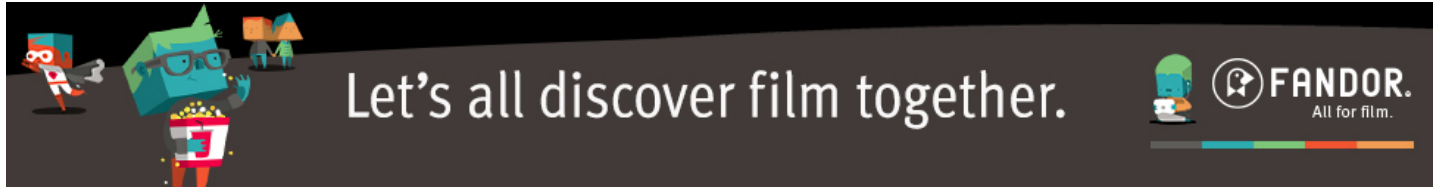




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[Exposition](#) March 14, 2014

## Scenes from South By Southwest's 2014 film festival

by [Genevieve Koski](#)

The South By Southwest film festival is a story within a story, a film festival that continues to grow in size and influence within a larger festival that itself grows exponentially larger and more influential with each passing year. (This year's film section alone hosted more than 200 features and shorts, spread over 11 venues, plus a slew of panels and special events.) The single day when the Interactive, Film, and Music branches of South By Southwest come together—sometimes referred to as Confluence Day, which fell this year on Tuesday, March 11—is when it becomes most apparent that any one person's SXSW experience represents only the tiniest fraction of potential experiences the festival offers; taking into account that I was only able to attend SXSW Film for three days out of the fest's nine-day run, that experience becomes even smaller, relatively speaking. Trying to take in and piece together all the festival had to offer in roughly 72 hours often felt like trying to build a raft out of wood shavings. It's hard to get a handle on an overarching "story" when you're one person, adrift in a sea of millions of potential stories.

Perhaps coincidentally, but more likely because of the mindset I was in, I kept seeing this theme of individuals grappling with huge, imposing circumstances in many of the films I saw in Austin. That's not surprising, given the premium that SXSW's organizers place on individuality and off-the-beaten-path visions. Those interests come together with another one of the fest's main interests—technology—in two of the highlights of my SXSW, both of which find individuals using everyday technology and out-of-the-box thinking to face down a big, intimidating obstacle. (Unless otherwise noted, all of these films received their world première at SXSW.)

On the narrative side of things, the moving Spanish relationship drama *10,000 KM (Long Distance)* centers on a couple spending a year apart while Alex (Natalia Tena, a.k.a. Osha from the *Game Of Thrones* television show) completes a photography residency in Los Angeles and her boyfriend of seven years, Sergei (David Verdaguer), stays behind in their Barcelona apartment. They conduct their relationship via video chat, Google Maps tours, Facebook posts, text messages, and email, all of which director Carlos Marques-Marcet integrates into the film's visual language in ways that add meaning beyond what's being said or typed onscreen. Alex's photography project involves taking photos of the many hidden antennas that dot California's landscape; at one point, the project takes her to Silicon Valley to photograph the headquarters of the different companies who facilitate her and Sergei's communication, and whose servers store the history of their long months spent apart. But *10,000 KM*'s most compelling element is the way it uses all those technological channels—or barriers, depending on your mindset—to tell an achingly human story. Alex and Sergei's long-distance relationship, and the movie, is bookended by two bravura long-take sequences—one in their Barcelona apartment, and the other in Alex's L.A. apartment. It's the only time Tena and Verdaguer physically share the screen, but their performances never seem separate from each other, since their chemistry is so deep. Tena and Verdaguer won a Special Jury Recognition for Best Acting Duo, and it's richly deserved; they turn what could have been a gimmicky, shallow premise into a heartfelt, often funny reflection of modern relationships that's universal in its well-realized specificity.



