

VARIETY

Sundance Film Festival Announces 2015 Premieres Lineup



VIEW GALLERY 
29 PHOTOS

DECEMBER 8, 2014 | 01:00PM PT

Justin Chang Chief Film Critic @JustinCChang

Viola Davis, Jennifer Lopez, James Franco, Ewan McGregor, Greta Gerwig, Jesse Eisenberg, Saoirse Ronan, Ryan Reynolds, Peter Sarsgaard and Lily Tomlin — as well as directors Noah Baumbach, Michael Almerayda, Rodrigo Garcia, James Ponsoldt, Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman — are among the big names in the Premieres lineup at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, unveiled today along with Documentary Premieres and a new Special Events section.

Festival director John Cooper noted that while this year's 16 Premieres selections will be among the buzziest, most commercial titles in Park City, "they're not without an independent feel to them, and that's what I'm always looking for. There is a very independent spirit behind these films."

By way of example, Cooper cited “Last Days in the Desert,” a description-resistant foray into father-son territory from Garcia, a director known for his stories about women (“Nine Lives,” “Mother and Child”); John Crowley’s “Brooklyn,” an unusually romantic drama starring Ronan as an Irish-American immigrant; and “Ten Thousand Saints,” Pulcini and Springer Berman’s ’80s-set drama about the challenges of parenting in the modern world, a particularly common theme for today’s independent filmmakers.

A particularly provocative-sounding entry is “I Am Michael,” Justin Kelly’s drama starring James Franco as Michael Glatze, a former journalist and gay-rights advocate who renounced his homosexuality and became a conservative Christian minister. It’s joined in Premieres by another film that tackles evangelical Christianity, Jared Hess’ Utah-set comedy, “Don Verdean.”

Hess, who came to prominence as writer-director of the 2004 Sundance hit “Napoleon Dynamite,” is not the only Park City alum in Premieres. Other returning filmmakers include Joe Swanberg (of last year’s dramatic competition entry “Happy Christmas”), back with the 35mm-lensed “Digging for Fire”; Leslye Headland (“Bachelorette”), bringing “**Sleeping With Other People**,” starring Jason Sudeikis and Alison Brie as serial cheaters; James Ponsoldt (“The Spectacular Now,” “Smashed”), bringing “End of the Tour,” starring Jesse Eisenberg and Jason Segel as David Lipsky and David Foster Wallace, respectively; Michael Almercyda (“Hamlet”), back with “Experimenter,” a dramatic account of social psychologist Stanley Milgram’s radical 1961 behavior experiments; Noah Baumbach (“The Squid and the Whale”), bringing his latest collaboration with Greta Gerwig, “Mistress America”; and Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden (“Half Nelson,” “Sugar”), a poker movie starring Ryan Reynolds and Ben Mendelsohn.

Other Premieres titles include Paul Weitz’s “Grandma,” with Lily Tomlin and Julia Garner as a grandmother-granddaughter duo; Brett Haley’s “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” starring Blythe Danner as a woman who starts dating again after 20 years; Charles Stone III’s “Lila & Eve,” a drama of grief and retribution starring Viola Davis and Jennifer Lopez; Mora Stephens’ “Zipper,” starring Patrick Wilson as a politician who has trouble keeping it in his pants; and Benson Lee’s “Seoul Searching,” an ’80s-set comedy about three foreign-born Korean teenagers.

Sundance director of programming Trevor Groth noted that their selection differences this year were particularly difficult with regard to documentaries, 13 of which will screen in Documentary Premieres. Among the selections are “What Happened, Miss Simone?,” Liz Garbus’ portrait of Nina Simone, which will receive one of the festival’s first-day screenings; “The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution,” an account of the organization’s rise and fall; “Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Story of the National Lampoon,” Douglas Tirola’s film about the Harvard-founded humor magazine; and “Most Likely to Succeed,” Greg Whiteley’s investigation into the shortcomings of America’s educational system.

“Documentarians have learned what cinema is, and how going from the informational to the cinematic makes things much more engaging,” Groth said. “The story is key in tackling an issue.”

Three docs likely to generate considerable attention by virtue of their subject matter alone are “Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief,” Alex Gibney’s HBO-bound look at Scientology; “The Hunting Ground,” Kirby Dick’s look at the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses (particularly in the wake of Rolling Stone’s recently published, controversially contested account of a gang rape at the U. of Virginia); and “Prophet’s Prey,” a look at Warren Jeffs, former president of the Fundamentalist Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. “Prey” is directed by Amy Berg, coming off “An Open Secret,” her controversial feature about widespread sexual abuse of young male actors in Hollywood.

