Our favorite feature films from Sundance 2018

Every January, cinema fans don their boots and heavy coats, gear up for extensive line-standing and bus-waiting, and flock to Park City, Utah, for the Sundance Film Festival. Founded in 1978, Sundance has become America's biggest independent film festival, and it's often the launch point for films from around the world that were made outside the studio system, and are looking for recognition and distribution deals. Some years, Sundance has a bigger impact than other years. 2017's lineup saw the premieres (and sales) of breakout hits like *Call Me By Your Name* and *The Big Sick*, in addition to gems like *A Ghost Story*, *Brigsby Bear*, and *Ingrid Goes West*. 2018 was a lower-key year, but it had its share of well-received hits and instant sales, and it remains an annual focal point for cinema fans who want an advance look at some of the more idiosyncratic, daring movies coming to theaters or streaming services later in the year. Here are our favorite films from this year's festival.

Mandy

Panos Cosmatos' *Beyond the Black Rainbow* is a great cult film, but not a particularly accessible one. So I'm thrilled to see a follow-up like *Mandy*, which pairs its fever-dream aesthetic with an actually comprehensible plot and intense performances from Nicolas Cage and Andrea Riseborough. *Mandy* amps up the tension between a happy couple and a murderous cult in a remote wilderness setting, before letting it all loose in a ridiculous but satisfying revenge quest. It maintains a sense of humor that's based largely on the contrast between the film's overall ominous atmosphere and Cage's over-the-top action-movie setpieces. But even its most ridiculous elements — like a gang of Cenobite-like bikers whose powers come from

LSD, or a chainsaw duel — are played straight enough that they don't fall into camp. The tone underscores *Mandy's* symbolic battle between blind mysticism and a self-aware love of the fantastical, while making for a gory, solidly enjoyable midnight movie. *Mandy* was produced by XYZ Films (*Beyond Skyline*, *I Don't Feel at Home in This World Anymore*), which seems set to self-distribute the film, so it's likely to be out later this year. *—Adi Robertson*



YouTube Red

Bodied

Eminem produced the latest feature from prolific music video director Joseph Kahn, and at first glance, it's easy to mistake it for an update of the rapper's 2002 film *8 Mile*. Like that film, *Bodied* also features an up-and-coming white battle-rapper navigating a racially charged environment, and inevitably rising up through it. But the tone is entirely different: *Bodied* is a comedy and a thriller as well as a drama, and its tongue-in-cheek, confrontational sarcasm about

everything from cultural appropriation to race stereotypes is startling and refreshing. It’s a ridiculously dense movie that flits from idea to idea with the speed of battle-rap itself, packing in the protagonist’s movie-friendly underdog triumphs with accusations that he’s being racist, and counter-arguments that the *accusations* are racist. Far from a tiresome political debate or a feature-length scold session, *Bodied* is an energetic, playful, freewheeling film that gets at some of the complexity of the endless counter-currents of racial debate in America. Also, there’s a lot of intense, shocking, hilarious battle-rapping. *Bodied* wasn’t on the official Sundance roster this year: it came to the festival as a special presentation by YouTube Red, which bought the film just before Sundance. It’ll be in theaters and on the streaming service later this year. *—Tasha Robinson*



A24

Hereditary

Sundance has been making a habit of debuting innovative, terrifying horror films over the past few years, often from

first-time directors. This year, joining the ranks of *The Babadook* and *The Witch* is Ari Aster's *Hereditary*. A family drama that slowly morphs into a supernatural horrorshow, it's steeped in the tradition of '60s and '70s horror classics like *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*, and like those films, it has a high-class cast. Toni Collette goes all-out as an artist coping with her two challenging children and the death of her mother, while Gabriel Byrne stars as her patient, increasingly frustrated husband. Ann Dowd, fresh from Hulu's version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, also appears as a woman who's eager to help Collette's character cope with her loss. *Hereditary* is atmospheric, beautiful, and utterly terrifying, taking some weird and wild story turns that caught my audience totally off-guard. It's only January, but I already suspect it will be my favorite horror film of the year. The first trailer just came out, and the film is due for theatrical release on June 28th, 2018. *—Bryan Bishop*



