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Age Appropriate? Sundance's Women Filmmakers Come Next

Patricia White

When **Desirée Akhavan** took the stage for the premiere of her film *Appropriate Behavior* in the Sundance Film Festival's "Next" section, she remarked that while many young women fantasize about their wedding day, her lifelong dream was to screen a feature film at Sundance. "Welcome to my wedding!" the first-time filmmaker greeted the crowd. Her marriage detour resonated in part because she identifies as bisexual and was speaking in Utah, where just a few months before, the right of same-sex couples to marry was suddenly granted, and just as suddenly rescinded. But it is also exemplary of the skewed take on female-coded rites of passage on the part of young women directors coming into their own at the festival this year.

Akhavan's audience gave a warm reception to her chronicle of the cringe-worthy misadventures in romance, sex, housing, and underemployment of Shirin, a twenty-something Iranian American college graduate in Brooklyn much like, and played by, Akhavan herself. Akhavan's commanding presence exudes warmth and wit as Shirin, pining for her ex-lover Maxine, makes a game effort to bounce back by dating men, women—and both at the same time, in a hilarious *ménage à trois* scene. Described by her smug brother as "a sexually confused narcissist," Shirin would fit right in on Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls*, with its feminist, liberal-arts college grad vibe. But with her loving, ironic portrait of Shirin's family and their community of well-to-do Persians in New Jersey, Akhavan deserves more than a designation as the "next"—queer and ethnic—version of Dunham. After all, "girls" is a plural noun with room for many different visions, and Sundance, a festival usually driven by "buzz" about males, actually revealed a bit of a *Girls* vibe shadowing the 2014 festival: Dunham herself even showed up in Joe Swanburg's *Happy Christmas*. But it remains curious that the word "girls," which second-wave feminism taught us to stop using along

with terms like "secretarial pools" and "coeds", has come back to brand the artistic self-examination of the Title IX generation.

One reason of course is that "girls" can be sexy. This year's "Next" section proved to be so as well. *Appropriate Behavior* is one of three raunchy comedies about underemployed young women in New York featured in the section for (low-budget) digital filmmaking and innovative storytelling. Just thinking of Madeleine Olnek's lesbian prostitution comedy *The Foxy Merkins* as a riposte to last year's Sundance drama on this burning subject, Stacie Passon's *Concussion*, had me already amused. Sadly, however, the film misfires in tone and address, despite funny bits by East Village talents and the bull's-eye of taking Talbots for granted as a soliciting spot. Gillian Robespierre's well-received *Obvious Child* features oversharing comedian Jenny Slate as an oversharing comedian who schedules an abortion for Valentine's Day. Although the representation of female directors in the main US competitions at Sundance was a disappointment this year after a record achievement of gender parity in both dramatic and documentary categories in 2013, half of the films in the edgier, cheaper "Next" category were by women. It seems women waiting to step into the full glare of the independent film spotlight are being told: "You're next." But there's also something to be said for dwelling in the "experimental" phase, or what might be compared to what J. Halberstam calls "queer time," unscripted by the normative life narrative of marriage, reproduction, death. Certainly a new spin on prolonged adolescence is a recurrent theme of this work.

For "girls" is also popular because women who were taught as girls by consumer culture to feel entitled now find themselves infantilized by the current economic and political climate. Film scholar Diane Negra refers to the perpetual time crisis of female citizen/consumers—rush to grow up; rush to get pregnant; panic about aging—as the "new postfeminist life cycle." If this pace has slowed down some with the economy, the upside is that there is quite a range of work by young women telling the story differently.

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Sirin (Desiree Akhavan) in *Appropriate Behavior*. Photo by Chris Teague

Interestingly, this Sundance edition also saw strong representation by women directors in the “Premieres” section, where Lynn Shelton, apparently having maxed out of the Dramatic Competition with last year’s *Touchy Feely*, introduced her sixth feature, *Laggies*. Only at Sundance could the slacker aesthetic be represented so industriously! Acknowledging the role of the festival in making marquee names of filmmakers like Shelton and Nicole Holofcener is an important corrective to its historical association with male auteurs—two of whom were celebrated this year, with a twentieth anniversary screening of Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* (1994) and Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* as a hot ticket premiere. Shelton is doing her own level best to keep up, and *Laggies* is a funny and alarming take on the future of nice white middle-class girls.

Shelton’s highest budget film to date, *Laggies* features a very funny Keira Knightley and a fantastic Chloë Grace Moretz as . . . friends. Primary female friendship, however banal in life, is almost as rare in film in the era of the Bechdel test as it was in fiction in 1929, when Virginia Woolf warned of the shock likely to greet her words: “Chloe liked Olivia.” First-timer Andrea Seigel wrote the film’s polished screenplay, a departure from Shelton’s habitual improvisatory ways of working, and the result is evidence



Chloe Moretz and Keira Knightley in *Laggies*.