The festival-wide comedy theme identified by Cooper and Groth in last week’s competition lineup announcement continues with the Documentary Premieres entry “Tig,” Kristina Goolsby and Ashley York’s film about comedian Tig Notaro, and with Kevin Pollak’s “Misery Loves Comedy,” an interview-heavy inquiry into whether comedy has its roots in agony. That film is screening in Special Events, a new section the festival introduced this year to showcase episodic work, short films and live performances.

The Sundance Film Festival runs Jan. 22-Feb. 1.



“Ten Thousand Saints”

PREMIERES

The 16 films in this section are world premieres, and are from the U.S. unless otherwise noted.

“Brooklyn” (U.K.) (Director: John Crowley, Screenwriter: Nick Hornby, based on the book by Colm Toibin) — 1950s Ireland: Eilis must confront a terrible dilemma — a heartbreaking choice between two men and two countries, between duty and true love. Cast: Saoirse Ronan, Domhnall Gleeson, Emory Cohen, Julie Walters, Jim Broadbent.

“Digging for Fire” (Director: Joe Swanberg, Screenwriters: Jake Johnson, Joe Swanberg) — The discovery of a bone and a gun sends a husband and wife on separate adventures over the course of a

weekend. Cast: Jake Johnson, Rosemarie Dewitt, Orlando Bloom, Brie Larson, Sam Rockwell, Anna Kendrick.

“Don Verdean” (Director: Jared Hess, Screenwriters: Jared Hess, Jerusha Hess) — Biblical archaeologist Don Verdean is hired by a local church pastor to find faith-promoting relics in the Holy Land. But after a fruitless expedition he is forced to get creative in this comedy of faith and fraud. Cast: Sam Rockwell, Jemaine Clement, Amy Ryan, Danny McBride, Leslie Bibb, Will Forte.

“End of the Tour” (Director: James Ponsoldt, Screenwriter: Donald Margulies) — This story of the five-day 1996 interview between Rolling Stone reporter David Lipsky and acclaimed novelist David Foster Wallace explores the tenuous yet intense relationship that develops between journalist and subject. The two men bob and weave, sharing laughs and also concealing and revealing their hidden vulnerabilities. Cast: Jesse Eisenberg, Jason Segel, Anna Chlumsky, Joan Cusack, Mamie Gummer, Ron Livingston.

“Experimenter” (Director and screenwriter: Michael Almereyda) — *Experimenter* is based on the true story of famed social psychologist Stanley Milgram, who in 1961 conducted a series of radical behavior experiments that tested ordinary humans’ willingness to obey authority by using electric shock. We follow Milgram from meeting his wife through his controversial experiments that sparked public outcry. Cast: Peter Sarsgaard, Winona Ryder, Jim Gaffigan, Kellan Lutz, Taryn Manning, John Leguizamo.

“Grandma” (Director and screenwriter: Paul Weitz) — Self-described misanthrope Elle Reid has her protective bubble burst when her 18-year-old granddaughter, Sage, shows up needing help. The two of them go on a day-long journey that causes Elle to come to terms with her past and Sage to confront her future. Cast: Lily Tomlin, Julia Garner, Marcia Gay Harden, Judy Greer, Laverne Cox, Sam Elliott.

“I Am Michael” (Director: Justin Kelly, Screenwriters: Justin Kelly, Stacey Miller) — The controversial true story of a gay activist who rejects his homosexuality and becomes a Christian pastor. Cast: James Franco, Zachary Quinto, Emma Roberts.

“I’ll See You in My Dreams” (Director: Brett Haley, Screenwriters: Brett Haley, Marc Basch) — A sudden loss disrupts Carol’s orderly life, propelling her into the dating world for the first time in 20 years. Finally living in the present tense, she finds herself swept up in not one, but two unexpected relationships that challenge her assumptions about what it means to grow old. Cast: Blythe Danner, Martin Starr, Sam Elliott, Malin Akerman, June Squibb, Rhea Perlman.

“Last Days in the Desert” (Director and screenwriter: Rodrigo Garcia) — Ewan McGregor is Jesus — and the Devil — in an imagined chapter from his 40 days of fasting and praying in the desert. On his way out of the wilderness, Jesus struggles with the Devil over the fate of a family in crisis, setting himself up for a dramatic test. Cast: Ewan McGregor, Ciaran Hinds, Ayelet Zurer, Tye Sheridan.

“Lila & Eve” (Director: Charles Stone III, Screenwriter: Patrick Gilfillan) — Lila, a grief-stricken mother reeling from her son’s murder, attends a support group where she meets Eve, who urges her to take matters into her own hands to track down her son’s killers. They soon embark on a journey of revenge,

but also recovery. Cast: Viola Davis, Jennifer Lopez, Shea Whigham, Julius Tennon, Ron Caldwell, Aml Ameen.

