The 25 Best Films of 2021 We've Already Seen

Say goodbye to 2020 the best way we can: by looking forward to a slate of feature films well worth the wait, including festival standouts, wide releases, and awards contenders.



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Dec 31, 2020 10:00 am
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Well, let's never do *that* again. With 2020 nearly over and done with — and good riddance — it's time to look ahead to what can only be a better year to come. And what better way to prepare for 2021 than by getting excited for a slate of much-anticipated films that have already caught our fancy? Hell, maybe we can actually check these movies out in actual theaters, wouldn't that be something?

From festival standouts that played earlier in the year or via one of 2020's many virtual events to delayed releases and awards contenders anteing up for wide showings beyond their 2020 qualifying runs, we've been lucky enough to catch some real gems that will call 2021 home. From heavy-hitting contenders like Regina King's "One Night in Miami," Lee Isaac Chung's "Minari," and Chloe Zhao's "Nomadland" to heart-stopping indies like Heidi Ewing's "I Carry You with Me," Madeleine Sims-Fewer and Dusty Mancinelli's "Violation," and Keith Thomas'

"The Vigil," 2021 is already stacked. (And, if you're looking for some great films still in need of homes, we've got that covered, too.)

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IndieWire has curated 25 titles worthy of anticipation and combined them all into a single guide, complete with release dates and review snippets that provide a sneak peak at several movies bound to be a part of the year-end conversation 12 months down the line. Here's to better months ahead.

Of note: This list only includes films we have already seen that have a set 2021 release date or have been picked up for distribution with 2021 release dates to be set. Because of the weirdness of 2020, we are including films that had qualifying runs in 2020 but are opting for wider release in 2021.

"Shadow in the Cloud" (in theaters and on VOD, January 1)

Built around enough wild concepts that it sounds a bit like a Hollywood pitch meeting gone seriously off the rails — it's a creature feature! set on a World War II B-17! filled with misogynist soldiers! and the star is a badass woman! the soundtrack is synth-heavy! — the craziest part about Roseanne Liang's nutso "Shadow in the Cloud" is that she very nearly pulls the whole thing off. Bolstered by a go-for-broke performance by star Chloë Grace Moretz and an energy that never relents (even in the face of things like "logic" and "physics" and "common sense"), "Shadow in the Cloud" is the most bonkers mash-up of monster movie and World War II drama since, well, at least this year. (The sub-genre is fertile, to put it mildly.)

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Herself" (streaming on Amazon Prime, January 8)



"Herself"

Sundance

Co-written by star Clare Dunne alongside "What Richard Did" screenwriter and frequent TV scribe Malcolm Campbell, "Herself" traces Sandra's journey from doting mother and abused wife to emancipated woman, thanks to her own ability to dream big in the face of overwhelming obstacles. While Dunne and Campbell's script attempts to tackle a number of timely issues — from economic anxiety and housing scarcity, in addition to domestic abuse — "Herself" also keenly observes how all those problems can impair good, caring people from being able to help others. Sandra's big plan to literally build her own house from scratch is steeped in her own sense of self-determination, but it's a wild idea without the help of others. But how can she rally her friends and neighbors when they are suffering their own troubles?

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"One Night in Miami" (in theaters, January 8; streaming on Amazon Prime, January 15)

On a warm February 1964 night in Miami, self-professed "The Greatest" (a distinction that's still hard to argue with, even so many decades on) Muhammad Ali defeated Sonny Liston to capture his first World Heavyweight Championship. A 7-to-1 underdog, Ali's win was hardly expected, but it also somehow felt preordained, a necessary step towards his domination of the sport and then the world. Malcolm X, a close friend of Ali's and his spiritual guide who would lead him to the Nation of Islam soon after the win, was there. So was soul singer Sam Cooke and NFL superstar Jim Brown. And when it was all over, when Ali became the greatest, the four close friends celebrated the win together at a local Miami hotel. What transpired on that evening — an evening that, yes, really did happen — belongs to both history and its central foursome, but is now vividly imagined in a film that crackles with all the hopes and fears and dreams and possibilities of both the men it tracks and the blossoming filmmaking talent behind the camera.

