

# THE PLAYLIST

## Sundance Review: Robert Greene's Remarkable And Captivating 'Kate Plays Christine' Starring Kate Lyn Sheil

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"Kate Plays Christine"

Sean Price Williams

It's been well over 40 years since 29-year-old TV reporter Christine Chubbuck walked into her Channel 40 newsroom in Sarasota, Fla., and committed suicide on live television. By all accounts (and there aren't very many of those), Chubbuck was a lonely and terribly depressed woman, struggling to find a way to love herself, living a seemingly uneventful life. Her sudden act of violence, and the bone-chilling way she introduced it, made her famous — for a while, at least, and mostly in Sarasota. Today, she's all but forgotten by everyone apart from lovers of dark and bizarre history or

ardent cinephiles who know that **Paddy Chayefsky's** Oscar-winning "**Network**" screenplay was directly inspired by her story. Yep, the classic "I'm mad as hell, and I can't take it anymore!" line is basically Chayefsky paraphrasing Chubbuck. And yet, more people know about **Peter Finch's** monologue than the real-life woman who inspired it. Enter **Robert Greene**, a singular documentarian eternally fascinated by the blurred barriers that separate the fictional from the real.

Following up 2014's "**Actress**," Greene and actress **Kate Lyn Sheil** dive even deeper into the nature of performance and role-playing with his latest hybrid, the emotionally gripping and infinitely thought-provoking "**Kate Plays Christine**." Setting off from the dynamic he achieved with **Brandy Burre** in "Actress," Greene finds an inherently compelling way to explore the psychological and emotional implications behind portraying the arcane and everlastingly sad Chubbuck. He follows Kate as she researches and prepares for her role as Christine for the film's movie-within-a-movie. In reality, this inner "movie" is more of a re-enactment, purposefully soapy and unrealistically melodramatic, something that in and of itself begins to feed into the overarching themes of the film. How does one even begin to faithfully depict a story like this? Where are the lines between performer and subject, and how far can they be crossed in order to get the most authentic portrayal possible? *Should* they be crossed at all when dealing with a woman who consciously decided to end her life in such a sensational way?

I'll stop there, but Greene and Sheil have crafted such an absorbing and multilayered piece of work that one could easily write 1,000 words made only of questions that the film explores. And we're not just enveloped by the mystery of Chubbuck's personal life, which is largely told through accounts of people who've only heard of her. We also get a rarely intimate peek into Kate Lyn Sheil. Fans of her work in "**A Wonderful Cloud**," "**You're Next**," "**House of Cards**," et al. get a behind-the-scenes all-access pass to her process: why she does what she does, how she goes about it, how much of herself she invests in a given character. "There's gonna be a victim," says one interviewee; "it's not going to end well, and you're going to be the victim." He's talking about Christine, but he might as well be talking about Kate. The symmetry between Greene's two subjects is

another aspect of this project that just glues you in wholeheartedly (introduced in a genius way with the film's title). We see Sheil disappearing into her character through a wig, color contacts, and spray tans, and we feel the frustration, pressure, and anguish that simmer as she interviews people who are quick to judge Chubbuck without providing any actual insight. All of this builds to a riveting meeting when two good Samaritans open Kate's eyes to Christine in a way she didn't think possible. There's so much going on — psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually — in these penultimate scenes that they end up softening the blow of the cathartic punch in the film's actual climax.

As if the content itself wasn't so blisteringly captivating, "Kate Plays Christine" also boasts the kind of sumptuous cinematography that you'd never associate with the documentary format. Nonfiction is usually too busy digging for truth to pay a lot of attention to form, but if it wasn't already clear, we're not dealing with some run-of-the-mill doc here. Cinematographer **Sean Price Williams** ("**Heaven Knows What**," "**Queen of Earth**") continues his upward climb to major recognition with absolutely gorgeous camerawork. Two scenes in particular won't be leaving me any time soon: a close-up of Sheil against a backdrop of cascading out-of-focus fireworks near the beginning; and a scene by the beach near the end, with the actress reflected in a puddle under overcast skies. It's stunning work by Williams, Greene's go-to DP for obvious reasons.

There's a tangible sensitivity to "Kate Plays Christine" that is constantly present as the project explores two personas and a gamut of topics (gender politics, gun control, and depression among them). This sensitivity is partly derived from Greene's search for meaning and purpose behind Christine Chubbuck's decision on that July morning in 1974 — not in the context of her life, exactly, but in the context of her legacy and what it says about us as people and as a society. The sensitive presence is also derived from the way Sheil grapples with Christine's ambiguous nature on a purely performative level. Because of its purposefully unhinged structure, and the movie-within-a-movie that in some scenes has the intended effect, and in others not so much, the film is something of a laborious watch, one that'll be hard to return to, especially considering how the

sensitive tone seamlessly evolves into bottomless-pit sadness. It will be interesting as well to see how Greene's film compares to another Christine Chubbuck movie that's emerged at the same time, **Antonio Campos' "Christine"** with **Rebecca Hall**. Campos takes the more conventional fictional approach, from what I've read, with Hall already receiving some the greatest praise of her career. But I hope Greene's documentary isn't sidelined in any way because of its un-customary approach to the same subject. "Kate Plays Christine," once seen, is never to be forgotten: a remarkable documentary that gives a devastatingly complex subject the kind of multifaceted, investigative respect it deserves. [A-]

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