More reviews from the 2020 Sundance Film Festival

Save Yourselves

Dir. Eleanor Wilson and Alex Huston Fischer

USA, 2019



Stilll from Save Yourselves. **Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival.**

"What if you turned your phone off, and something really bad happened?" asked Eleanor Wilson, who co-wrote and directed Save Yourselves with Alex Huston Fischer. The comedy, which premiered to raucous fanfare, follows a millennial Brooklyn couple dealing with the aftermath of an alien invasion that occurs during their self-guided retreat (read: sans laptops and cellphones) in upstate New York. In a year where the festival's program was dominated by dark subject matter, a reflection of the times we're living in, Save Yourselves was a welcome respite.

The film's opening scene is a familiar one; Su (Indian-American comedian and actress Sunita Mani) and Jack (John Reynolds) lounging on their couch at home on their phones, rather than interacting with each other. Inspired by an old friend who they run into at a party, the couple decides to embark on a digital detox of sorts, heading to a remote cabin where they can reconnect with each other and reestablish their personal goals. (Millennial existential dread remains a subtext of the film throughout; the looming sense of adulthood being thrust upon you but not being emotionally prepared for the consequences).

For viewers close in age to the protagonists, Su and Jack's constant impulse to grab their phones coupled with a longing for the instant gratification of being able look up an answer online will hit close to home. So, too, does their sense of futility when confronted with the prospect of surviving in nature, away from civilization.

"We don't have any skills," laments Su, after news of the alien invasion has reached them and the realization that returning their former lives back in Brooklyn is impossible. Such is the generation that grew up learning how to master technology but not any practical skills for when said technology is unavailable.

With skillful levity and grace, Save Yourselves is a surprisingly affective comedy - an adult coming-of-age story of sorts - grounded by Mani and Reynolds' performances. Through Mani's expressive eyes we see Su's vulnerability; her fear of not living up to her full potential. Opposite her, Reynolds' measured deadpan delivery gradually peels back the layers of Jack's insecurity. And, though it ought to be able to go without saying in this day and age, it's refreshing to see an interracial couple onscreen without race being a plot point.

With their first feature-length film, Wilson and Fischer successfully give an age-old sci-fi premise a modern treatment that resonates, at times goofy and others poignant.

Assassins

Dir. Ryan White

USA, 2019

in 2017, the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, in a busy airport in broad daylight made headlines worldwide. But, as the orchestrators of the attack escaped back to North Korea that very same day, two unwitting young women were forced to bear the consequences. Assassins, from director Ryan White, follows their convoluted narrative in extraordinary detail, with as many twists, turns and villains as a James Bond movie.

Prior to that fateful day at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Siti Aisyah and Doan Huong had never met, though they had both been primed for months for what they believed to be a prank video to be uploaded online. Immigrants to Malaysia in search of better opportunities (Aisyah from Indonesia, Huong from Vietnam), the young women quickly realized that, without wealth or education on their side, options for making it in the bustling metropolis of Kuala Lumpur were limited. So, when the offer to partake in filming joke videos for several hundred dollars per shoot arose, it was a no-brainer when the alternative was sex work.

Over the course of months, as the women's lawyers explain, a small team of North Koreans based in the Malaysia capital filmed videos with them that, in hindsight, were clearly practice for the attack on Kim Jong-nam. The "joke" involved the woman approaching a stranger from behind in a public space, rubbing lotion on him, and running away. Whether or not they actually found it funny was irrelevant; they were getting paid regularly for relatively little effort, and were even given opportunities to travel by their Korean handlers.

The stunt at the airport seemed no different at first; the women arrived at the appointed time, were shown the target, and then converged on him one after the other. But, of course, the target was Kim Jong-nam and lotion contained deadly NX nerve agent. Within an hour, he was dead, and the Koreans who had seemed so invested in Aisyah and Huong had swiftly disappeared. Without the possibility of extraditing the real criminals, the Malaysian judicial system, which punishes those found guilty of murder with death by hanging, needed someone to blame, and for two years it seemed inevitable that Aisyah and Huong would suffer the utmost consequences.

