

'2023 Sundance Film Festival Short Films' Review: Small Bites'

Nicolas Rapold

From animated partygoers to real families embracing a name, this basket of goodies includes seven titles, among them comedy, tragedy and documentary.



It's party time for the teenagers with the light-switch faces in "Inglorious Liaisons," one of the Sundance Film Festival shorts packaged to be shown in American theaters. Credit...Vivement Lundi/Zorobabel and Arte

Every year, features from the Sundance Film Festival can become critical favorites — "Past Lives" is a notable example — but the fest's shorter works can fade away. The "2023 Sundance Film Festival Short Film Tour" brings a seven-film omnibus to cinemas across the country, and Kayla Abuda Galang's "When You Left Me on That Boulevard" alone is reason enough to see it.

This lovely and funny short portrays a Filipino American family's Thanksgiving get-together through the eyes of Ly, an introverted teenager who's a daydreamer even before she gets stoned with her cousins. It's a film that contains both bustling images and delicate vibes, inner-voice stillness and subtle soundscapes, all of which can flourish in a movie theater.

Galang seems especially drawn to dialing into private spaces in social situations, for example when Ly talks about her boyfriend as if to herself, until a cut reveals she's surrounded by family members. Ly can sound endearingly oblivious, but instead of having the actor play that tendency for cheap laughs, the writer-director picks up on the warmth in the room.

Galang also looks out for different ways of showing how the family is together, whether it's karaoke — the short's title comes from a song Ly's aunt belts out — or a cool split shot of kids and parents hanging out on either side of a wall. If past Sundance collections are any guide, this short might preview a feature, and Galang's immersive exploration of inner and outer spaces makes one eager to watch what comes next.

Family bonds weather transitions in a number of the shorts. "Parker," from Catherine Hoffman and Sharon Liese, the sole documentary in this selection, teases out a rich, arduous history of Black experience in a decision by members of a family in Kansas City to adopt the same surname. Interviews with the parents and their children show the love, and the fears and trauma, that can be inscribed in a name, and the peace of mind and unity promised by their choice.

Resembling vérité nonfiction, Crystal Kayiza's "Rest Stop" follows a Ugandan-American mother traveling with her three children to join her estranged partner. Kayiza dwells on scenes that a feature might relegate to a montage, the better to sit with feeling unsettled and tired and scattered, but pushing ahead to another future. Liz Sargent's "Take Me Home" is also a portrait in becoming, as an overwhelmed, cognitively disabled woman (played by Sargent's real-life sister, Anna) sends an S.O.S. to her sister after years of relying on their ailing mother.

Comedies are well-represented in the collection: "Pro Pool" feels like a trailer for itself as it churns through retail workplace humor, while the stop-motion animation "Inglorious Liaisons" fondly portrays a goofy teen party, wherein people have light switches for faces. But Aemilia Scott's shrewdly written, well-cast opener to the program, "Help Me Understand," turns a focus group of women testing detergent scents into a nervy experiment in hung-jury dynamics. Shifting gears from satire to a double-edged dissection of point of view, it's a snappy way of prepping viewers for the multiplicity of voices to follow.

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Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 27 minutes.

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