

# Sundance 2009: Final Scorecard

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By **Robert Davis**



Sundance 2009 began two weeks ago, and while I still have a few mini-reviews to post, I'll join the chorus of commentary to present a final scorecard. My overall impression of the festival is that there were few films at the extremes — I saw no masterpieces and no awful films — but the mid-section was rich with movies that tried something new even if they found only partial success. I think it's unlikely that many of these films will end up as favorites at the end of the year — although a few might — but I still feel pretty good about what's coming down the pike.

**indieWIRE** and **Movie City News** have posted poll results that differ from my take, in part because everyone sees different movies, in part because a few of my favorites weren't

seen by very many polled critics. It's hard to believe that people who liked *You Wont Miss Me*, which fared reasonably well in both polls, wouldn't have found something to like in the more visually interesting *Unmade Beds*. If only they had seen it. Manohla Dargis, world-class critic for the *New York Times*, is a notable exception. **She says** "this beautifully shot movie has a level of formal ambition — the narrative is as elliptical as the lives it concerns, and even seemingly throwaway moments catch your eye — which was generally absent from most of the American fiction films I saw."

Hear, hear.

I'd break down the 30 feature-length films that I saw from best to worst as follows, with links to further remarks:

## **MASTERPIECES**

None this year.

## **THOROUGHLY ENJOYABLE**

In a festival that most people, including me, think of a showcase for American independent films that are seeking theatrical distribution, I'm surprised that my three faves are 1) a romantic drama from Argentina, 2) an avant-garde documentary, and 3) a feature film made for HBO (airing in February!).

- ***Unmade Beds* (Dos Santos)**

Filmmaker Alexis Dos Santos is from Argentina, but since this film takes place in London, it's largely in English. The frequent comparisons to *The Dreamers* or *Y tu mamá también* are superficial. Yeah, there are teens having sex in myriad groups. But those films were about young people turning their backs on the world, shutting it out. This is a film about young people stepping into new worlds, uncertain of what they may find, uncertain of what they *want* to find. It's a lovely film, and this is a director to watch.

- ***O'er the Land* (Stratman)**

Deborah Stratman has created a beautiful meditation on militarized culture, an elegant, logical strand, an oasis in a festival of generally more hurried films.

- ***Taking Chance* (Katz)**

Kevin Bacon gives a fantastic, controlled performance in a deeply moving film of uncommon simplicity that told me something about the Marines that I had no idea was happening every day.

## **OFFERING MORE FOOD FOR THOUGHT THAN EXPECTED**

- **Reporter (Metzgar)**

A profile of a journalist and a treatise on journalistic ethics, rolled into one film. Watching it to the end should create not only more informed readers but more skeptical documentary audiences.

- **Good Hair (Stilson)**

It's not great cinema, and it's not a deep essay, but I'm surprised to find how little I knew about something I see every day, and I'm grateful that Chris Rock was thorough enough to satisfy the curiosity that his off-the-cuff questions stir up.

- **The Messenger (Moverman)**

Had I not seen *Taking Chance* a few days before this, I'd have come away from the fest calling this the best fiction film about the domestic side of the Iraq war. That's not a very high bar, I know, but since the medium has essentially failed to help us understand the mess we're all in, there's still room, in 2009, to shed light on the situation. Sadly, the audience may have dried up for it. This is easily the best ensemble of supporting performances I saw at the fest, and even Woody Harrelson as one of the leads eventually won me over.

## **PROBLEMATIC, FLAWED, OR DISAPPOINTING BUT STILL WORTH MUCH OF THE EFFORT**

- **Bronson (Refn)**

It's both enticing and repelling like *A Clockwork Orange*, and I fear that, like Kubrick's film, it won't withstand repeat viewing, but I'd love to be wrong.

- **Cold Souls (Barthes)**

A bit chillier and scattered than I'd hoped for, it still includes great ingenuity and an often brilliant performance from Giamatti.

- **Big Fan (Siegel)**

Robert D. Siegel shows great promise as a teller of complex but watchable stories.

- **Moon (Jones)**

Sam Rockwell and (I'm surprised to say this) realistic visual effects elevate this science fiction story above its underwritten script. It has plenty of ideas and occurrences, but sharper dialogue could have knocked this one into a new level.

- **We Live in Public (Timoner)**

Although this time capsule has been ten years in the making, it scores points for suddenly seeming relevant to our present-day techno-lives, as well. Quite a trick, and it involves some sleight of hand, but it's compelling stuff, anyway.

- **Dare (Salky)**