

# Sundance: Obama Love Story 'Southside With You,' Anthony Weiner Doc to Premiere at Fest



'Southside With You'

by Tatiana Siegel

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There's also a number of hot-button issues on display among the documentaries including ones tackling ISIS and abortion.

Love is in the air as the Sundance Institute unveiled the 65 films that will premiere as part of the U.S. Competition, World Competition and out-of-competition NEXT category.

In a departure from recent years, a multitude of love stories -- including *Southside With You* about the fledgling romance between a young Barack Obama and future First Lady Michelle Robinson -- will be among the buzz-worthy films that made the cut for the 32nd incarnation of the festival.

As for whether the president and first lady will make the trek to Park City for the Richard Tanne-helmed film's world premiere, festival director John Cooper says he can only wish, even if it would create a logistical and security headache for the indie film mecca.

"Wouldn't that be cute?" he says. "I haven't talked to the filmmakers about [extending an invite]. But you never know."

Other traditional and unconventional love stories that will screen in and around Park City include Miles Joris-Peyrafitte's *As You Are*, Jason Lew's *The Free World*, So Yong Kim's *Lovesong* and Chad Hartigan's *Morris From America* -- all competing for the top U.S. Competition prize. They are joined by World Competition titles *Halal Love (and Sex)*, *Sand Storm*, *Wild* and *Male Joy*, *Female Love* as well as NEXT films *First Girl I Loved* and *How To Tell You're a Douchbag*.

"It's cyclical of course, and love stories come and go, but this year, there is definitely a greater number than in past years," Cooper adds. "Look at [last year's Sundance premiere] *Brooklyn* and how well it's doing. Just the love story of it is very real, and I think it caught people off guard how much audiences would respond to that."

And perhaps in a reflection of the culture at large where identity politics loom at the forefront of the national conversation, there's a prevailing theme of identity narratives making a showing at the festival. Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* about a young gay Korean-American man trying to reconcile his obligations to his struggling immigrant family with his burgeoning sexual desires and Nate Parker's slave drama *The Birth of a Nation* are among the offerings. Even Andrew Neel's fraternity-set drama *Goat*, which sees Nick Jonas morph into leading man, falls into the category as it tackles male identity and masculinity and how it's formed and the toll it takes.

"I think this idea of identity is a pretty common thread," says director of programming Trevor Groth of the lineup. "We are in an age when we are having multiple layers of identity. We have our private lives, our public lives, our online lives. There's all different ways people are shaping them. I think that's spurring a lot of storytellers to examine it, to find the reality beneath all that positioning and giving an understanding of why we do the things that we do."

As is typical, there's a number of hot-button issues on display among the documentaries including Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg's *Weiner* -- a behind-the-scenes look at

former Congressman Anthony Weiner's high-profile sex scandal -- and Kim A. Snyder's *Newtown*, which tackles the mass shooting at a Connecticut elementary school that sparked worldwide headlines. Other documentaries that have taken on a timely resonance include *Jim*, about ISIS' public execution of American journalist James Foley, and abortion-themed *Trapped*.

For the 2016 festival, 120 feature-length films were selected, representing 37 countries and 48 first-time filmmakers, including 28 in competition. The films were selected from 12,793 submissions, including 4,081 feature-length films and 8,712 short films. Of the feature film submissions, 1,972 were from the U.S. and 2,109 were international. 98 feature films at the Festival will be world premieres.

The festival's Midnight films were recently announced and additional lineups including Premieres and Shorts will be unveiled in the coming days.

The festival, founded by Robert Redford, runs Jan. 21-31.

A complete list of films playing in the U.S. Competition, World Competition and out-of-competition NEXT category follows:

## **U.S. DRAMATIC COMPETITION**

Presenting the world premieres of 16 narrative feature films, the Dramatic Competition offers Festivalgoers a first look at groundbreaking new voices in American independent film.

***Southside With You***/ U.S.A. (Director and screenwriter: Richard Tanne) — *Southside With You* is a chronicle of the summer afternoon in 1989 when the future president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, wooed his future First Lady on an epic first date across Chicago's South Side. *Cast: Tika Sumpter, Parker Sawyers, Vanessa Bell Calloway. World Premiere*

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