Photo by Barbara Kinney & Laggies Pictures LLC

of a friendly collaboration. In plot and performance, *Laggies* hits all the screwball beats, even as it gives us room to question the social conventions they ultimately reinforce. Set, as are her other films, in Shelton’s hometown of Seattle, *Laggies* is a fine example of the recent rapprochement between indie women’s films and commercial chick flicks—it opens with a bridesmaids’ party and ends with a prom. Thematically regressive, is it also ideologically so? Not necessarily.

Appalled by the behavior of the smug marrieds among her own group of high school friends, and by the revelation of her father's peccadilloes, Megan becomes a runaway bridesmaid, putting a safe distance between herself and her fiancé's vision of their future. She buys liquor for a group of underage kids and ends up drinking it with them. Hooking up with the sensible Annika (Moretz), she goes underground in an extended sleepover: her fiancé thinks she's at a self-actualization seminar.

There is no socially sanctioned script for the connection between the slacker Megan and the wise-beyond-her-years child of divorce (and of divorce lawyer Craig, played by Sam Rockwell) Annika. If erotic connection is still unthinkable, they are soon enough slotted into mother-daughter roles. This works *functionally*—Megan can drive, Megan can “pass” for a parent at a teacher conference—but not *affectively*, since there is never any love lost on mothers within the female regression narrative. As Annika's absent mom (turned Victoria's Secret model) recounts her own disappointment: “There's no such thing as a cool mom.” Megan and Annika clearly like each other, so their bond must be something else: Shelton admits to finding her inspiration in *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971).

As the plot goes through its paces, Megan shifts from *in loco parentis* to actually hooking up with Craig, thus finally literalizing and legitimizing a maternal relationship. The union brings about the generic restoration of community and order—it's satisfying from a rom-com perspective, but we can't help but see Megan's fate as somewhat grim. In effect, she's marrying Dad and still living at home. With the Electra complex guiding the film's erotic resolution, and sleepovers defining Megan's social world, *Laggies* really has no place for adult women.

Except in the audience, of course. *Laggies* lets the “girls” throw in their lots together and offers potential for wider solidarity. A different payoff than the clichéd shot of Craig pulling Megan into the house, which she has never really left, comes through the arrival of Misty (Kaitlyn Dever), Annika's tough best friend, knocking at the door to take Megan to the prom.

As I will explore below, a similar double message—female solidarity, albeit with male order intact—comes from offscreen advocacy for gender equality in film that is based largely on industry advancement. I have been looking to films for different versions of the female/feminist legacy. While so far the issue has been taken for comedy, two women's dramas at Sundance told from girls' points of view depict previous generations more equitably.

We finally meet a competent adult woman in *Infinitely Polar Bear*, Maya Forbes's touching autobiographical film about girlhood in 1970s class- and race-divided Boston. Zoe Saldana plays a young mother who leaves for New York to start a career in finance because she can't get a break at home. Her husband Cam (Mark Ruffalo) may be Boston Brahmin—but he's crazy, and she's black. As told from the point of view of the elder daughter Amelia (Imogene Wolodarsky), the film invests its affective energy in Ruffalo's remarkable performance as their bipolar dad, not in exploring Saldana's predicament or that of being a mixed-race family at that volatile place and time. Cam is a great cook and a terrible housekeeper; his series of spectacularly battered cars and his myriad unfinished projects reflect his inability to complete his own reformation. His manias humiliate his children, but they are also magical ruptures in the everyday. The audience comes to savor them as well; in comparison, time with Mom is something of a buzzkill.

Like *Infinitely Polar Bear*, Sophie Hyde's debut fiction feature *52 Tuesdays* turns on a daughter being left with her father while her mother takes care of something important. But *52 Tuesdays* brackets that time with Dad; the film is structured around sixteen-year-old Billie's (Tilda Cobham-Hervey) weekly Tuesday evening visits home during the year her mother (Del Herbert-Jane) transitions gender. Quite tightly structured, in fact. The film itself was made via a series of Tuesday appointments in Adelaide, Australia—weekly consecutive shoots over the course of a year, with mostly first-time actors, scripted as they went along. The successful result is at once controlled and unpredictable, quotidian and dramatic, formalist and realist.

52 Tuesdays is a full-on depiction of that fraught negotiation of autonomy between mother and daughter that informs feminism and classical melodrama alike. But while affect is by no means banished, it's weighed and balanced—put under unnatural scrutiny. One Tuesday Billie and James meet for dim sum; on another, Billie fails to show up for James's top surgery. An involving cast of supporting characters shows that the pair can't go it alone anymore than a film can be completed without a crew.

