



# ‘Land’ Review: A Broken Soul Rebuilds in Robin Wright’s Beautiful Solo Show

By: Peter Debruge

After directing episodes of 'House of Cards,' Robin Wright is ready to fly on her own, making what feels like the mainstream equivalent of a Kelly Reichardt movie.



*Focus Features*

Robin Wright spends most of “Land” alone, but that’s not how her character Edee sees it. Newly widowed and raw with sorrow for reasons left (mostly) unsaid, Edee abandons nearly everything about her old life and buys a cabin on the side of a mountain in Wyoming — barely a shack, really, with no running water or electricity, surrounded by wilderness. Isolation serves a specific purpose for Edee, one that Wright, in a directorial debut so pure and simple it speaks to enormous self-confidence, has better instincts than to reveal outright.

It takes maturity to make a film like “Land,” a human mystery that trusts audiences to supply their own answers. So often, first-time helmers feel tempted to use their movies as show-offy sizzle reels for all they can do, getting in the way of the material. When actors transition, it can be even more self-indulgent, as frustrated performers try to demonstrate the full range other directors have denied them.

So bless Wright for paring “Land” down to a beautiful haiku, and for delivering a performance that’s ambiguous and understated in all the right ways. Wordless for long stretches, it’s very nearly a solo show — though there’s wisdom in the way she uses Demián Bichir as well. His character, Miguel, doesn’t appear until about midway, empathy embodied.

Watching these two interact softens the film, and the anger Edee’s still processing. One can imagine a different approach in which we’d learn more about her background, but co-writers Jesse Chatham and Erin Digman let Wright’s performance speak for itself. In her hands, we recognize that Edee is strong and capable. This woman has lost her husband and son. Rather than exploiting her suffering, Wright shows us what Edee does with it — how she turns that pain into something proactive.

Edee stocks up on the barest provisions, escaping from everything she built over the previous half-century. All of this happens over the opening credits, accompanied by the Staves’ acoustic cover of Bruce Springsteen’s “I’m on Fire” that translates the song’s pent-up sexual desire into something more anguished: “Sometimes it’s like someone took a knife, baby, edgy and dull / And cut a six-inch valley through the middle of my skull.”

Feelings like that are cause enough to flee. Or as Edee puts it in one of the film’s precious few flashbacks, “Why am I here? At all?” If she could fly away to the moon, maybe she would — although there’s a specific reason Edee has chosen this place, a million miles from anywhere. Folded up and stashed in a shoebox, that explanation is perhaps the one detail the movie could have done without. But then, “Land” might have been too minimalist if she’d withheld the clue. (The same goes for what happened to Edee’s family.)

Whatever our baggage, the movie offers a vicarious opportunity for introspection and connection — with Wright’s character, of course, but also with the one person Edee allows in during this period of self-imposed exile, a man named Miguel (Bichir) with an emotional backstory every bit as complicated.

How strange to get “Land” within months of Chloé Zhao’s “Nomadland,” in which Frances McDormand’s Fern abandons the idea of home following her husband’s death. There are parallels, too, with ex-husband Sean Penn’s “Into the Wild” or Kelly Reichardt’s off-the-grid rambles, though Wright resists the heady art-house austerity of such indies.

Spare as her approach may be, Wright has actually made a very accessible film. Without ever explaining herself fully, Edee clearly decided to check out of civilization — a choice whose implications the director slowly unpacks over the slender film’s 80-odd minutes. Has she chosen this mountain as a place to die? Or is she open to survival, engaging with that instinct on its most primitive terms?

At one point, Miguel saves her life. Clearly, there's decency in his actions, but more important is the idea that he sees his own experience in what Edee's doing, and the sense of communion between them is cathartic. Healing is a process, and everyone deals with their wounds differently. "I'm here in this place because I don't want to be around people," Edee tells Miguel, and he makes himself scarce, without abandoning her entirely.

Nor is she alone on the mountain. Early on, Edee sees her husband, Adam (Warren Christie), and son, Drew (Finlay Wojtak-Hissong), fishing alongside her in a stream, or running through the woods. And she smiles. This is a surprising response in a film that's so much about tragedy, but a critical one in understanding the film. When Robin Wright smiles, it's brighter than the sun. That's a power she's always had as a performer, a radiance, and she uses it here to counterintuitive effect.

Wright rejects the misery-porn tropes. Instead of wallowing in the pain — or pantomiming all the red-eyed, ugly-cry histrionics that have earned actors Oscar nominations over the years — she changes the tense on Edee's feelings, from past to present. "Land" unfolds in the here and now, focusing on how Edee deals with each new challenge.

Wolves run by her window at night. A bear ransacks the cabin. She runs out of food and fuel for the stove. These scenes are so basic as to be banal, but it's the immediacy that counts. When faced with debilitating depression, even the sunrise can seem daunting — although you've seldom seen any as gorgeous as this. DP Bobby Bukowski alternates between intimacy and isolation, gazing upon Edee as she gazes out, while also giving us time to appreciate her surroundings.

If you're on Wright's wavelength, then it doesn't matter that you personally would never deal with an equivalent crisis by running away to Wyoming. This is how Edee has chosen to cope, and her story can be taken literally or as a metaphor. It feels real enough, and yet, for an hour and a half — best experienced in the cocoon of a cinema, if you can do so safely — Wright invites us all to retreat from life's distractions and do a bit of healing up there on that mountain.

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**Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (online), Jan. 30, 2021. MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: 89 MIN.**

- **Production:** A Focus Features release and presentation of a Big Beach, Flashlight Films production, in association with Nomadic Pictures, Cinetic Media. Producers: Allyn Stewart, Lora Kennedy, Leah Holzer, Peter Saraf. Executive producers: Robin Wright, Marc Turtletaub, Eddie Rubin, Chad Oakes, Michael Frislev, John Sloss, Steven Farneth.
- **Crew:** Director: Robin Wright. Screenplay: Jesse Chatham, Erin Digman. Camera: Bobby Bukowski. Editors: Anne McCabe, Mikkel E.G. Nielsen. Music supervisor: Susan Jacobs.