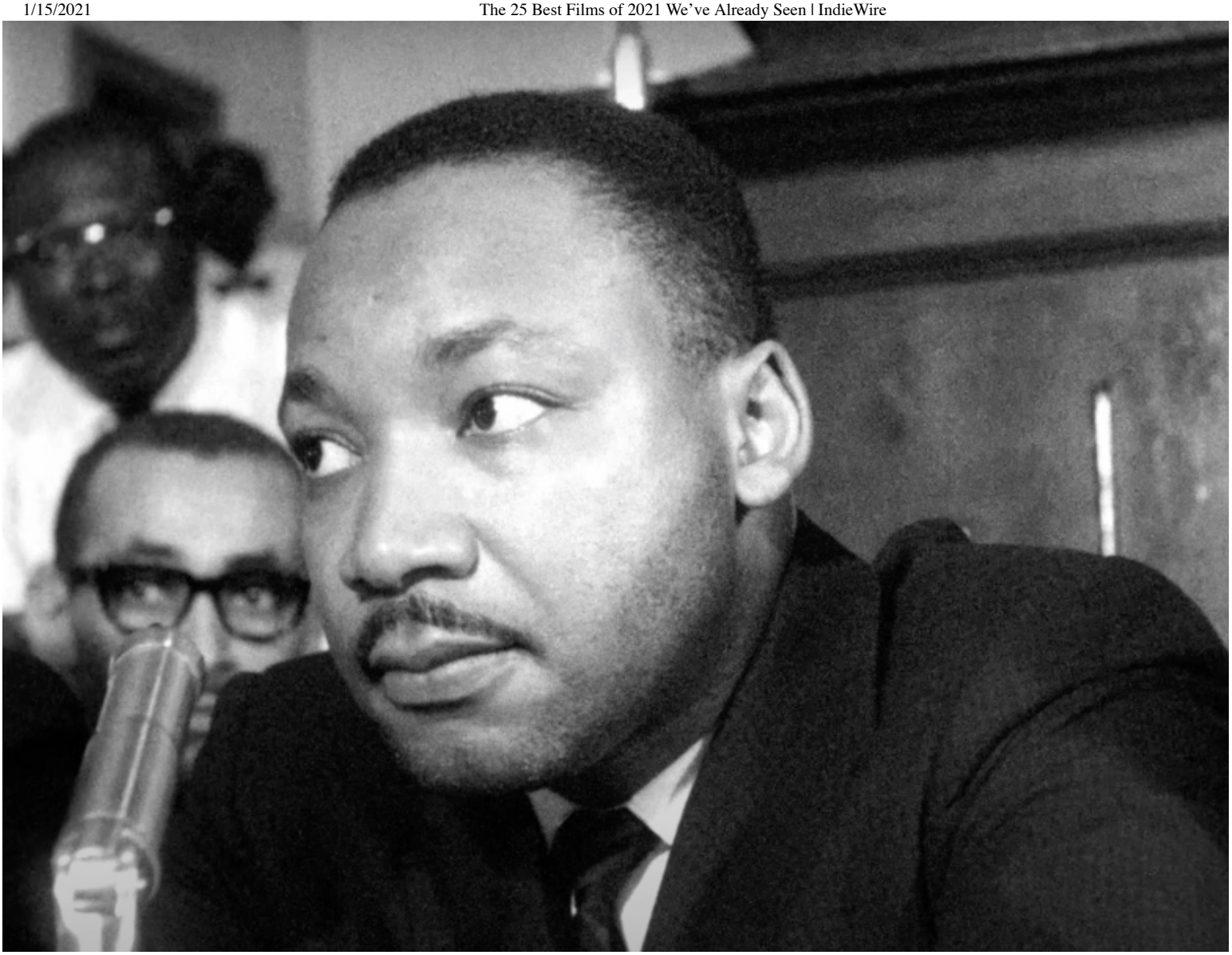
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"Ham on Rye" (streaming on MUBI, January 11)

A stylish twist on the end-of-high-school dramedy, Tyler Taormina's "Ham on Rye" offers the ethereal echoes of "The Virgin Suicides" with the gossamer veil of a humid summer's day slowly lifting, but laced with notes of John Hughes on a steady micro-dose of LSD. That's to say things are always off-kilter in this movie but the exact nature of whatever is the kink in this coming-of-ager never reveals itself. And while the narrative hardly goes into the fully unhinged direction it teases, it's pleasantly askew and always marching to its own strange and, slightly off, beat.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"MLK/FBI" (in theaters and on VOD, January 15)



"MLK/FBI"