The documentary feature *Vessel* similarly benefits from its specificity, centering on a single, compelling figure at the center of a much larger issue. Dr. Rebecca Gomperts is the founder of the Women On Waves organization, which originated as a ship based out of the Netherlands that sails into international waters to provide safe medical abortions for women in countries where they are illegal. (In international waters, the laws of the ship's country of origin apply, and abortions are legal in the Netherlands.) The documentary—for which director Diana Whitten pieced together more than a decade's worth of footage, some of it donated by other filmmakers who never finished their own projects—covers the Women On Waves program from its 2001 launch, which resulted in an unsuccessful first attempt to aid women in Ireland, to its current-day iteration, in which the ship serves as more of a symbol for the work the organization does via its online outlet, Women On Web. *Vessel* lands squarely in the realm of advocacy documentary—at one point the film spells out, via animation, how Women On Web teaches women seeking abortions that they can induce one using the ulcer-prevention drug Misoprostol—but that actually works in the film's favor. The abortion angle is an effective emotional hook, especially when Whitten integrates heartbreaking emails and voicemails from desperate pregnant women seeking help. But *Vessel* is ultimately about the nature of advocacy, showing how Gomperts and her team adapt and respond to the challenges thrown at them. (*Vessel* also received a Special Jury Recognition for "Political Courage.") Much of Gomperts' time onscreen is spent discussing publicity and media tactics, embracing the philosophy, "The only bad press that exists is your obituary." She's shrewd and compassionate, more than willing to upset people in the name of providing what she considers an absolute civil right to women who have been denied it.

The HBO-produced documentary *The Case Against 8* (which premiered at Sundance) is much glossier than the scrappy *Vessel*, but it also puts a human face on a topic that's generated more than its fair share of controversy and media coverage. Or rather, human faces: *The Case Against 8* goes behind the scenes of the legal team that worked for five years to get Proposition 8 overturned by the California, and eventually U.S., Supreme Courts. The two same-sex couples who stepped forward as plaintiffs in the case against the state—Berkeley's Kristin Perry and Sandra Stier, and L.A.'s Paul Katami and Jeff Zarrillo—provide the beating heart at the center of a film that plays as a real-world legal procedural. But the star of the show ends up being conservative super-attorney Ted Olson, previously infamous in liberal circles for the victory he helped secure for George W. Bush in the 2000 Bush v. Gore court debacle. Adding to the legal intrigue is Olson's co-council, David Boies, who was Olson's opposing council in Bush v. Gore. This odd-couple pairing lends a lot of humor and humanity to an issue that's been hugely politicized, to the detriment of pretty much everyone it affects. Perry, Stier, Katami, and Zarrillo are among those people, and they emerge from the case, and the film, as everyday heroes, fighting—with the help of Olson, Boies, and their dedicated team—for their way of life as they try to continue living that life in the face of enormous public scrutiny and hatred. (Some of the voicemails Perry and Stier receive from Prop 8 proponents are stomach-churning.) The access filmmakers Ben Cotner and Ryan White had to the case behind the scenes provides a new, unseen angle on a story most Americans probably assume they've heard more than enough about. It's enormously entertaining and moving; the theater I watched it in was overcome with a sudden case of the sniffles several times over the course of the film.



*The Case Against 8* came to SXSW an already-established winner—it received great notices at Sundance, and already has a distributor in HBO, which will air the film in June. But the big newcomer success story to come out of SXSW might end up being the hipster-womanchild comedy *Fort Tilden*, which was awarded the festival's Grand Jury prize. *Fort Tilden* is of-the-moment, occupying the same pop-cultural space as TV shows like *Girls* and *Broad City*, and films like *Frances Ha*. *Fort Tilden*'s two protagonists somehow manage to be more grating and self-absorbed than 10 Hannah Horvaths combined as they spend a Tuesday blowing off what little commitments they have so they can make their way from their Williamsburg apartment to the beach and hang out with some guys they met at a party. While it's always nice to see a well-defined, close female friendship onscreen, *Fort Tilden*'s high marks on the Bechdel test don't render its main characters any more likable. Harper (Bridey Elliott) and Allie (Claire McNulty) are extremely passive-aggressive, maddeningly self-absorbed, and incapable to the point of infantilization: Both spend most of the movie wearing rompers and looking utterly bemused by everything around them, at one point watching a kid steal one of their bikes, but remaining too absorbed with discussing whether he's *actually* stealing the bike to go stop him. *Fort Tilden* is committed to taking its characters' most obnoxious faults to the extreme while exhibiting little to no interest in redemption for either of them; the SXSW jury apparently responded to that, but I found much of the humor far too parodic and easy. At this point, the "look at these hipster clowns" approach is too familiar and expected; it doesn't have nearly the satirical bite *Fort Tilden* seemingly thinks.

