake at her own party, and is always the only one to pick up the broken pieces of everyone's mess. Until someone gives her a 1000-piece puzzle, and she knocks it off in a heartbeat. This leads her to puzzle master Irrfan Khan (*Lunchbox*), a wealthy and world weary Indian tech inventor living in lonely splendor in Manhattan, who is looking for a partner to compete in the coming world tournament. Producer Marc Turtletaub (*Little Miss Sunshine*) directs a bitter sweet rom-com that survives its own metaphor with the charm of its two leads and the script by Oren Moverman.

The Israeli born Moverman was busy here. In addition to writing *Puzzle*, he produced two films (*The Tale* and *Wildlife*) in the US Dramatic competition, and executive produced a third, *Monsters and Men*, about a white cop gunning down a black man in Brooklyn.



Finally, take pity, as in Babis Makridis' *Pity*, wherein a Greek lawyer whose wife lies in a coma in a hospital after an accident, basks in the torrent of pity that comes his way at every turn. It starts with the neighbor lady upstairs who makes an orange Bundt cake every morning for his and his teenage son's breakfast, and ripples out through the dry cleaner, his lawyer's best friend, and his dog, among many others. *Pity* was written by Efthymis Filippou, who's become the edge of the new Greek absurdity with scripts for *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. Alas, it's the lawyer's misfortune that his wife, for whom he sits on the end of his bed every day and loudly wails, wakes up and comes home. The pity parade stops.

And we can't have that, now, can we?