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## New York Film Festival #5: "Mudbound" and "Lady Bird"

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Here's my last batch of reviews from the 55th New York Film Festival. But events are still happening all weekend long, so if you're lucky enough to be nearby, check out what's happening. The closing night film is Woody Allen's *Wonder Wheel* and sadly I wasn't able to make a screening so just like everyone else, I'll be eager to hear what the buzz is for that one. On the bright side, I'm ending on a strong note: two good films by two female directors. Perhaps because Greta Gerwig is a first-time solo director, I find myself thinking of what she got right. And because director Dee Rees has mightily impressed with her debut *Pariah* and her Emmy winning HBO movie *Bessie*, I find myself thinking of how it could be even better.

**MUDBOUND** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**LADY BIRD** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**MUDBOUND** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Two of the hottest films coming out of this year's Sundance Film Festival were *Call Me By Your Name* and *Mudbound*. Both are hot Oscar tips and while I have many reservations about *Call Me By Your Name*, I was far more impressed by *Mudbound*. Director Dee Rees follows up her acclaimed HBO film *Bessie* with another period piece. I just wish it were great instead of merely good.

Based on the best-selling novel by Hillary Jordan, *Mudbound* is set around World War II. It gives equal weight to a string of characters, allowing each to take center stage via voice over and a focus on their story. Carey Mulligan is Laura, the spinsterish daughter of a well-off Southern family that seems all too pleased when a rough hewn but attentive Henry (Jason Clarke) comes a-courting. Laura is so unused to anyone noticing her at all that she is...well, not swept off her feet exactly but relieved to be imagining a life other than the dreary and limited one she seemed fated to live.

That genteel romance of convenience (he needs a wife, she needs rescuing) is sharply contrasted with the determined, back-breaking world of Mississippi tenant farmer Hap Jackson (Rob Morgan), his wife Florence (Mary J. Blige) and their family. They must struggle to survive yet that's not enough for Hap. He is a preacher

overseeing the construction of a church and he is the owner of a mule, which gives him the slim hope that they might earn more than they owe and slowly, precariously save up enough money to buy land of their own and escape the slavery-by-any-other-name existence they are trapped in now.

All too late Laura meets Henry's handsome, charming and far more relatable brother Jamie (a dashing Garrett Hedlund). You could be swept off your feet for good by Jamie and while there's nothing one can point to that marks him as a rake or untrustworthy, one can't help thinking it would be better to be ruined by Jamie than rescued by Henry.

Their distant worlds collide twice. First Henry impulsively buys farmland in Mississippi and drags Laura and their two little girls to a new life, tossing in his hateful, glowering father in the process. (Jonathan Banks miraculously keeps the virulent Pappy a real if dangerous character, rather than a caricature.) Then World War II upends everything. Jamie goes off to be a fighter pilot and Ronsel Jackson, the eldest son of Hap and Florence, becomes a tank commander, finding more respect and friendliness overseas than he ever did in his own country.

If war doesn't kill them, trying to adjust to civilian life just might. And always, the danger of bad weather, a minor accident or the illness of an animal can destroy the tenuous work of Henry or the fragile dream of owning his own land that is treasured by Hap.

Black soldiers who returned home were abused, beaten and sometimes lynched by whites who would

become enraged by the sight of them in uniform or merely acting with more dignity and self-worth than white people could bear. That's not strictly the issue here but it gives a sense of the dangers all black G.I.s faced who might foolishly expect service to their country might mean better conditions back home. You never doubt for a second the looming disaster that awaits Ronsel.

*Mudbound* is well acted, admirably shot, restrained and builds convincingly to a dreadful, brutal climax no less upsetting for being so very easy to predict. Much is implied rather than said, all to its credit. So why did I respect the film more than love it? Perhaps it's because while much is implied by a look between Hap and Florence or the tension on a face as Ronsel says why yes he will apologize for daring to try and walk out the front door of the local general store, too much is said. Too many voice overs spell out what we've already gathered. Even the modest hopeful nature of the ending seems too soon, as if *Mudbound* wants to assure that while things are bad they might and will get better.

Its violent climax is unquestionably earned by history and the facts of the KKK. But fairly or not it felt like a drama turned into melodrama, however righteous its message and the need to remember. I was more torn by the "minor" indignities of the everyday existence of the Jacksons, how saying "no" to white folk — any white folk - was dangerous and unthinkable. Or rather, they thought, you knew they thought it but they knew it was not wise to act on it. For me that was more wrenching than the brutal violence at the climax. I felt like I was left off the hook — it's easy to condemn the KKK and vigilante hate. I was more moved when the film allowed me to merely experience the day to day brutality, the feeling of sinking deeper and deeper in the mud and knowing that even if you escaped, even if you were the one in a thousand lucky enough to get away, you might never wash it off.