IFC Films

"MLK/FBI" reveals shocking behavior by the American government, but the most troubling aspect of its revelations is that nobody had to answer for it. Sam Pollard's sobering and essential documentary recounts the government's efforts to blackmail, discredit, and otherwise disempower Martin Luther King, Jr. during the height of the Civil Rights movement, by recording his marital infidelities and wielding them like a blunt weapon. Though Pollard draws from King biographer David Garrow's book "The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.," the filmmaker has created a remarkable cinematic framework for injecting this frightening aspect of King's story with immediacy.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time" (Film at Lincoln Center virtual cinema, January 22)

Had Jesse and Celine actually met six months after the events of "Before Sunrise" as planned, had they gone horribly wrong to the point where one of the parties couldn't even remember the other, and had they both been neurosurgeons, the scenario might look something like "Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time." Such a mouthful of a title, poetic and unwieldy, belies the starkness of Hungarian writer/director Lili Horvát's haunting and mysterious second feature, a kind of amnesiac love story crossed with the gloomiest of Krzysztof Kieślowski movies, and bordering on existential science fiction. Even if the conceit winds up a little undercooked, and a loopy ending doesn't quite stick the landing, the filmmaking is exacting and assured, pulling us in like a current into the heart of a most strange romantic mystery.

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"Derek DelGaudio's In & Of Itself" (streaming on Hulu, January 22)

A lot of magic shows aim for immediate shock and awe, stunning audiences with sleight of hand so seamless, it's practically a rollercoaster for the eyeballs: The gimmick is a means to the end, rabbit comes out of the hat, everybody goes home happy. Self-described "storyteller and conceptual magician" Derek DelGaudio's beguiling show "In & Of Itself," now preserved in a mystical and poignant feature directed by Frank Oz, rejects such dime store wizardry in favor of a soulful approach that redefines the form from the inside out. Make no mistake: DelGaudio's remarkable one-man show, which enjoyed a lengthy Off-Broadway run between 2017 and 2018, has ample card tricks, optical illusions, and even one extraordinary teleportation bit. All along, however, DelGaudio transforms the usual shock-and-awe routine into a powerful meditation on existential yearning and his own bumpy quest for meaning in life.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Penguin Bloom" (streaming on Netflix, January 29)

In 2011, former Movieline editor S.T. VanAirsdale suggested — not *entirely* facetiously — that the dog who played Uggie in the then-Oscar contender "The Artist" be considered for his own Academy Award.

It wasn't an ask without precedent (Rin Tin Tin was in the race for the very first Best Actor award, and arguably won the accolade), but it was certainly the most public awards campaign for a non-human actor. Nearly a decade later, it's time for another: Give an Oscar for the bird(s) that star in Glendyn Ivin's dramatic real-life story, "Penguin Bloom." That's not to diminish the work of the human actors — including a stirring Naomi Watts and a breakout performance by young actor Griffin Murray-Johnston — but there's a reason why this gentle Aussie drama is named after its sole winged character. Based on the book of the same name by Cameron Bloom and Bradley Trevor Greive, Ivin's latest feature tracks a familiar enough story about injury, grief, and resilience, though one wonderfully fluffed up by the unlikely heroine at its heart.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Little Fish" (in theaters and on VOD, February 5)



"Little Fish"

Tribeca Film Festival

Chad Hartigan's clever sci-fi drama "Little Fish" sums its chief concerns in one grim line: "When your disaster is everyone's disaster, how do you grieve?" A change of pace for the director of "Morris From America," Hartigan's weighty romance takes place in world afflicted by memory loss, with all the devastating results implied by that premise. Beautifully acted and grounded in relatable emotions despite the lofty premise, "Little Fish" plays as both an effective metaphor for Alzheimer's, and the

disintegration of a relationship without closure or reason. Lead couple Emma (Olivia Cooke) and Jude (Jack O'Connell) are battling to recover their memories of each other as Jude succumbs to the affliction, which so far leaves Emma untouched. They aren't the only ones working through that problem: In "Little Fish," everyone in the world is collectively losing their memory to something called NIA, or "neuroinflammatory affliction."

