

A Few Signs of Life

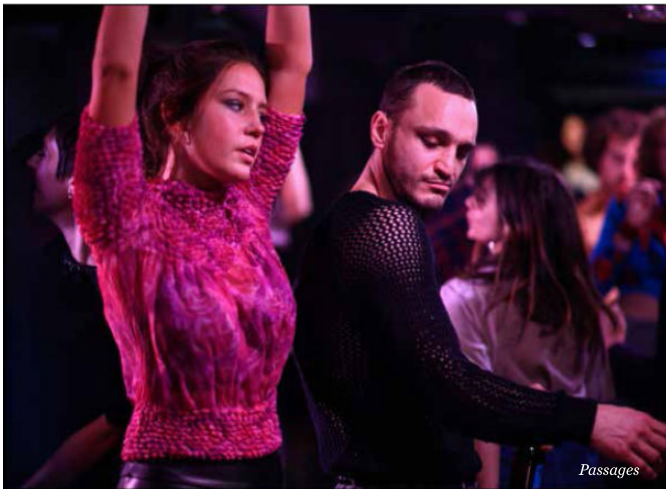
BY ROBERT KOEHLER

The 2023 edition of the Sundance Film Festival wasn't the worst ever—that would be 2021, when the lousiest movie in the history of major festival-winners, that thing titled *Coda*, somehow won every prize in sight and never stopped. That annus horribilis also marked the year that Sundance went online (because of you-know-what), and it is now clear that the festival will never be the same again. The latest edition, though not the worst, was certainly the strangest, presenting a hybrid of online and in-person programming, and it was up to you to choose which one (or both) you fancied. I chose a blend of each, partly for efficiency and partly out of a simple desire to return to a live festival with human beings sitting in cinemas. Having deliberately avoided the general insanity of the opening weekend in Park City, I arrived just in time to learn that the expected mob scene never happened, and to discover a ski resort far more populated by skiers than festivalgoers. Main Street, usually the teeming hub of life during Sundance, was semi-deserted, and it became quickly obvious that most attendees had opted for their laptops and living-room sofas. I've never attended a festival of this scale with so little energy or so few bodies, rendering the event aspect of Sundance rather absurd.

This did, though, have the salutary effect of allowing me to get into just about any screening I wished, which meant being able to watch many more movies than expected, albeit in cinemas half-full (or less).

It also meant that, as in the case of the audience watching Deborah Stratman's rich, multi-levelled *Last Things*, that they really wanted to be there—and *Last Things* demands, if nothing else, a committed audience. Against a mesmerizing montage of images capturing geological phenomena (particularly crystals and their dynamic growth processes), Stratman constructs a densely layered soundtrack comprising texts spoken in French (by filmmaker Valérie Massadian) along with commentary by Lawrence University professor of geology and environmental studies Dr. Marcia Bjornerud, the whole mixing science fiction, speculative narrative and lucid science that explains how the essence of all life on Earth can be traced to minerals interacting with water on the surface. Stratman's film conveys aspects of both doom and hope: doom for a human race apparently hell-bent on self-destruction (the term "climate change" is never uttered, nor does it need to be), and hope for the Earth's own evolution—an evolution that may not include homo sapiens in the picture, and where rocks and crystals may again rule as they once did.

Stratman's astounding work was part of Sundance's revived New Frontier section, coinciding with Kim Yutani's first year as director of programming. Yutani clearly saw, as some of us did, that the elimination of any experimental cinema from New Frontier last year was stupid—and even better, she did away with the festival's even stupid-



Passages



A Common Sequence

er obsession with VR, which had turned into a kind of techno-fetish. (Additionally, Yutani wisely reduced the number of films in most sections and eliminated multiple Park City venues.) A grand total of three experimental films were shown in New Frontier (meaning the program remains a serious laggard on the North American front, behind TIFF's incredibly shrinking Wavelengths), the other good one along with *Last Things* being Mary Helena Clark and Mike Gibisser's fascinating *A Common Sequence*, which explores in pleasantly oblique fashion the merging of scientific, economic, and political dilemmas surrounding the commodification of genetic material for patents and future commercial applications. In one ingenious example, the filmmakers consider the history and traditions around the achoque salamander of Mexico, which is highly valued by Indigenous fisherman on Lake Pátzcuaro, and the medical and commercial potentials derived from the salamander's unique ability to regrow its body parts. Clark and Gibisser land on one of the toughest critiques of capital in recent cinema, and the art of *A Common Sequence* is that even the most observant viewer wouldn't see it coming.

Sundance's Premieres section is typically negligible, yet somehow this year's selection included two of the best narrative works in the lineup. Ira Sachs has never made anything at the level of his new film, *Passages*, but then again he's never worked with Franz Rogowski. If there's an actor on fire right now, it's Rogowski, who makes anything he's in more interesting, and, in this case, extremely funny. He plays Tomas, a self-involved German film director working in Paris and living with his husband Martin, a British graphic designer (played by the impressive Ben Whishaw), who falls hard for a woman named Agathe (Adèle Exarchopoulos). The ensuing love triangle, which sees Tomas jumping in and out of beds like a man possessed, is a roundelay of comic-tragic desire that Ophüls (and, probably, Truffaut) would have admired. It's hard to recall a previous case of two likely unprecedented things occurring in the same movie: two mainstream male actors who are stars in their respective countries (Rogowski in Germany, Whishaw in the UK) having a lengthy, lusty sex scene with each other; and an

American indie filmmaker so easily adapting to French filmmaking style and practice.