“Mississippi Grind” (Directors and screenwriters: Ryan Fleck, Anna Boden) — Gerry is a talented poker player whose habit is getting the best of him. He convinces younger player Curtis to join him on a road trip, and they begin gambling their way towards a high-stakes game in New Orleans. During their journey, true motivations are revealed, and the two bond. Cast: Ryan Reynolds, Ben Mendelsohn, Sienna Miller, Analeigh Tipton, Alfre Woodard, Robin Weigert.

“Mistress America” (Director: Noah Baumbach, Screenwriters: Noah Baumbach, Greta Gerwig) — Tracy, a lonely college freshman in New York, is rescued from her solitude by her soon-to-be stepsister Brooke, an adventurous gal about town who entangles her in alluringly mad schemes. Mistress America is a comedy about dream-chasing, score-settling, makeshift families, and cat-stealing. Cast: Greta Gerwig, Lola Kirke.

“Seoul Searching” (U.S.-South Korea) (Director and screenwriter: Benson Lee) — A comedy set in the '80s about a group of foreign-born Korean teenagers who meet at a Seoul summer camp to learn what it means to be Korean. The three boys, from the U.S., Mexico, and Germany, then meet three girls who rock their world. Cast: Justin Chon, Jessika Van, In-pyo Cha, Teo Yoo, Esteban Ahn, Byul Kang.

“Sleeping With Other People” (Director and screenwriter: Leslye Headland) — Jake and Lainey impulsively lose their virginity to each other in college. When their paths cross twelve years later in New York City, they realize they both have become serial cheaters. Bonding over their chronic infidelity, they form a platonic friendship to support each other in their quests for healthy romantic relationships. Cast: Jason Sudeikis, Alison Brie, Adam Scott, Amanda Peet, Jason Mantzoukas, Natasha Lyonne.

“Ten Thousand Saints” (Directors: Robert Pulcini, Shari Springer Berman, Screenwriters: Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini) — Based on the acclaimed novel, “Ten Thousand Saints” follows three lost kids and their equally lost parents as they come of age in New York’s East Village in the era of CBGB, yuppies, and the tinderbox of gentrification that exploded into the Tompkins Square Park Riot of 1988. Cast: Ethan Hawke, Asa Butterfield, Emily Mortimer, Julianne Nicholson, Hailee Steinfeld, Emile Hirsch.

“Zipper” (Director: Mora Stephens, Screenwriters: Mora Stephens, Joel Viertel) — Sam Ellis is a man on the rise — a hot-shot federal prosecutor on the cusp of a bright political future. But what was meant to be a one-time experience with an escort turns into a growing addiction — a new demon threatening to destroy his life, family, and career. Cast: Patrick Wilson, Lena Headey, Richar Dreyfuss, Ray Winstone, John Cho, Dianna Agron.



"Tig"

DOCUMENTARY PREMIERES

The 13 films in this section are world premieres from the U.S.

"Beaver Trilogy Part IV" (Director: Brad Besser) — A chance meeting in a parking lot in 1979 between filmmaker Trent Harris and a young man from Beaver, Utah, inspired the creation of an underground film that is now known as Beaver Trilogy. But the film itself is only part of the story.

"The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution" (Director: Stanley Nelson) — This feature-length documentary tells of the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party, one of the 20th century's most alluring and controversial organizations that captivated the world's attention for nearly 50 years.

"Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Story of the National Lampoon" (Director: Douglas Tirola) — Three Harvard graduates start the first national humor magazine for adults, launching the careers of some of Hollywood's most legendary talent. But success and excess among its brilliant and subversive contributors begins to challenge its existence.

"Fresh Dressed" (Director: Sacha Jenkins) — The history of hip-hop fashion from its birth in the South Bronx to its rise as a billion-dollar global industry, "Fresh Dressed" is supported by rich archival materials, in-depth interviews with individuals crucial to the evolution, and the outsiders who study and admire them.

“Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief” (Director: Alex Gibney) — “Going Clear” intimately profiles eight former members of the Church of Scientology, shining a light on how they attract true believers and the things they do in the name of religion.

“In Football We Trust” (Directors: Tony Vainuku, Erika Cohn) — Four young Polynesian football players struggle to overcome gang violence and poverty as they enter the high-stakes world of recruiting, competitive athletics and family pressures.

“The Hunting Ground” (Director: Kirby Dick) — From the makers of “The Invisible War” comes a startling expose of rape crimes on U.S. campuses, their institutional cover-ups, and brutal social toll. Weaving together verite footage and first-person testimonies, the film follows survivors as they pursue their education and justice — despite harsh retaliation, harassment, and pushback.

“Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck” (Director and screenwriter: Brett Morgen) — Cobain, lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter of Nirvana, remains an icon 20 years after his death. “Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck” is a raw and visceral journey through Cobain’s life and his career with Nirvana through the lens of his home movies, recordings, artwork, photography, and journals.