### **LADY BIRD** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

While I had the highest of expectations for *Mudbound*, I was caught pleasantly unawares by Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*. She wrote and directed it after various collaborations on screenplays and a stint co-directing behind the camera (not to mention of course her acting career). The highest compliment I can pay this movie is that despite all sorts of familiar filmic elements — a dash of John Hughes here, a soup on of *Juno* there — that it feels...real, life-sized, *genuine*, even as certain bits hint at the broader and more obvious film it might have been.

Our heroine is a rebellious teenager named Lady Bird (Saoirse Ronan) — self-named that is. Her "real" name is Christine but she yearns to be the star of her own life, to fight against the strictures of her provincial existence and the suffocatingly intense demands of her mother Marion (Laurie Metcalfe). Lady Bird attends Catholic school but refuses to fit in. She rolls her eyes at an anti-abortion lecture and plays a prank on one nun by adding "Just Married To Jesus" and lots of tin cans to her car a la newlyweds. She hides her modest background from the rich kids and does anything and everything to be a "character."

But unlike say the titular character of *Juno* or a zillion other teen roles, Lady Bird remains resolutely genuine, despite herself and her all too familiar failings. Whatever happens to Lady Bird — dumping her best friend Julie

(Beanie Feldstein) when cooler kids come calling, dealing with a boyfriend who respects her too much to touch her breast already or watching her dad's life fall apart when he's fired from his job — she may be funny or morose or self-pitying, but she's still an honest to goodness person. Credit Gerwig's nuanced screenplay, smart editing (especially what was left on the cutting room floor, I imagine) and Ronan's wonderfully unflattering performance. She wins our affection by never trying to do so.

The plot is certainly familiar, though it's dominated by the deliciously tense battles between Lady Bird and her mother, embodied to irritating perfection by Metcalfe. This gives the film its heart and soul — both women are flawed, make mistakes and learn, but they're never softened or reduced to a type. And while they come to a new understanding, it's not a pat one, even if the finale spells it all out a little too neatly.

It has a terrific cast and while the plot-lines are routine, they are handled nicely. Lucas Hedges is a treat as Lady Bird's dreamy drama class boyfriend (no points for figuring out why he won't go further). Timothée Chalamet has the less interesting part of a "bad boy" beatnik Lady Bird woos as part of her intro to the rich kids. In one small example of how nicely low-key the film remains, we know Lady Bird never really fits in with them. It comes to a head but the *really* devastating moment occurs when three of them are waiting to drive with her to prom. We overhear one of them casually refer to Lady Bird as weird and the rest agree. A lesser film would have them stage some elaborate prank — "You really thought I would take *you* to prom? Ha ha ha ha!" — but that offhanded comment is far more painful. She's not important enough to them to merit more than that.

Ronan is a delight from start to finish. She never smooths out Lady Bird into a lovable flake. And if you're wondering where she gets her stubborn, flinty personality, look no further than her mom. Metcalfe drives you bonkers when she can't seem to give this kid a break but you know life has never given her a break and she's doing precisely what she believes to be in the best interest of her daughter. These two stick in your brain long after the film is over.

Tracy Letts is his usual mopey self as her sweet, not-waving-but-drowning dad. Feldstein really shines as her best friend, never devolving into the stereotypical heavysset yet bubbly pal that others might have slid into but displaying her own charm and humanity. Secondary parts are filled with terrific actors like Lois Smith and Stephen McKinley Henderson as a priest/drama teacher. Some subplot involving his travails has been wisely cut. (I'd love an entire film starring him but this isn't his story.) They should have cut the one scene between him and Metcalfe that remains of it since we're only confused. Worse is a dum offshoot of that plot in which a football coach takes over directing the next school play. We're given a jokey, dumb scene with him prepping the kids to tackle Shakespeare as if he's diagramming a forward pass. It's exactly the sort of schtick you'd find in a thousand lesser teen flicks and is precisely what Gerwig avoids the rest of the time.

The other minor misstep is a finale that spells out too neatly exactly how much Lady Bird has learned to appreciate about her mom and her hometown. Frankly, the movie had the perfect ending when she is at a college party, meets a guy and introduces herself. "That's it!" I thought happily, but the movie went on for another few extraneous minutes. That scene told us everything we needed to know about who Lady Bird was becoming. It's a credit to Gerwig that the scene is there in the first place and I expect her next film will build on the promise shown here.

**NYFF #1:** The Rider, Arthur Miller: Writer, The Other Side of Hope

**NYFF #2:** The Florida Project, BPM

**NYFF #3:** Wonderstruck, Last Flag Flying

**NYFF #4:** Call Me By Your Name, Voyeur

**NYFF #5:** Mudbound, Lady Bird

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