



What to Watch at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival: Films Based on Real Life and True Stories

NEWS

January 21, 2023 8:29 AM



By Peter Jones

As a medium, film can always deliver a kind of truth. But when the magic of movies meets real life, the result can be all the more meaningful. A broad range of nonfiction stories — from the illustrious to the utterly unknown — will be presented in creative ways at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival.

They say truth is stranger than fiction, but truth can also be more engaging, relatable and thought provoking — especially when it's a true story well told. Take the tale of a campy, gay Mexican wrestler who became an unlikely "champ," or the elderly, low-key Vietnamese cab driver who took the ride of his life after picking up three escaped convicts, or the Iranian mother living in an Australian women's shelter whose life was upended when her fundamentalist ex came looking for their 6-year-old daughter.

Creative nonfiction can be at the heart of great storytelling, especially when film brings slices of real life to the larger-than-life screen. Stories of inspiring schoolteachers, rescuers of endangered elephants and even purveyors of Indigenous witchcraft will find their way to the Festival with intriguing narratives based on actual events.



The Accidental Getaway Driver (U.S. Dramatic) — Long, a Vietnamese cabbie living in Southern California, is almost ready to call it a night — and already in his pajamas — when he reluctantly picks up one last fare, a wild ride that will put him squarely into the mayhem suggested by this film's title. As Long slowly develops a kind of relationship with one of his armed captors, tension builds in a motel hideout and Long relives his nightmares as a South Vietnamese Army officer. The horrors of barely surviving a forced-labor camp and the recurring reality of loss and homelessness are the captors that Long may never escape in this faithfully adapted true story. (In person and online)

Cassandro (Premieres) — What happens when a gay Mexican wrestler flips his wild sport's mockery of queer onto its proverbial head? In Mexico's lucha libre wrestling, the exóticos are supposed to be comic relief, usually portrayed by straight wrestlers who play it for laughs and never win. But everything changes — or does it? — when charismatic luchador Saúl Armendáriz adopts his wildly successful Cassandro persona and becomes the much adored "Liberace of lucha libre." (In person)

Fairyland (Premieres) — Based on Alysia Abbott's memoir of the same name, this poignant coming-of-age story set in 1970s San Francisco is told from the perspective of young Alysia as her free-spirited, tragically widowed father, an aspiring poet, jumps headfirst into his new life as an openly gay man. As the father and daughter discover themselves — and each other — the two grow conflicted in their differing expectations for life as it should be and the ways of a parent-child relationship. As Alysia grows into a young woman, the loving but uneasy bond is tested. (In person)



A still from *Shayda* by Noora Niasari, an official selection of the World Dramatic Competition at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute. All photos are copyrighted and may be used by the press only for the purpose of news or editorial coverage of Sundance Institute programs. Photos must be accompanied by a credit to the photographer and/or "Courtesy of Sundance Institute." Unauthorized use, alteration, reproduction or sale of logos and/or photos is strictly prohibited.

Heroic (World Cinema Dramatic) — Actor Santiago Sandoval Carbajal effectively plays a fictionalized version of himself in this raw and unflinching look at the life of a teenage cadet in the Mexican military. When Luis, played by Carbajal, naively joins the army in hopes of earning an officer's rank and sending money back to his impoverished family, he discovers a world less than worthy of a storied institution christened the Heroic Military College. Luis faces a moral and mental health crisis as he navigates a power structure grounded in abuse, cruelty and corruption. (In person and online)

Poacher (Indie Episodic) — This fact-based narrative uncovers the heartbreak and corruption of elephant poaching in India. In a sort of murder investigation, a disparate group of Forest Department officers, NGO workers, and ragtag volunteers try desperately to solve a true crime while venturing to save the lives of endangered animals — all in the face of cover-ups and threats on their own lives. Organized crime and government corruption are the real behemoths of this true-crime story. (In person and online)

Radical (Premieres) — Radical is not a word typically used to describe a sixth grade teacher, but desperation called for desperate measures at Jose Urbina Lopez Elementary in northern Mexico. When a good-natured but inexperienced teacher finds himself in front of a classroom full of some of the worst-performing students in the nation, he is determined to try something different — even radical — to instill a love of learning amid the violence and hopelessness. (In person)

Shayda (World Cinema Dramatic) — First-time Iranian-Australian filmmaker Noora Niasari based this loving yet taut mother-daughter narrative on her own immigrant story. Just as Shayda, a recently divorced mother, is venturing to bring some calm back to her and her daughter's life, the ex-husband re-emerges with an eye on taking the 6-year-old back to Iran. Freedom, culture, and a mother's love meet at the intersection of this beautifully crafted drama. (In person and online)

Sorcery (World Cinema Dramatic) — This unusual drama-fable is set against the backdrop of an actual court case from the 1880s in which the Chilean government prosecuted a group of Indigenous sorcerers from the "magical" island of Chiló. After her father is murdered by colonialists, a 13-year-old girl unleashes demons — spiritual as well as colonial — when she turns to local sorcerers for revenge. (In person and online)

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