
On Their Own

THREE FEMALE-CENTRIC FEATURES AT SUNDANCE BEAR THE FRUITS OF A CLOSE DP/DIRECTOR PARTNERSHIP.

BY VALENTINA VALENTINI

Fifty percent of Sundance's entire slate this year was directed by women. And if that doesn't immediately resonate, consider that in Sundance's 25-plus-year history of leading the indie world as a haven for marginalized filmmakers, it's the first time festival programmers have hit gender parity. (The rest of the industry is woefully behind, but that's an article for another day.)

Not only were half of the films at Sundance 2021 made by women, but the stories were also themed around female characters, who had complex issues and offered deeply moving narratives. Three films shot by Local 600 Directors of Photography showcased these

themes, supplying intimate visuals, intuitive movements, and aesthetic worlds that complemented each woman's journey.

The U.S. Dramatic Competition film *CODA* (which smashed all previous sales records for a single feature at Sundance – \$25 million from Apple+) featured Director of Photography Paula Huidobro's re-teaming with writer/director Sian Heder after their 2016 Sundance hit *Tallulah* (ICGmagazine.com: *Ladies Night?*). Huidobro supplied beautifully organic visuals for this story about a deaf family and their blossoming teenage daughter, who is hearing and struggles with choosing between ambition for herself and loyalty to her family. In the

Premieres section, Nanu Segal, BSC, worked with a first-time feature writer-director Kate Tsang on *Marvelous and the Black Hole*, which weaves a fantastical tale of a young girl who turns to magic after the death of her mother. Also in Premieres, longtime Sundance veteran Bobby Bukowski shot Robin Wright's feature directorial debut, *Land*, about a mother and wife mourning a tragic loss.

Each cinematographer's close working relationship with their director supported the theme of a woman in crisis who is working through sadness, grief and familial challenges.

We asked the three pairs to expand upon their collaborations.



NANU SEGAL, BSC, SHOOTING ON AN L.A.
FOR MARVELOUS AND THE BLACK HOLE
PHOTO COURTESY OF NANU SEGAL

CODA

For director Sian Heder, creating a strong sense of place in *CODA* (an acronym for “child of deaf adults”) was important. The story – a remake of the French-language film *La Famille Bélier* – is set in Gloucester, a working-class Massachusetts coastal town where fishing is the dominant trade, and families rise or fall on each season’s catch. Heder says she chose nostalgic spots from her childhood summers in the area.

“We were lucky to shoot in a quarry that was the same one Sian used to swim in as a child,” reveals Huidobro, who used the Sony VENICE at 6K with ARRI Signature Prime lenses to create a realistic, natural look. “That was also a challenging location but had an incredible beauty and was a magical setting for Ruby’s [Emilia Jones] and Miles’ [Ferdia Walsh-Peelo] first kiss.”

As Heder adds: “The sense of place and community was very important. The ocean, the fish, the people – we also wanted to visually capture Ruby’s love for music, the complexities of being a hearing child in a deaf family and falling in love for the first time. The cinematography had to be simple and real, hoping that the beauty and sincerity would come across more from the landscapes or the emotion of our characters.”

Another aspect of *CODA*’s authentic look was shooting at sea. They had three days on a working fishing boat, and because of coastal regulations could only catch a certain number of fish in federal waters three miles from the coast. That meant a lot of complicated logistics, including real fish, actors learning how to properly catch and process them, handheld cameras and a crane on a nearby boat, as well as several seasick crewmembers.

Scenes shot entirely in American Sign Language (ASL) were a new experience for both Huidobro and Heder; it meant that the film’s cinematic language had to be tweaked to catch the nuances of the silent communication. Often a director’s instinct will be to close in on an intense moment, of which there are many in *CODA*, or to have a character throw a line over their shoulder as they walk out of a room. But with ASL conversations, people are looking directly at each other, especially during arguments.

“Paula and I were invested in finding a cinematic language that honors deaf culture and the way ASL works as a language,” notes Heder, who met Huidobro during an AFI Directing Workshop for Women. They’ve since done two short films, *Tallulah* and AppleTV+’s *Little America (Hidden Nation)*. Their careers have progressed in parallel fashion – Heder describes it as both a familiar and familial working relationship, explaining that her sister, Thyra Heder, has been her storyboard artist on all of the same projects, and often it’s just her, Thyra and Paula shot-listing and brainstorming together.

“Our careers have continued to develop together, and we have always pushed each other creatively,” Huidobro concludes. “We have established a shorthand and really enjoy working together, spending time shot-listing and discussing the look of the movie and the emotional journey of the characters. We can both relate to Ruby’s story.”



PHOTOS BY SEACIA PAVAO / COURTESY OF THE SUNDANCE INSTITUTE



MARVELOUS AND THE BLACK HOLE

When Nanu Segal signed on to *Marvelous and the Black Hole*, she'd read the script twice because she wanted to make sure that the fondness she felt for Sammy (Miya Cech, above) the first time wasn't just a fluke. And it wasn't. A contrast between Sammy's everyday life and her internal world spoke to Segal, who enjoys offbeat character-driven work, like the Sundance 2018 NEXT-section feature *An Evening with Beverley Luff Linn* and Film4's *Old Boys*.