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"Falling" (in theaters and on VOD, February 5)

It's a testament to Viggo Mortensen's restless and singularly creative spirit that nobody could possibly predict the subject of his directorial debut, and perhaps an even greater testament that "Falling" immediately makes sense as the kind of movie that the modern poet, abstract painter, experimental musician, prolific anthropologist, septilingual traveler, Oscar-winning "Green Book" accomplice, and rightful King of Gondor would feel compelled to make. Ostensibly a drama about a married gay liberal who struggles to care for his homophobic father during what might be the final days of his life, Mortensen's first effort behind the camera never settles into the expected grooves of its genre or premise. On the contrary, the film vibrates at its own unrecognizable frequency as soon as it starts, and only allows for easy categorization during the clunkier moments when it bumps against clichés like a boat that would rather crash into lighthouses than use them for guidance.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"The World to Come" (in theaters, February 12; on VOD, March 2)

"The World to Come" is so withholding that the characters from "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" are practically sky-writing their emotions by comparison, and Mona Fastvold's film — despite its delicate lilt of a last scene — never detonates inside of you with remotely the same force. It's jabbing and elliptical instead of lush and symphonic; old-fashioned where some of its predecessors have thrummed with contemporary zeal. No one filters drugs through armpits, or scissors their bodies into shapes that Abdellatif Kechiche might cut together. On the contrary, Abigail and Tallie are seldom

onscreen together at all, and only in hindsight can we appreciate how charged the space between them is when they are. Fastvold shoots the movie at a polite and unfussy remove, the fuzzy vibrations of Andre Chemtoff's 16mm cinematography hinting at an energy invisible to Abigail and Tallie's husbands.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"French Exit" (in theaters, February 12)

Death is always just a few dollars away in the wry and beguiling "French Exit," a musty tragedy of manners that director Azazel Jacobs and his longtime friend/sometime collaborator Patrick DeWitt have adapted from the latter's novel of the same name. For Frances — who a serrated Michelle Pfeiffer plays like an intoxicating cross between Selina Kyle and Luann de Lesseps — the dwindling stacks of cash in her bedroom closet are the last grains of sand in an hourglass turned upside down more than a decade ago, when Big Frank died and she pulled Malcolm (Lucas Hedges) out of boarding school because she needed someone new to love her. Imminently penniless, Frances decides that she and her doting son and the family cat who may or may not house the spirit of her long-deceased husband will make a break for it: They'll convert the money they have left to euros, sail on a tacky cruise ship across the Atlantic, and hole up in a borrowed Paris apartment until spent dry.

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"Minari" (in theaters, February 12)



"Minari"

Told with the rugged tenderness of a Flannery O'Connor novel but aptly named for a resilient Korean herb that can grow wherever it's planted, Lee Isaac Chung's semi-autobiographical "Minari" is a raw and vividly remembered story of two simultaneous assimilations; it's the story of a family assimilating into a country, but also the story of a man assimilating into his family. Jacob Yi (Steven Yeun) and his wife Monica ("Sea Fog" star Yeri Han) emigrated from Korea together in the early '70s, but — after nearly a decade of scraping by as chicken sexers in California — they arrive at the Arkansas trailer home he bought for their family in separate cars. Monica drives the kids: A stoic pre-teen girl named Anne (the natural and grounded Noel Cho), and a precocious seven-year-old boy named David (newcomer Alan S. Kim, delivering one of the most crucial and transcendently honest child performances since Jonathan Chang in "Yi Yi").

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Nomadland" (in theaters, February 19)

"Nomadland" is the kind of movie that could go very wrong. With Frances McDormand as its star alongside a cast real-life nomads, in lesser hands it might look like cheap wish fulfillment or

showboating at its most gratuitous. Instead, director Chloé Zhao works magic with McDormand's face and the real world around it, delivering a profound rumination on the impulse to leave society in the dust. Zhao previously directed "The Rider" and "Songs My Brother Taught Me," dramas that dove into marginalized experiences with indigenous non-actors in South Dakota. "Nomadland" imports that fixation with sweeping natural scenery to a much larger tapestry and a different side of American life. Inspired by Jessica Bruder's non-fiction book "Nomadland: Surviving America in the 21st Century," the movie follows McDormand as Fern, a soft-spoken widow in her early 60s who hits the road in her van, and just keeps moving. The movie hovers with her, at times so enmeshed in her travels that it practically becomes a documentary.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"I Care a Lot" (streaming on Netflix, February 19)

Filmmaker J Blakeson makes one fatal flaw in his darkly funny thriller "I Care a Lot," an understandable misstep because it seems like such a fundamental addition to any film: he tries to humanize his characters. While the film's first half leans into the icy, often hilarious villainy of such very bad people as a ponytailed crime boss played by Peter Dinklage, a smarmy lawyer (Chris Messina) who dresses as if Colonel Sanders was a stand-up comedian, and star Rosamund Pike, returning to her frosty "Gone Girl" best, its messy final act attempts a brief foray into making some of these outsize monsters more civilized. What a mistake, because "I Care a Lot," a pulpy social thriller that might be better suited for midnight movie positioning, is at its most purely enjoyable when it's leaning right into just how very, very bad people can be.

