



20 of the best bets at the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival

By [Peter Howell](#) Movie Critic
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This year's edition of the Toronto International Film Festival is like one big mystery movie thanks to the many restrictions of the coronavirus.

The raging pandemic that has shut down many other fests — including bellwethers such as Cannes and Telluride — means that movie critics have had very few advance peeks at the films headed to TIFF. Normally by this time, I would have already seen 20 to 30 of the films on offer.

This year, I've seen only a couple of the 61 features and 36 shorts that will play TIFF 2020, which runs from Sept. 10 to 19.

So the 20 features I've identified as festival hot picks for TIFF 2020 are based on a combination of advance buzz, intriguing program notes and gut instinct, a combo I hope succeeds!

76 Days

COVID-19 is the most unwanted guest at TIFF this year, having already drastically changed the festival due to its pandemic ravages. But a better understanding of the disease would be welcome and this stealthy documentary credited to three directors — Hao Wu, Weixi Chen and “Anonymous” — goes right to the source for insights. Filmed on the ground in Wuhan, China, ground zero for the bug, it promises to reveal the frantic and too-little-too-late attempts to wrestle a viral tiger to the ground.

Ammonite

Francis Lee's drama of illicit romance, a potential Oscar contender starring Kate Winslet and Saoirse Ronan, was chosen for the 2020 Cannes Film Festival before the virus forced a

cancellation. Set in 1840s England, it's the tale of fossil hunter Mary (Winslet), who searches the Dorset coast for the remains of ancient sea creatures, toiling while male scientists (who are the real fossils) take credit for her work. Into Mary's world comes Charlotte (Ronan), a grieving wife whose life — and Mary's — is about to be changed.

Another Round

Thomas Vinterberg's drama of deliberate drunkenness sounds more like a comedy: at a boozy birthday bash for an uptight schoolteacher named Martin (Mads Mikkelsen), his pals propose they test an obscure philosophical theory about living life permanently pickled. Martin is normally a teetotaler, but he takes up the alcohol "experiment" and finds himself a changed man in ways both good and bad. Vinterberg directed Mikkelsen in the Oscar-nominated "The Hunt," so expect great things.

Bruised

Oscar winner Halle Berry makes her directorial debut as an MMA fighter on the downslide, trying to redeem herself as both a champion fighter and mother. Berry's Jackie has tried to keep it all together with a series of menial jobs, but when the opportunity suddenly arrives to return to "the only thing she is good at," she laces up the gloves again — but can she also prove her worth as mom to six-year-old Manny, the child she left behind? "Bruised" is screening at TIFF as a work in progress.

Concrete Cowboy

Adapting the young adult novel "Ghetto Cowboy," Ricky Staub's father-and-son drama stars Idris Elba as a Philadelphia cowboy named Harp and Caleb McLaughlin (TV's "Stranger Things") as his estranged teen son, Cole. It's certainly not the Wild West or the great open plains, but can Harp and Cole find a common path to ride on the rough streets of Philly? An intriguing setup for a family-themed film, which also provides a look into the real-life world and legacy of Black cowboys.

David Byrne's American Utopia

The pairing of former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne with director Spike Lee seems odd at the outset, with the former being famously distant and the latter very much in your face. So it will be fascinating to see what kind of alchemy they've concocted for Lee's screen adaptation of Byrne's recent hit Broadway musical, which as always with any Byrne endeavour is rich in percussion, dance and the kind of world-wise songs that make you think he's reading your mind.

The Disciple

TIFF co-head/artistic director Cameron Bailey cites this film by Mumbai writer/director Chaitanya Tamhane ("Court") as the one he's most excited about, in the Star's annual "Chasing the Buzz" poll. It's about a young singer Sharad (Aditya Modak), who is torn between his love of Indian classical music and his devotion to a mystical religious master named Maai, who demands the utmost discipline from his followers. Executive produced by Oscar winner Alfonso Cuarón, "The Disciple" sounds like a true discovery for this year's TIFF.

Falling

Viggo Mortensen does nothing by half measures. His directorial debut also has him writing and co-starring in the story of John (Mortensen), a gay man whose happy life is upended when he's obliged to care for his homophobic father, Willis (Lance Henriksen), whose anger and hatred hasn't been dimmed by advanced dementia. Can John learn to love the man who caused him so much pain growing up? We already have an answer about the film's worth from the applause it received at Sundance 2020.

Fireball: Visitors From Darker Worlds

No edition of TIFF, it seems, would be complete without at least one film from Werner Herzog, a man of indefatigable curiosity and energy. He could literally make a rock seem interesting, as he's ready to do with this latest doc about things from outer space. Having canvassed such topics as the creation of the internet, a man's grizzly bear obsession and fiery volcanoes, he turns his polymathic gaze upon asteroids. Herzog and co-director Clive Oppenheimer find a Norwegian jazz musician who collects micrometeorites: "It's like looking eternity in the eye."