As far as SXSW's narrative world premières go, the odd little cult thriller *Faults* makes a virtue of its unfamiliarity and unexpectedness, keeping audiences guessing right up until its unsettling final reveal. Like the other narrative standouts I saw, *Faults* centers on a tremendous acting duo, in this case character actor Leland Orser as Ansel, a washed-up cult expert, and Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Claire, whose parents hire Ansel to deprogram her after she takes up with a mysterious organization known as Faults. Most of *Faults* takes place in a seedy motel room, as Ansel and Claire play a game of psychological cat-and-mouse, with Claire's not-quite-right parents (Chris Ellis and Suzan Averitt) providing complications from the room next door. *Faults* starts out seeming like a dark comedy about a washed-up, sad-sack cheapskate who tries to scam free meals from cheap hotels, and pockets any "complimentary" perk that isn't nailed down. Ultimately, though, the film winds up in much murkier, psychologically/supernaturally dramatic territory. Explaining how it gets there would be denying potential audiences much of what makes the film so bracing, but Orser and Winstead's performances are what really make the film's sharp left turn work.


Along the same lines, *Hellion*, which premiered at Sundance, turns on the paired central performances of first-time actor Josh Wiggins as Jacob, a 13-year-old budding delinquent in rural Southeast Texas and Aaron Paul as his troubled widower father, whose loving yet hands-off approach to parenting results in child-protective services sending Jacob's little brother Wes (Deke Garner) to live with his aunt (Juliette Lewis). *Hellion* colors inside the lines of its family-drama outline so neatly, it risks becoming rote—which isn't helped by its screamingly obvious Chekhov's-gun reveal—but writer-director Kat Candler creates a nice little world to move the pieces around in, one where an amateur motocross tournament represents Jacob's best bet for saving his family. (In his mind, at least.) Wiggins' soulful face is captivating all on its own, and his performance is admirably small and thoughtful for someone so young and inexperienced, while Paul brings a deep sadness and fundamental goodness to a character that could have been a standard deadbeat-dad figure.



### Also seen:


As one of SXSW's Headliners selections (along with *Chef*, *Neighbors*, *Joe*, and *Predestination*, none of which I was able to see), *Veronica Mars* was the big-deal premiere of the fest for fans of the dearly departed television show, some 90,000 of whom helped Kickstarter it into existence. Keith Phipps has the [official review](#), but as one of those fans, I came out of *Veronica Mars* both deeply satisfied and deeply curious about how non-fans might process such an obvious love-letter of a film. *Before I Disappear* is a feature-length expansion of the 2013 Oscar-winning short *Curfew* that's weighed down by forced indie quirk: a protagonist writing a letter to his dead girlfriend, a deadbeat adult paired with a precocious young child, an out-of-nowhere-musical sequence, strained familial relationships—this one has it all, and none of it really makes much sense together. (Ron Perlman is in it, though, so that's something.) Similarly incoherent: the Kickstarted video essay *Beyond Clueless*, which stitches together clips from 200-plus post-1995 films in an effort to make some sort of statement about the nature of teen movies. It's the sort of thing that might charitably called a "meditation," but it's really more of a ramble, casting a too-wide net to draw too-vague conclusions from a too-broad selection of films, which puzzlingly includes movies like *Idle Hands*, *Rules Of Attraction*, *Jeepers Creepers*, and *Spider-man* under its all-inclusive definition of "teen movie." It's somewhat entertaining as a spot-the-movie exercise, but a droning score and constant, grandiose narration from Fairuza Balk quickly render that exercise tedious. And finally, a couple of short, entertaining-enough documentaries: *Surviving Cliffside*, about a family from a small, drug-ravaged West Virginia town that's pinning its hopes for its eldest daughter on beauty pageants, which plays like a cross between an episode of MTV's *True Life* and *Toddlers And Tiaras*; and *Wicker Kittens*, which attempts to give the *Wordplay/Word Wars* treatment to the dubiously fascinating subculture of jigsaw-puzzle enthusiasts.

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Ha ha, you didn't go see *That Guy Dick Miller*, the clear hot-ticket item of the festival?

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**Officer Dog** • 2 hours ago

Faults and 10,000 KM are new to me and both sound really interesting and cool.

Great write up on the general feel of a festival like this! Makes me appreciate the Philly Film Fest and how, even when I'm running around trying to see everything, it always feels pretty intimate and small.

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