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"The Vigil" (in theaters and on VOD, February 26)

Jewish superstition has been riddled with dybbuks and golems for centuries, but horror movies haven't wised up to it nearly enough. "The Vigil" is proof that bible-thumping priests and haunted convents can't have all the spooky fun. In director Keith Thomas's eerie first feature "The Vigil," a

young man estranged from the Orthodox Jewish community of Borough Park, Brooklyn, agrees to fulfill the duties of a "shomer," the ritualistic practice of looking after a dead body over the course of one night.

Desperate for rent money, he agrees, unwittingly signing up for a long night with a possessed corpse. The ensuing mayhem relies on the usual preponderance of jump scares, but Thomas combines those moments with aplomb and surprising thematic depth. Set almost exclusively within the confines of the shadowy home, "The Vigil" suggests the potential for a new angle on "The Conjuring" universe via Jewish guilt and Holocaust trauma. And if "Conjuring" owner Warner Bros. doesn't ingest its lore, Thomas has ample potential for a new franchise of his own.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"My Zoe" (in theaters, February 26)



"My Zoe"

Neatly and purposely divided into three acts — a black screen signals the lag time between each, should the viewer not be ready for the required understanding that things are about to change, and that it's best to prepare now — Julie Delpy's fascinating "My Zoe" uses its classic formal structure to tell a thoroughly modern tale. While Delpy's directorial output thus far has mostly consisted of fizzy rom-coms like her "Two Days" features and the odd historical drama ("The Countess"), "My Zoe" finds the filmmaker and star moving fast into fresh territory. One part domestic drama, one part medical mystery, "My Zoe" subtly spins those two acts into its final segment: a contemporary thriller with morals and medicine on its mind.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"The Father" (in theaters, February 26)

At once both an unsettlingly accurate simulation of what it's like to love someone with dementia, and also a strikingly believable conception of what it's like to live as someone with dementia, Florian Zeller's "The Father" envisions senility as a house of mirrors in which everyone loses sight of themselves. Adapted from Zeller's award-winning play of the same name, and directed with a firm hand by the playwright himself, this M.C. Escher drawing of a movie chips away at the austerity of the Euro-dramas that inform its style until every shot betrays the promise of its objectivity, and reality itself becomes destabilized.

"The Father" is a slippery film in which even the most basic information can be vaporized in the span of a single cut, but there's no ambiguity to the fact that Anthony Hopkins plays the title role (although it might be worth noting that the character's name has been changed from Andre to Anthony, a self-reflexive detail that adds a crunchy meta core to one of the movie's most harrowing moments).

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"The Truffle Hunters" (in theaters, March 12)

Foodies may delight at the prospects of fresh truffles on their pasta, but few know the sheer labor involved in bringing them to the table. Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw's illuminating documentary helps change that, as the filmmakers manage to capture the clandestine truffle hunts in the Piedmont region of Northern Italy undertaken by elderly men and their faithful dogs. While it's fascinating to watch that process unfold in extraordinary cinematic detail (including a canine cam that is very much appreciated), the surprise of this gentle, poetic movie is how much emotion in packs into a story that doesn't demand it from the outset.

As much a window into the aging process and the struggle of the agriculture industry in the 21st century as it is a culinary behind-the-scenes peek, "Truffle Hunters" has a transformative quality to its

lyricism as it moves along. By the time one of its subjects tears up over a lost pet, you're right there with him. By then, it's clear that "Truffle Hunters" has a lot more on its mind than mushrooms. But it doesn't pretend that they're the real star of the show, either: This movie reinvents the notion of "food porn" by giving it a whole new sense of elegance and purpose.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Zola" (in theaters, June 30)



"Zola"

A24

If the evolution of creativity in the 21st century means that Twitter feeds can fuel feature-length adaptations, "Zola" is a terrific place to start. Director Janicza Bravo's zany road trip comedy about a pair of strippers on a rambunctious 48-hour Florida adventure embodies its ludicrous source while jazzing it up with relentless cinematic beats. Bravo, who co-wrote the movie with "Slave Play" breakout Jeremy O. Harris, applies the surreal and edgy sensibilities of her unsettling dark comic short "Gregory Go Boom" and the similarly outré "Lemon" to another jittery look at anxious people driven to self-destructive extremes. This time, their antics result in a rambunctious crowdpleaser made all the more compelling because it's true.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"I Carry You with Me" (in theaters, TBD 2021)

