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Qasim Ali
Seattle University

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Short Films on the Big Screen: The 2022 Sundance Short Film Tour

Madden Armstrong, Staff Reporter

On a rainy winter night, the movie theater is a welcome escape. Film enthusiasts flocked to the Northwest Film Forum (NWFF) Jan. 11 and 12 in two sold-out screenings of the 2022 Sundance Film Festival Short Film Tour, which showcased seven of the best shorts of the year in one continuous, 95-minute screening.

The seven films span multiple mediums: five are live-action, one animated and the other made entirely with paper puppets. The short made with puppets, “Stranger than Rotterdam with Sarah Driver,” is the only short for the 2022 selection that is a documentary, detailing the smuggling of a controversial film from the United States to a film festival in the Netherlands. The others are works of fiction that allow the viewer to peer into other lives, or other worlds entirely.

As a medium, short films foster creativity through their time constraints. A short is a film that runs for less time than feature-length or 40 minutes. Each of the films in the Sundance Film Festival Short Film Tour pack an emotional punch and do so in twenty minutes or less. Animated short “Goodbye, Jerome!” does so in eight minutes, the shortest film of the bunch, and leads the viewer through the afterlife as a man looks for his long-lost wife.

The medium is further restricted by budget, as many filmmakers create shorts with limited materials at their disposal to build their repertoire and someday make the transition to a feature-length film.

Short films are more than a stepping-stone in a filmmaker’s career, though. They were critical to the history and success of film in its earliest forms. Before the movie theater, locales known as parlors or nickelodeons were gathering places for early viewers to enjoy “one-reelers,” films known for their brevity that were viewed back-to-back with other short films.

John Trafton, professor of film studies at Seattle University, specializes in film history, music festivals and film aesthetics. He is also a board member for the Seattle Social Justice Film Festival and the Seattle International Film Festival. Trafton sees the success of film festivals and the success of independent films as inherently intertwined. Festivals are often the arenas in which amateur filmmakers can become prominent, and Sundance is no exception.

“Sundance, like any other major film festival, is a way to showcase new films. It’s essentially a trend forecaster and reference point for critics and fans,” Trafton said.



Jordie Simpson

Sundance Shorts Tour poster from the 2022 film festival hung up alongside the Northwest Film Forum logo.

NWFF has hosted the Sundance Film Festival Short Film Tour annually since 2015, along with four tours that showcase films from the Sundance Institute Indigenous Shorts Tour. In addition to hosting screenings, NWFF also hosts Sundance Institute workshops for aspiring filmmakers to hone their craft with tips on creating short films, documentaries and other filmmaking techniques.

Rana San, Artistic Director at NWFF, has watched the turnout increase for the short film tour with each passing year. The strength of the 2022 program is apparent from the first short, “Warsha,” which brings us into a migrant worker’s daydream as he labors at a dangerous construction job, showing the viewer a protagonist that hardly speaks but instead dances in an aerial act atop a crane to escape the menial labor he undertakes to survive.

“‘Warsha’ by Dania Bdeir is enthralling and sets the scene for the lushness that ensues with the rest of the shorts. I admire how much the film communicates with limited dialogue,” San said.

Aly Ansbacher, fourth-year sociology major and film minor at Seattle University, sees a short’s runtime as a careful balance: packing a story too full leaves it feeling cluttered, and removing content risks the film’s message feeling diluted.

She finds short films to be an accessible way into independent cinema by offering small, thought-provoking escapes. In-person film festivals have been a rare occurrence over the past three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading many to turn to online festival screenings or even YouTube and TikTok.

“YouTube is such a wonderful tool, but TikTok is also doing wonders for us. The elaborate editing and stories coming out of TikTok creators is kind of surprising, with TikTok recently updating to three minute videos. That could be a short movie that’s three minutes... it’s also a good spot to advertise short films,” Ansbacher said.

Short films are often overshadowed by feature-length films due to limited release in theaters but should not be overlooked due to their runtime. Events like the Sundance Film Festival Short Film Tour allow viewers to dip their toes into a new film format within the familiar theater environment in an experience that is less than two hours long.

The future for the Sundance Film Festival includes their feature-length program which will begin screening Jan. 19.