

Tribeca '08 - Part One

I love New York - cliched but true. A genuine world-class city, a culture vulture's fantasy, a foodie's smorgasbord, a shopper's paradise and the moviegoing capital of the U.S. For the past two years I've been more than happy to visit for the Tribeca Film Festival because even if the films weren't the best, a trip to Manhattan in the springtime made up for it.

My first day of screenings this time, however, seemed to indicate that in its seventh year, the festival's programming has hit its stride. I found a terrific movie on the first day, plus a couple of other solid selections. And not one of the five I saw was a total dud.



War Inc.

World Premiere

The most high-profile movie I saw all day was also the weakest of the bunch, but not for lack of trying. John Cusack produces, co-writes and stars in this incredibly earnest military industrial complex satire, playing a hitman working for Halliburton stand-in Tamerlane. His new assignment is

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the assassination of a once friendly, now uncontrollable politician in a fictional Iraq-like country, where Tamerlane is overseeing the reconstruction and selling branding and franchise rights to the highest bidders. But his cover, as the supervisor of an international trade show (ever-reliable Joan Cusack's his assistant) where Middle Eastern pop star Yonnica (Hilary Duff) will marry a local warlord's son as a publicity stunt, gets in the way, as does Marisa Tomei's snooping lefty reporter.

While the plot is complicated, the poking of war profiteering and celebrity culture is too blunt and simplistic, from a chorus line of Arab women with prosthetic legs to Ben Kingsley's nutsy, wheelchair-bound leader, hidden in a bunker below a Popeye's Chicken and seen only on video monitors as a constantly morphing image of American icons (George Washington, Mr. T). For their part, almost all the performers - an out-of-her-league Duff the exception - transcend the material. And I had to chuckle when, during a kidnapping late in the film, the captors demands include LeBron James for the country's basketball team.

I'm still mulling over why it ultimately doesn't work, but I've got it down to a few possibilities. There's the inherent difficulty in satirizing a hot war, also the problem of trying to hit too many targets at once. Cusack's affinity for deeply flawed characters seeking a moral center, something that's bound to dull satire's edge, can't help. The movie also might have gotten burned by the filmmakers' scorching desire to make the next *Dr. Strangelove*.

[Trailer](#)

Bitter & Twisted

World Premiere

Australian writer-director Christopher Weekes also takes a supporting role in his feature debut, a somber, nicely stylized portrait of a family still struggling with the sudden death of the oldest son three years after the fact. Touching on our general discomfort with the natural processes of life - death, aging, change - it offers honestly moving performances from Steve Rodgers as the father, who's slowly eating himself into an early grave, and Noni Hazlehurst as his wife, who's desperate to feel wanted, as well as Weekes himself. And though it sounds dour, it doesn't leave the viewer feeling down.

Let the Right One In

North American Premiere

This Swedish drama from director Tomas Alfredson takes a novel approach to the coming-of-age story by fusing it with a vampire tale. Friendless and bullied, 12-year-old Oskar takes an immediate interest in his new neighbor

Eli, who's also 12. At least, that's how old she appears to be, but as she later admits, "I've been 12 for a long time." Initially she's reticent to befriend him, until the man who presents himself as her father is caught trying to collect blood for her, and she grows to rely on Oskar. His friendship with her gives him the courage to stand up for himself, but it may also cost him his soul.

Beyond the sight of Eli taking victims, the wintry, beautifully photographed Stockholm setting creates a chilling effect of its own. Its only big detraction is a certain predictability in plot.

The Cottage

North American Premiere

I could definitely see this one finding cult notoriety when it opens in the U.S. (Screen Gems has picked it up, release date still TBA). A heist gone wrong and a romp with crazy rural folk, writer-director Paul Andrew Williams' movie stars the multi-talented Andy Serkis as David and [The League of Gentlemen](#) cast member Reece Shearsmith as his brother Peter. David, the thug of the two, has convinced straight-laced family man Peter to go in on the kidnapping of a London crime boss' daughter (British *Hell's Kitchen* winner Jennifer Ellison) to get the money Peter needs to buy the family home from his brother.

A comedy of errors ensues when they get their captive to a remote cottage, followed by a comedy of horrors when she makes a run for it and they all end up at the house of one really messed up farmer. As with too many horror movies, characters often crawl when they should be running, but the steadily escalating bloodshed should make genre fans happy.

Fermat's Room

North American Premiere

Four mathematicians who spend most of their time in one room made for the best movie of the day. Written and directed by Spaniards Luis Piedrahita and Rodrigo Sopena, who were funny and self-deprecating in their introduction, the film brings together four top number crunchers (including *Bad Education's* Lluís Homar and *The Devil's Backbone's* Federico Luppi) for what's supposed to be an academic meeting of the minds. They're given pseudonyms before ending up in a beautifully appointed room inside a remote grain storage warehouse, where a PDA sends them riddles to solve in one minute's time.

Soon they discover that the room's walls are backed by industrial strength hydraulic presses that start closing in whenever they go over their time limit. While trying to keep the room from shrinking, they also work on

finding the connection between them and the identity of their mysterious host.

The filmmakers do a lot with a little, helped greatly by editing that creates an edge-of-your-seat pace and a cast that's fine across the board. At this point the film doesn't have a U.S. distributor, so here's hoping it finds one at Tribeca.

4/29 Update: Variety.com reported this morning that IFC has picked up *Fermat's Room*. It'll be available to cable subscribers around the country this summer through IFC's Video on Demand service.

Posted by Melissa Starker on April 28, 2008 8:33 PM | [Permalink](#)

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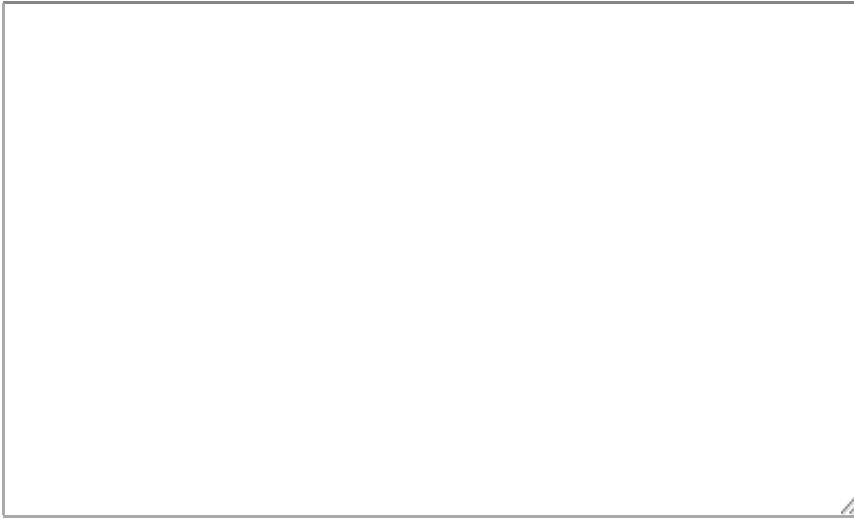
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