They say truth is stranger than fiction, but more often than not it's much sadder too. Where fiction likes to wrap things up in a tidy bow, real life is all about calculated compromise. In the case of Iván Garcia and Gerardo Zabaleta, whose touching love story is dramatized in the timely drama "I Carry You With Me," the choice between a life together in the U.S. or with family in Mexico has no clear-cut answers. The narrative feature debut of Oscar-nominated documentarian Heidi Ewing ("Jesus Camp"), "I Carry You With Me" weaves this painful division into a poignant and visually striking tale of resilience, striving, and the sacrifices we make for love.

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"I Carry You With Me" operates on three separate timelines, often jumping between with little rhyme or reason. Ewing intercuts footage of the real Iván, now in early middle age and a successful chef in New York City, alongside the talented actor (Armando Espitia) dramatizing his life as a young man in Puebla, Mexico, with occasional flashes of his childhood self (Yael Tadeo).

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Dear Comrades!" (in theaters, TBD 2021)

"Dear Comrades!" sometimes works a bit too hard to remind viewers of just how much Lyudmila has committed to the lost cause of her government's priorities ("Had Stalin been around we'd already be living under communism!" she declares, in one of several terse reminders that she simply adored the guy.) However, Andrei Konchalovsky excels at building out the complex set of generational forces at work in Lyudmila's household, from her angsty daughter to her batty military veteran father, who still wears his WWI outfit around the house like a rumpled echo of another bygone era. "Let it burn," he tells her, as the city goes into lockdown.

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Gunda" (in theaters, TBD 2021)



"Gunda"

NEON

More experience than movie, "Gunda" is a visionary case for veganism in black and white. Russian filmmaker Viktor Kossakovsky's mesmerizing achievement removes humans from the picture to magnify the small moments in the lives of various farm animals, with his eponymous pig at its center. Over the course of 90 hypnotic minutes, his roving camera observes Gunda and her piglets, a handful of chickens, and a smattering of cows simply going about their lives on an unspecified farmland.

Devoid of music or any other obvious artifice, "Gunda" neither aims to document animal consciousness or anthropomorphize it. Instead, Kossakovsky's fascinating non-narrative experiment burrows into the center of his subject's nervous system, meeting the creatures on their own terms in a remarkable plea for empathy that only implores carnivores to think twice by implication. (With vegan activist Joaquin Phoenix signed on as an executive producer, it doesn't need to make its message overt anyway.)

Read IndieWire's full review.

"Violation" (streaming on Shudder, TBD 2021)

Madeleine Sims-Fewer and Dusty Mancinelli's unflinchingly grotesque "Violation" hammers the bluntest of female gazes into the rape-revenge thriller. Rich in sumptuous visuals that portend its nasty undercurrent, "Violation" admirably swings very big, but ultimately comes up short.

A resolutely disturbing genre thriller, it opens with the ominous image of a pitch black wolf feasting on a rabbit carcass as eerie choral music pulses hypnotically. "Violation" is sprinkled with a healthy dose of animal imagery — like the kind found in Andrea Arnold's films — from spiders flailing under jars to the actual skinning of rabbits. Whether Miriam (Sims-Fewer) is recalling how her shifty brother-in-law Dylan (Jesse LaVercombe) used to pick the wings off of flies when they were kids, or she's draining the blood from him like the rabbits he catches in wooden traps, the symbolism isn't hard to follow.

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Read IndieWire's full review.

"Night of the Kings" (TBD 2021)

Male hierarchies inside prison walls are well-trod ground, from "Brute Force" and "Birdman of Alcatraz," to "Papillon," "Midnight Express," and "The Shawshank Redemption." But rarely is an entry as visually rapturous as West African filmmaker Philippe Lacôte's "Night of the Kings," which takes place inside the bowels of the infamous La MACA prison in Abidjan, a city on the south side of the Ivory Coast. While the film, both written and directed by Lacôte, is grounded in oral traditions that may seem exotic to certain viewers, the movie is really about the universal power of storytelling regardless of tongue — and how it can be used as a way to survive. Though hampered by some shaky third-act visual effects, "Night of the Kings" is through and through an intoxicating and immersive visual experience even as it unfolds almost like a filmed play.

Read IndieWire's full review.

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