"Her demons, the pain she's carrying around, and the complications of coming of age," notes Segal, "[I wanted to] visually reflect all those sides of her." Segal used an ALEXA Mini with Cooke Xtal Express anamorphic lenses to create a bit of magic to match Sammy and Margot's (Rhea Perlman) practical magic. And this tapped into first-time feature writer-director Kate Tsang's desire for a cinematographer who could bring something special to familiar places. As they venture into Sammy's imagined world, Segal switched to spherical – Panavision legacy prime lenses, Super Speeds.

"This film has a realistic grounded space that Sammy occupies and also a fantastical space," offers Tsang. "We wanted to build those two distinct feelings, so her home is cooler, starker. But when she goes into her head, those are full of spectacle, even in black and white; at Margot's home, too, it's warmer, colors shine

brighter. It was important for the visuals to communicate Sammy's [altering] emotional state in certain spaces."

Another way in which Segal and Tsang achieved this was by changing the aspect ratio from 2.39:1 to 16:9 so that Sammy's world literally opens up in her own mind.

"Having the black cinema bars on the top and bottom of the screen was a way to communicate her trapped-ness," Tsang continues. "So that when she does have those fantastical escapist scenes, removing those bars shows that for her, fantasy was a means of getting away from where she was."

Though the project was the first time Segal and Tsang worked together, both say the passion they shared for Sammy's story – a character neither felt they'd seen on screen before – helped them to achieve their goals. And while Tsang notes that Segal was taking a risk in working with a first-time feature director, Segal assures her that every time she shoots a new feature, it feels like her own first feature.

"We were on the same page from the beginning with all of the visual influences," Tsang concludes. "I'd made a look book and Nanu made her look book, and when we compared them, there was so much [overlap]. It was a very easy collaboration because ideas were always flowing."

Though first-time feature director Robin Wright wasn't initially going to star in *Land*, timing dictated the decision for the Golden Globe-winning actress. What resulted was an intimate and physically grueling story where the camera, operated almost always in handheld mode by Director of Photography Bobby Bukowski, acted as an appendage to Wright's haunted widow, Edee.

"I wanted the viewer to literally feel like they were going on this journey [with Edee]," says Wright, who first met Bukowski on *Rampart* in 2011 and habitually asked him questions about lighting, cameras, filters, and lenses in a continual education of what goes on behind the camera. Or as Bukowski describes it: "She was collecting everything for her ultimate goal of being a director."

Bukowski says that given the nature of the project – long days (and nights) inside a cabin built at lower elevation in Alberta, Canada and moved up to the film's nearly 8,000-foot position – there was no one better suited to capture Wright's vision (along with a skeleton crew). An avid camper and hiker, Bukowski wrote a love letter to Wright about Mother Nature, delving deeply into what the script meant to him. The letter resonated with the director on a personal level, who says the film was "an antidote to the ugliness of the last four years in America" and a humanistic study in loss and grieving.

"Bobby has always had great female friends," describes Wright, who directed many episodes of Netflix's Emmy-winning drama *House of Cards* before leaping into a feature. "[I needed someone] in the cabin that I could do an emotional scene with; someone who could just walk with me, next to me, be in it together. [We would] clear the set and it was just him and me."

For the flashbacks, Wright ended up deciding that less is more. They focused on what Wright calls *elliptical memories* – scenes where the light is blown out and there's no audio, where the visuals sort of bleed into one another, and clarity only comes in a flash. Visual references for these moments came from *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, shot by Janusz Kaminski. "We didn't need those flashback scenes to show her past [clearly]," Wright continues. "We felt the elliptical memories pulled the viewer in much more. Again, you're riding this journey with her, inside her head."

One of Bukowski's biggest contributions was his suggestion not to build the cabin on a set, which was the original plan, but rather on location. Wright says it was the right choice, despite the challenges of filming in a remote and rural place. There were no light sources other than the windows in the cabin,

LAND





PHOTO BY DANIEL POWER/FOCUS FEATURES

and Bukowski operated mostly handheld on the ALEXA Mini to stay as close to Edee as possible.

Bukowski also slept in the cabin after each day's shooting to capture B-roll of the sunsets and first light, animals passing by (including bears!), or the first snow without footprints. The small crew had to shift gears based on the constantly shifting weather, yet they managed to capture all four seasons in 29 days of shooting with only a week hiatus as they waited for winter.

"[I wanted] to use the landscape in a way that represented the internal response that [Edee] was having," concludes Bukowski, known for his work on *The Messenger*, *99 Homes*, and *Rosewater* (ICGmagazine.com: *See No Evil*). "We tried to show how small she was in relation to that landscape, her trying to surmount this thing that's much larger than herself. As the story progresses, I started to bring the camera lower, including the ground or having her foregrounded by trees, to integrate her to be more a part of the landscape instead of separate from it." 🌍