Courtesy of Sundance Institute

Monsters And Men

Reinaldo Marcus Green is a specific kind of Sundance success story: he debuted his short film *Stop* (about a racially

motivated traffic stop) at the festival in 2015, got picked up for the festival's Directors and Screenwriters labs, and went on to premiere his feature debut film *Monsters and Men* at the festival in 2018. Neon promptly picked up the film, so expect a wide 2018 release. The feature is a loose, heavily fictionalized take on the 2014 death of Eric Garner, from the points of view of three men in New York City: the witness who films a white NYPD officer shooting an unarmed black man, the black cop who struggles with the fallout of the event, and a black high school football star who feels moved to join the subsequent protests. The film is carefully even-handed about presenting various sides of the story – at a post-screening Sundance Q&A, Green said the NYPD read and approved the script, and was heavily involved in the filmmaking – but it's also honest about the anger, fear, and frustration that surround police-related fatalities. The film feels like a tighter, more directed, more carefully balanced spin on Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*: both are beautifully moody pieces about injustice and the response, but *Monsters and Men* takes on three personal perspectives instead of one. Green won Sundance's Special Jury Award for Outstanding First Feature, and rightly so. –*TR*





Courtesy of Sundance Institute

The Guilty

While Sundance is still ostensibly a playground for “indie” films, we’ve come a long way from hyper low-budget films with limited resources. That’s partially why Gustav Möller’s Danish film *The Guilty* was such a wonderful surprise. It’s an old-school indie that saves money by taking place inside a single location – in this case, an emergency call center – and keeping its focus on a single character (Jakob Cedergren) trying to save a kidnapped woman who called for help. It’s an incredibly taut film, humming along on the intensity of Cedergen’s performance and the voice of the victim (Jessica Dinnage) on the other end of the line. *The Guilty* takes some great twists and turns along the way; it’s one of those movies that knows exactly when you expect it to zig, and makes sure to zag every single time instead. By the time it was over, my palms were sweaty, my stomach was in a knot, and I couldn’t quite believe what Möller and his collaborators had pulled off. Magnolia bought the rights to this one, but hasn’t set a

date for 2018 release yet. *—BB*



Courtesy of Sundance Institute

Blaze

Everything about Ethan Hawke's *Blaze* is loose and rambling: its musical performances, its non-linear chronology, its adaptation of Sybil Rosen's book *Living in the Woods in a Tree: Remembering Blaze Foley*. It's a low-impact, unhurried movie that frames Foley's life through a radio interview with Townes Van Zant (played by Charlie Sexton) and through a bar set where Foley (whose real name was Michael David Fuller) plays for a small, unappreciative crowd while his performance is recorded for a live album. Newcomer Benjamin Dickey, a friend of Hawke's, plays Foley as a gentle, awkward, but often inebriated bear who rarely seems to know what's good for him. He walks through life without a plan, which slowly but surely gets on the nerves of his lover Sybil (Alia Shawkat). *Blaze* is a sympathetic and sentimental movie, but it's frank about Foley's flaws as well as his talent, and it clearly shows how his lack of discipline and ambition undermined his career, even as he was making beautiful music. The songs, performed by Dickey, Sexton, and others, suggest an even shaggier and more

mournful take on the Coens' *Inside Llewyn Davis*, with less black irony and a lot more love. It's a sprawling, wandering movie, but it's beautifully shot and felt, and Dickey, in particular, feels like a real find. The film is still looking for distribution. *—TR*



Courtesy of Sundance Institute

Leave No Trace

After Debra Granik directed 2010's stellar, Oscar-nominated *Winter's Bone* (ushering Jennifer Lawrence to wider fame in the process), she all but disappeared from the film scene. Her 2014 documentary *Stray Dog* is touching and heartfelt, but scattershot, so full of disconnected emotional moments that its sheer weight becomes a little overwhelming. Her new feature *Leave No Trace* solves the problem by stripping the story down to the bone, as a mentally ill veteran (Ben Foster)

and his teenage daughter (Thomasin McKenzie) live together in the deep woods of a Portland park, until they're eventually discovered. Like *Winter's Bone*, *Leave No Trace* centers on a quiet but ruthlessly determined teenage girl and her complicated relationship with her father, but in this case, her father is an active and demanding presence in her life, and their relationship is close but frustrated instead of distant and frustrated. Granik lets the story play out with quiet intensity, taking in the lush greenery of the Pacific Northwest as she goes, and letting the audience feel the relaxation that comes with living off the grid, free of society and demands. But McKenzie's character also brings across a vivid frustration at being kept apart from the world, and the irreconcilable tension between the two leads. Like *Winter's Bone*, it's a heartfelt, melancholy film that's memorable more for its beautiful tone than for specific plot points. Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions has picked up international distribution, but the film is still looking for domestic release. *—TR*

https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/30/16952212/sundance-2018-best-of-mandy-blaze-leave-no-trace-hereditary-guilty-monsters-and-men