Director and co-writer Sophie Hyde and writer Matthew Cormack of the collective Closer Productions invented the film's structure in advance of creating characters who would inevitably undergo important changes in a year's time. While this approach could have positioned trans subject matter as a plot gimmick, the filmmakers' process of collaboration with Herbert-Jane, the gender nonconforming actor cast in the role of James, and the trans community,



Billie (Tilda Cobham-Hervey) and her mother (Del Herbert-Jane) in *52 Tuesdays*. Photo Courtesy of Visit Films

ensures it is germane to the tale and its telling. Who says there is no such thing as a cool mom?

For her part, Cobham-Hervey's presentation of Billie's character transforms the introspection of female adolescence into a motor of narrative art, much like Dunham or Akhavan. She narrates her year and her feelings about her mum in a series of speeches taped in what looks like the confession room of a reality show, splicing it together with footage of her weekly erotic "games" with a pair of schoolmates, one male, one female. Becoming a woman, becoming a man: both are portrayed with equal measures of demystification and narrative investment. Pacing the stories over a whole year means that the film indulges neither the heightened drama of female adolescence nor the sensationalism of a "sex change" narrative. Agency is built into the character arcs. In this movie, not only does Billie have a future, so does James. By refusing to conform to genre even as it tells a generational narrative, *52 Tuesdays* provides a new take on the "postfeminist life cycle."

I can't help but think that the emotional realism of *52 Tuesdays*, to say nothing of the inventive form and its rare-enough focus on the "B" and "T" in LGBT, are owed in part to the quite different conditions under which women—and independent filmmakers more generally—work in Australia. With the support of the South Australian Film Corporation, the collaborative, year-long shoot allowed for an intentional focus on filmmaking as process and labor. Hyde took home the directing award in the World Cinema Drama Competition, one of few prizes to go to a woman's film at Sundance this year.

Perhaps the fact that this year women were also better represented in the Sundance world competitions than in the US competitions with which the festival is most identified is due to more equitable distribution of resources in

subsidized industries. While the "cool moms" of indie filmmaking like Holofcener and Allison Anders may have paved the way for Shelton, Dunham, and the "next" group of directors, neither of them had it easy. It is important to frame the fact that women have been "laggies" in US independent fiction filmmaking in institutional, rather than familial, terms.

Sundance Institute Executive Director Keri Putnam launched The Women Filmmakers Initiative in conjunction with Women in Film Los Angeles to do just that. The nonprofit Sundance Institute is one of few US sites with the power and standing to begin to redress the unequal representation of women and men behind the camera. High numbers of annual submissions and selections for the festival as well as applicants and participants in the Sundance Institute labs provide a treasure trove of data. Under the direction of Director of Special Projects and Senior Programmer Caroline Libresco, the Initiative began by analyzing the gender representation in Sundance festivals and set up a new mentorship program. This year, the second phase of research findings conducted by Stacy L. Smith and her team at USC's Annenberg School was presented at a luncheon hosted by new corporate partner, Dove.

While the first phase had found asymmetries in festival representation especially in narrative—women constituted only 16 percent of directors (a number, incidentally, twice that of top-grossing Hollywood films)—the data collected this year from the labs represented more parity. (The full report is available online at sundance.org.) Over a twelve-year period, women constituted nearly 40 percent of the participants in the labs sponsored by the Feature Film Program and the Documentary Program combined. Significantly, these filmmakers were also found to be completing and exhibiting films at the same rate as their male peers after their support by the institute. The findings confirm that there are plenty of women filmmakers making plenty of films. But institutional support is key. Once the free market takes over, women filmmakers are too often caught in another kind of regressive narrative, finding it difficult to sustain careers.

But the shadow of Hollywood—of corporate capitalism—hangs a little heavy over the proceedings. With new Dove sponsorship, the initiative found itself in the position of aligning its goals with "redefining beauty." Surely the ambitions of independent filmmaking are more far-reaching. On the one hand, the debate about women's filmmaking has been stalled too long in a liberal dialogue that feels like a romance with Hollywood. The labs, on

the other hand, work because they function like arts funding should: they are equitably and professionally administered by experienced staff—an impressive number of whom are women and feminists—and emphasize personal vision and innovation “free from commercial and political pressures.”

Meanwhile, the women’s films reviewed here work out their ambivalence about female and feminist legacies through the collapse of generational succession: twenty-somethings who refuse to grow up; actual girls, like Amelia

in *Infinitely Polar Bear* and Annika in *Laggies*, who seem to be doing the parenting; narrative estrangement that allows for a new equality in *52 Tuesdays*. We could make the analogy to the deep and rich, yet stop-and-start, history of women’s film culture: there is no single, agreed-upon genealogy, no entitlement to pass on from one group of women directors to another, but plenty going on here and now. Maybe we advocates should, like the films, forgo the conventional rites of passage. Instead of “next,” one by one, how about *now*, together?