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Tribeca Film Festival 2008: Brian gives us a few capsule reviews!

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TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL REVIEWS----

FIRE UNDER THE SNOW

Directed by: Makoto Sasa
Starring: Palden Gyatso
Running Time: 75 Minutes

Tibetan Buddhist Monk Palden Gyatso has a spirit and faith that could not be broken through 33 years of torture and imprisonment at the hands of the Chinese government. And though he watched his friends and family either be exiled or murdered, was electrically prodded, was hung upside down and brutally beaten - his wise and peaceful eyes teach us not only the importance of compassion, but the hope that someday Tibet will be free.

Director Makoto Sasa begins Palden's story at his birth and untimely death of his mother. Raised by his aunt, he is required to become a Buddhist monk because he is the youngest child. Little did Palden know that he would be thrust into a time that would change the direction of Tibet's rich cultural history and peaceful existence into an era of chaos, which would ultimately lead to millions of deaths at the hands of the Chinese.

Director Sasa makes a wonderful choice in letting Palden tell his own story: he walks and talks us through the invasion of Tibet by China in 1951 and the ultimate uprising in 1959, leading to the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama, leading us right up to the present day protests and outcry of the International Olympic Committee's decision to chose China to host the 2008 summer games. Palden goes on a hunger strike and we are taken inside his tent as he meditates on how little his sacrifice is when compared to the Tibetans he saw suffer under the imprisonment and torture of the Chinese. Stoic throughout, Palden begins to cry at this moment, and one cannot help but to find empathy with him and the Tibetans.

Alongside unflinching images of Chinese snipers shooting down Tibetans trying to cross over a snowy mountain range into India, Sasa has crafted a magnificent portrait of an unwavering role model and a peaceful movement to free Tibet that is as volatile and timely today as it was 50 years ago.

BITTER AND TWISTED

Directed by: Christopher Weekes
Starring: Noni Hazlehurst, Leeanna Walsman, Steve Rodgers
Running Time: 90 Minutes

Every once in a while a film comes along that not only far surpasses the limitations in budget and scheduling with pure moxy and passion, but crystallizes the fears, longing and listlessness of the human condition with a stellar script and outstanding performances. *Bitter and Twisted* is such a film. In his first foray into feature films, Christopher Weekes, the director, has exemplified a profound maturity and understanding of his characters that extends far past his tender age.

Liam Lombard has died. The film follows his family and lover three years on as they continue to struggle with their loss and redefine their lives. Jordan Lombard (Steve Rodgers), Liam's father, is a dangerously overweight car salesman who has lost the passion for his job and his wife, Penelope (Noni Hazlehurst). Battling the realities of menopause and a husband who no longer desires her, Penelope is forced to make a decision that could jeopardize her marriage. Ben (Christopher Weekes), the surviving brother, is sexually confused: he hangs out with tough talking, but vulnerable Matt (Matthew Newton), yet tries to justify his heterosexuality by flirting with Indigo (Leeanna Walsman). Indigo, former lover of Liam, tries desperately to put the past to rest by falling in love with the already married Greg (Greg Praline), who is more likely in a mid-life crisis than in-love.

In a normal director's hands this would be typical fair, except it isn't. Weekes knows how to draw performances that elicits our compassion: their issues are our issues and the world's. Steve Rodgers as the soft-spoken and tightly wound father holds so much of his pain in that you feel his discomfort. Hazlehurst, as the dissatisfied wife, shows the same depth of feeling and purpose as she did with her outstanding performance in *Candy*. Walsman, as the world-weary and self-destructive "Indigo", delivers a performance that carries with it a dangerous spontaneity. This is a rock solid cast expertly chosen. Even secondary character performances by Rhys Muldoon and Greg Praline warrant our attention. No one is boring in this film.

With cinematography (Sam Collins) that helps mirror the staidness of the characters and their suburban landscape, *Bitter and Twisted* is a fine meditation on recapturing the sense of self and purpose after a tragedy has befallen a family. With little to no money and shooting in over thirty-two locations in twenty days, it's a wonder that Christopher Weekes could show this much wisdom and wonder under so much pressure.

Bitter and Twisted is a sure fire standout at this years Tribeca Film Festival, and one could only hope that many people get a chance to see it.

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN (LAT DEN RATTE KOMMA IN)

Directed by: Tomas Alfredson
Starring: Kare Hedebrant, Lina Leandersson, Per Ragnar
Running Time: 114 Minutes

"Squeal, squeal like a pig," says 12 year old Oskar menacingly through a frothy and cold window while clutching a knife. So begins Tomas Alfredson's film based on the best selling international book of the same title. With an opening line such as this, would it surprise you that this film is a love story: albeit an at times a gruesome, but wholly original vampire love story.

Oskar (Kare Hedebrant) is a shy, platinum haired boy who gets unmercifully tormented by classmates. He carries around a knife with him, stabbing trees and making threats to no one in particular. And it is only when he meets Eli (Lina Leandersson) that his confidence and self worth begins to grow. Eli, a dark haired morose looking girl of the same age, begins hanging out with Oskar at the monkey bars at night. She has just moved in next door to Oskar along with her father. Oskar is immediately perplexed by this mature little girl. Strangely, a murderous spree has broken out at roughly the same time Eli and her dad moved to town.

When Oskar asks Eli if she will go steady with him, asking that they cement their bond with blood, Eli's dark secret comes to the surface - that she is a vampire. What follows is a risky yet loving relationship between the two children. Will Eli's constant need for blood and mobility spell the end of their relationship? You'll have to see for yourself. The ending is a wonderful shocker worth the price of admission alone.

The eerie, snow blanketed landscape of the Swedish town is photographed masterfully by cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema. The script, written by the author of the book - John Ajvide Lindqvist, is marvelously crafted, and exposes the quirks of each character carefully, by removing one layer at a time. The viewer is kept involved throughout the telling of this story. Mention should also be made of the melodic theme of the film composed by Johan Soderqvist. Alfredson seems to know just the right time to dip the music into the telling of the story.

Thomas Alfredson has helmed a terrific cast, headed brilliantly by the two young leads, while creating superb production design and just enough gore in just the right places to make even the most hardened horror junkie satisfied.

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