Though Assassins was just one of many films at this year's festival that explored what it means to be a young woman on social media in this day and age, it is perhaps the most extreme. One of the deepest tragedies of the film is how easily Aisyah and Huong were taken advantage of; how their vanity and aspirations for fame exploited. Aisyah, once returned to her hometown thanks to intense negotiation by the Indonesian government, remarks how painful it felt to realize how expendable she was to her Korean handlers. But as another source illustrates, it could have been any one of the other young women White shows earnestly snapping and uploading selfies in public; the source had asked hundreds of girls if they wanted to film the prank videos - Aisyah was just the first who said yes.

Under White's direction and Helen Kearns editing, Assassins plays like a taut political action thriller, drawing empathy for the naive girls who became pawns in a dangerous game, and continues to linger long after the credits roll. Because it's impossible to shake the most chilling aspect - that this is a true story.

The Mountains are a Dream that Call to Me

Dir. Cedric Cheung-Lau

USA, 2019

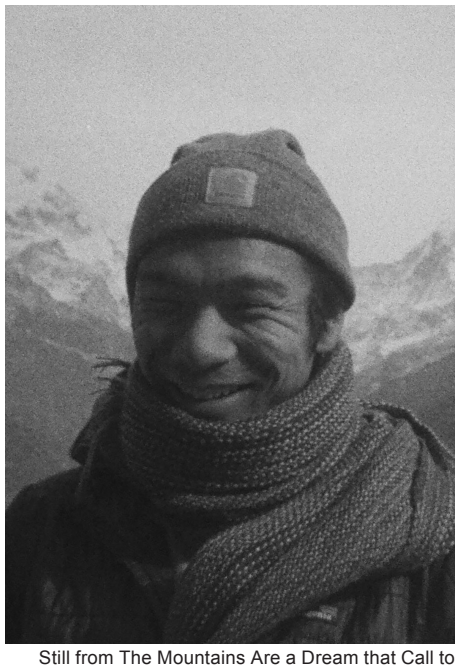
Eight years in the making, Cedric Cheung-Lau's debut feature The Mountains are a Dream that Call to Me is an evocative vignette about the unlikely meeting of two strangers set against the dramatic backdrop of the Annapurna Mountains in Nepal.

When Hannah (Alice Cummins), an older Australian woman trekking the mountains alone, crosses paths with Tukten (Sanjay Lama Dong), a Nepali youth en route to Dubai via Kathmandu for a fresh start that he's ambivalent about, there's a moment of quiet recognition. They exchange pleasantries, as hikers do, he expresses polite concern about whether she'll be able to reach her destination before dark, and ultimately gives her his walking stick. But something about Hannah's resolution, her self-contentedness, intrigues Tukten and he decides to push onward through the mountains rather than head to the city as he's supposed to do.

Cheung-Lau's film is practically the opposite of everything an audience would expect of a story set in the Himalayas - there are no avalanches, no ill-advised bivouacs or near-death experiences. The massif features heavily in the cinematography, but in this context is calm and majestic, rather than an oppressive force to be defeated by man's willpower. It also provides a glimpse into the lives of the locals, and how much they rely on tourism.

Yet for all the stunning shots of the mountains, where the film really shines is in its ability to capture the transient nature of the cross-cultural bonds forged between travelers. For even in their shared moments of silence Hannah and Tukten are still united by the sense of awe instilled by being in the presence of something sublime - in their case, the mountains. Their connection is less contingent upon sharing and knowing the most intimate parts of themselves and more about a feeling and sense of kinship.

In the age of social media, bucket list travel and derivative pics-or-it-didn't-happen attitude, the film is also a meditation on what it means to be present. Hannah's journey serves as a reminder of why we travel, and why we ought to do so without the added filter of our phones and gadgets. In a world obsessed with documenting the minutiae, we lose the ability to actually enjoy what's in front of us. ■



Still from The Mountains Are a Dream that Call to Me. **Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival.**