Good Joe Bell

Reinaldo Marcus Green's family drama is the fact-based story of a man's cross-U.S. walk, starring Mark Wahlberg, but the reason for that trek is a story all its own. Wahlberg's Joe is a macho Oregon dude who can't quite accept the homosexuality of his son Jadin (Reid Miller). But when Jadin has to endure bullying at school, pushing him to thoughts of suicide, Joe steps up. He commences a cross-America walk to preach about the evil of bullying. Expect the best from screenwriters Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, who wrote "Brokeback Mountain."

I Am Greta

Two short years ago, few people had heard of climate change activist Greta Thunberg, who first grabbed headlines in her Swedish homeland at the age of 15 by staging a school strike outside her country's parliament. Today she's one of the most famous women in the world, as she challenges the United Nations and global politicians to get serious about promises to combat global warming. Swedish docmaker Nathan Grossman tracks the rapid rise of this green-powered skyrocket.

Inconvenient Indian

WE'RE DEPENDING ON YOU

Thomas King's award-winning historical excoriation "The Inconvenient Indian" conjured up many images of how Indigenous North Americans were first killed or shoved aside, and then abused and exploited by colonizers from other nations. These images — and much food for thought and calls for action — are brought vividly to the big screen in this documentary by Michelle Latimer, a filmmaker of Algonquin, Métis and French heritage. Author King makes for a convenient and excellent narrator.

Memory House

The TIFF program notes says this Brazilian drama, written and directed by Joao Paulo Miranda Maria, arrives "boasting some of the most mesmerizing cinematography at the

festival this year.” Sold! But the story intrigues, too: Cinema Novo stalwart Antonio Pitanga plays an Indigenous-Black man named Cristovam, a migrant worker who finds himself “lost in a decadent community.” As he discovers clues about his violent past, he must also deal with the violent present.

MLK/FBI

It’s long been known that J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI relentlessly spied on civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., looking for dirt to diminish King’s powerful message of racial justice, which Hoover dismissed as a “communist plot.” Sam Pollard’s documentary promises to fill in a lot of the blank of that vendetta, drawing on recently declassified FBI documents to thoroughly expose a campaign that former FBI director James Comey has rightly called “the darkest part of the bureau’s history.”

Nomadland

The new feature by Chloé Zhao (“The Rider”), a road drama of hard-times restlessness starring Frances McDormand and David Strathairn, will have its Sept. 11 world premiere at both the Toronto and Venice film fests, indicating high esteem by people in the know. It’s the fact-inspired tale of cash-strapped retirees finding their inner Jack Kerouac as they drive camper vans across America in search of gigs and cheap lodging. It will be fascinating to see how Zhao transforms documentary truth into dramatic fiction.

Notturmo

Shot over three years along the borders of Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria and Lebanon, Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary depicts ordinary people struggling to survive the upheavals of Middle East conflicts. From the director of “Fire at Sea,” an acclaimed doc about desperate migrants off the coast of Sicily, “Notturmo” is described in press notes as “something to ponder.” Former TIFF director Piers Handling called it his most eagerly anticipated TIFF 2020 film in the Star’s “Chasing the Buzz” poll.

One Night in Miami

This feature directing debut of Oscar-winning actress Regina King (“If Beale Street Could Talk”) dramatically imagines what might have happened had 1960s icons Cassius Clay (soon to become Muhammad Ali), Malcolm X, Sam Cooke and Jim Brown met to discuss the groundbreaking racial, social and cultural events of their time. The setting: a Miami hotel in February 1964. The situation: an explosive time of American racial reckoning, with obvious and urgent resonance for the America of today.

Spring Blossom

French writer/director/actor Suzanne Lindon’s feature debut is a coming-of-ager in which she also plays the lead role, a 16-year-old Paris schoolgirl who falls for an older man (Arnaud Valois), two lost souls in a match not quite made in heaven. That’s quite a combination to pull off for a first-time filmmaker, now 20, who was just 15 when she wrote the screenplay. But this film was chosen for the official selection of Cannes 2020, so it comes to Toronto with much promise.

Trickster

This is the other Michelle Latimer project at TIFF 2020, a TV series adapted from Eden Robinson's bestselling novel. It follows an enterprising Indigenous B.C. teen (impressive newcomer Joel Oulette) who is coping with family dysfunctions — an alcoholic mom, an addicted dad — while at the same time experiencing nattering ravens, scary doppelgangers and weird shape-shifters. Aren't these creatures figments of Indigenous lore, such as the title-teasing Trickster? TIFF will premiere the first two episodes of this six-part CBC series, which is set to air Oct. 7.

Wildfire

Irish writer/director Cathy Brady looks at “The Troubles” through the lens of two once-close sisters, Kelly (Nika McGuigan) and Lauren (Nora-Jane Noone), whose sudden reunification after a year apart is fraught with mystery and danger. Kelly left her small border town for a spell, but her problems didn't; meanwhile, Lauren settled down with marriage and a job. They've grown worlds apart, perhaps explosively so.

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