“The Mask You Live In” (Director: Jennifer Siebel Newsom) — Is there a “boy crisis” in America? Is our male population suffering due to our emphasis on power, dominance, and aggression? “The Mask You Live In” explores how our narrow definition of masculinity is harming our boys, men, and society at large and unveils what we can do about it.

“Most Likely to Succeed” (Director: Greg Whiteley) — Our current education system is attempting to teach and test skills, that even when mastered, leaves graduates woefully unprepared for the 21st century. This feature-length documentary examines what sort of educational environment is most likely to prepare students for a world changing exponentially.

“Prophet’s Prey” (Director: Amy Berg) — When Warren Jeffs rose to prophet of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, he bridged the gap between sister wives and ecclesiastically justified rape, befuddling the moral compass of his entire congregation.

“Tig” (Directors: Kristina Goolsby, Ashley York, Screenwriter: Jennifer Arnold) — This documentary explores comedian Tig Notaro’s extraordinary journey as her life unfolds in grand and unexpected ways, all while she is battling a life-threatening illness and falling in love.

“What Happened, Miss Simone?” (Director: Liz Garbus) — Classically trained pianist, dive-bar chanteuse, black power icon, and legendary recording artist Nina Simone lived a life of brutal honesty, musical genius, and tortured melancholy. This astonishing epic interweaves never-before-heard recordings and rare footage, creating an unforgettable portrait of one of our least understood, most beloved artists. (Day One film)

SPECIAL EVENTS

One-of-a-kind moments highlighting new independent works that add to the unique Festival experience. An evolving section, this year includes episodic work, short films and live performance.

“Animals.” (Directors and screenwriters: Phil Matarese, Mike Luciano) — An independently produced animated series that focuses on the downtrodden creatures native to Earth’s least habitable environment: New York City. Whether it’s lovelorn rats, gender-questioning pigeons, or aging bed bugs in the midst of a mid-life crisis, the awkward small talk, moral ambiguity, and existential woes of non-human urbanites prove startlingly similar to our own. Cast: Phil Matarese, Mike Luciano, Mark Duplass, Katie Aselton, Nick Kroll, Rob Corddry. (World premiere) Followed by a conversation with the creative team of Animals.: Mark Duplass, Phil Matarese and Mike Luciano. They will discuss how their unique project came to light as well as the changing landscape of episodic storytelling in the digital era.

“The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst” (Director: Andrew Jarecki, Screenwriters: Andrew Jarecki, Marc Smerling, Zac Stuart-Pontier) — Robert Durst, scion of New York’s billionaire real estate family, has been accused of three murders but never convicted. Brilliant, reclusive, and the subject of relentless media scrutiny, he’s never spoken publicly—until now. During interviews with Andrew Jarecki, Durst reveals secrets that have baffled authorities for 30 years. Cast: Robert Durst, Andrew Jarecki, Marc Smerling, Zac Stuart-Pontier, Dick DeGuerin, Cody Cazalas. (World premiere)

“Misery Loves Comedy” (Director: Kevin Pollak, Screenwriters: Kevin Pollak, John Varhous) — Do you have to be miserable to be funny? Children cry, “Hey, look at me,” but who turns that into a profession? Over 50 funny people, like Tom Hanks, Larry David, Jimmy Fallon, Judd Apatow, and Amy Schumer share pain-filled insights from a life in pursuit of laughter. Cast: Tom Hanks, Larry David, Amy Schumer, Jimmy Fallon, Judd Apatow, Jim Gaffigan. (World premiere)

“The Sundance Institute Short Film Challenge” — An international shorts program designed to spark global conversation highlighting human ingenuity and imaginative solutions real people are creating to overcome challenges like extreme hunger and poverty. Filmmakers include Sundance Institute alumni Gael Garcia Bernal, Heidi Ewing, Rachel Grady, Diego Luna, Marialy Rivas, and six storytellers from around the world. Presented with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

“The Way of the Rain” (Creative Director: Sibylle Szaggars Redford, Collaborators: Will Calhoun, Dave Eggar, Chuck Palmer, Desmond Richardson, Ron Saint Germain, Steve Cohen, Floyd Thomas McBee III) — A live multidisciplinary performance art inspired by the annual monsoon rains that sustain life on the fragile high desert plateaus of the southwest. Conceived by environmental artist Sibylle Szaggars Redford and world-renowned artistic collaborators, this unique work comes to life through paintings, music, dance, film, light and spoken word. Special Guest Appearances: Sussan Deyhim, Marc Roberge, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Robert Redford. (Live performance).

<http://variety.com/2014/film/news/sundance-film-festival-announces-2015-premieres-lineup-1201373535/>