The other Premieres standout was also a comedic farce centring on a screwed-up filmmaker: *Rotting in the Sun*, an unexpectedly good movie from the typically terrible Sebastián Silva. Morose about his work, the protagonist (played by Silva himself) has been trying to kill himself by dosing on mass quantities of ketamine. A chance encounter with a pushy, gay social influencer (the nebbish-y Jonathan Firstman) leads to a reluctant collaboration, and the ensuing murder mystery becomes a (gay) farce for the mobile device age. The film also sees the Chilean-born Silva offering a sly take on Mexico City at its most contemporary (American expats appear to have taken over the place), and it has a terrific ace-in-the-hole: the brilliant Catalina Saavedra, who effectively revives the title character she played in Silva's second feature, *The Maid* (2009), only much funnier and lethal.

While advancing the mission of recapturing silent cinema's capacity for a poetics of emotion and ideas may not be a primary project at Sundance, it was fascinating to discover among this year's selection certain films that aggressively embraced such a task—and the two most remarkable works did this with a degree of commanding triumph, grace, and power rare at even the most adventurous festivals. Given that Sundance tends to program in such a blinkered, backwards fashion, was it purely an accident that the astonishing *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*—Raven Jackson's feature debut, following a few shorts that are viewable on the Criterion Channel (including the 2018 *Nettles*)—found its way into the usually dull US dramatic section? The film was such an outlier in the program that it certainly seemed that way. How could a virtually non-narrative reverie on the life of a young woman in the Delta country of Mississippi from the '70s to the '90s, rendered with no clear chronology, no conventional "dramatic" scenes, no direct exposition and no established "character arcs"—all of those basic building blocks that the Sundance Institute drills into its students—get into the festival's central showcase?

However it happened, here it was, and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* made a profound statement, suggesting an entirely new pathway



for American filmmaking in general. That it was made by a young Black woman trained primarily in writing and poetry seemed to prove a fundamental point: that if US cinema is to escape the creative doldrums in which it's currently stuck, it will need the help of artists who come to filmmaking with a fresh sensibility, unhampered by old ideas and notions. In the impressionist view of the various stages of childhood and young adulthood of her protagonist, Mackenzie (known throughout as "Mack"), Jackson captures a universe of non-verbal gestures, communications, and connections that consistently (and deliberately) transcend words. (Notably, she excised most of her written and performed dialogue in the final edit she created with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's longtime editor, Lee Chatametikool.) Over the course of the film's progression, Mack grows from a child who tragically loses her mother (Sheila Atim) to a woman living amidst an extended family, including father Isaiah (Chris Chalk) and sister Josie (Moses Ingram plays her as an adult), as well as a larger local community in the lush Delta country, which is so vivid, physical and tactile—down to the soil of the title, which the women of the region traditionally taste to get a sense of what to grow—that it becomes a primary character.

Mack's development is traced in a non-linear fashion, following poetry's capacity for backward and forward motion and memory. The film is concerned not with a direct line of growth, but with associations and remembered affections—seldom do films linger so long on hands touching other hands, bodies in embrace, faces touching each other, the sound of crickets in the distance, water gurgling, an openness to every sense receiving the world. Put another way, we've seldom encountered an American film influenced equally by the totemic poetics of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and the Soviet-era cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky and Elem Klimov, and then delivering an entirely fresh and new expression. *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*, which was denied a single prize by the bad jury (comprised of playwright Jeremy O. Harris, filmmaker Eliza Hittman, and actor Marlee Matlin), is a breakthrough—to what, only time will tell.

Though it was the deserving winner of the World Documentary directing award, Anna Hints' glorious, overwhelming masterpiece *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* is just as much of a Sundance outlier as

Jackson's film—a work of observational cinema in a festival that prefers its documentaries to tell the audience how and what to think. Sundance is a power centre in the filmmaking world for instructional non-fiction, the kind of message-driven, topical work that typically ends up on HBO and other high-end cable or streaming platforms. Hints' sensibility is entirely different, and in some ways notably close to Jackson's. While her subject is a world away from the Mississippi Delta—a traditional smoke sauna run by and for women, deep in a forest in southern Estonia—she also has a great concern for the poetics of image and sound intermingling and yielding fresh sensations and feelings, and exhibits a great trust in the viewer's willingness to totally immerse themselves in the moment in order to reach ecstatic heights of discovery.

This is fundamental, since *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* captures a profound sense of the ecstatic, which is achieved by these women in moments of genuine togetherness and connection. This experience nearly defies description, as Hints (aided by the incredible cinematography of Ants Tammik) gently observes the smoke sauna "sisters" as they commune together in a wooded hut managed and hosted four seasons of the year by Kadi Kivilo (the only woman, other than folk accordionist Kaarin Parts, whose face is shown onscreen). As the women allow their bodies to absorb the sauna's powerful brew of heat and moisture, they speak of their painful pasts in anecdotes that are uncensored, amusing, and sometimes deeply disturbing—monologues that cover a vast spectrum of women's experiences, from rape, cancer, and hatred of one's own body to absurd family encounters, bitter alienations from parents, and backwards and sexist societal biases.

It is precisely by not focusing on faces, but rather on bodies—how the rays of sunlight and lingering smoke form sculptural shapes around the flesh, how the flesh itself is a container of so much life, love and pain—that Hints is able to make the extraordinarily cinematic leap to understanding how pain may be released from the body itself. By the time that these women begin to chant, "We sweat out all the pain! We sweat out all the fear!" they are no longer vulnerable in their own skin, but a team of warriors, engaging the viewer in a genuinely transcendent experience.