

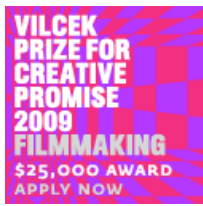


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FILMMAKER BLOG

Monday, May 05, 2008

TRIBECA ROUND UP

It's a hard festival to wrap your head around (especially if you're a New Yorker), with too many sections with vague names and programming sensibilities that begin to bleed together, but after awhile, the internal logic of the **Tribeca Film Festival**, which just wrapped its seventh and probably its best edition, begins to become clear. Although they would never refer themselves thusly, TFF is beginning to resemble a smaller, more hype-centric, less sales activated, Spring bound cousin to the **Toronto Film Festival**, another sprawling, premiere-savvy Metropolitan fest in a North American cinema capital that offers far too many riches for any single moviegoer to behold in one stretch and basks in both star wattage and high art in equal measures. In general, critics and observers seemed more pleased with the size and quality of the selection than in year's past, although very few movies bowing at Tribeca, especially among the world premiere narratives, seemed to draw impassioned or universal praise. I caught around twenty features or so at this year's festival, a small sliver of the 121 on display. I missed a large swath of films I wanted to see. Many of the films I did catch I had anticipated from earlier fests, while several took their initial bows in Tribeca, by filmmakers both new and old. Perhaps most fortunately, as you always hope for at any film festival, even big, almost but not quite market fests like this, I happened to catch a few movies that seemed to materialize out of nowhere and take my breath away. The whole thing just makes you want to whip out your American Express card and make a movie with it. The parties aren't bad either.



From the hyper-cute, pseudo-satisfying, "gee wouldn't it be great to have a kid", studio delivered opener *Baby Mama* to the magnificent revival of Ethiopian cineaste and professor **Haile Gerima's** didactic and frenetically lefty, post-Salassie, 1974 would be student feature *Harvest: 3000 Years*, to the uncompromising, sober eyed American historical gaze of **John Gianvito's** experimental doc *Profit Motive and The Whispering Wind*, Tribeca had just about something for everyone. Everything about the festival seems to be a mish-mash, a stream of contradictions. The small cadre of titles playing Tribeca which were released commercially during the festival, such as **David Mamet's** terrific dip into Los Angeles' Mixed Martial Arts world *Redbelt*, **Harmony Korine's** ethereally beautiful and oddly touching *Mister Lonely* and **Errol Morris'** chilling account of the truths buried within the photos from Abu Ghraib, *Standard Operating Procedure*, are each excellent products by true auteurs and couldn't be more different from each other.

SPRING 2008

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Personal favorites would have to include five of the six titles I mentioned above (I'll let you guess which one to scratch), along with a number of titles that upon reflection seem to represent a cross-section of what the festival had to offer.

Nina Paley's fantastic animated feature *Sita Sings The Blues*, which marries the tunes of obscure 30's blues songstress **Annette Hanshaw** to a retelling, by three hip, Gen-Y Indians, of the Indian myth Ramayana and a mildly autobiographical story of a Seattle based female cartoonist losing her husband to his job in India, is both heartfelt and consistently witty, the type of low-fi animated musical that puts Disney to shame. Paley's animated stylings are rich and constantly shifting, making it all the more impressive that she did the intricate and amusing animations herself. It is another terrific western made film kicking around the festival circuit with Indian themes and locales, following titles as varied as **Ritchie Mehta's** *Amal* (Toronto 07'), **John Jeffcoat's** *Outsourced* (Toronto 06') and **Chris Smith's** *The Pool* (Sundance 07'), none of which have the indie wood distribution muscle behind them that glossy yet blander titles like *The Darjeeling Limited* and *The Namesake* bring to the table.

82 year old Pole **Andrzej Wajda**, whose early masterpiece *Ashes and Diamonds* turned fifty last year, was back with his Academy-award nominated and Berlinale approved *Katyn*, a harrowing, multi-layered account of the massacre of captured Polish officers by the Russians during World War II and the beginnings of the repressive state of denial which they imposed upon the Polish people in its aftermath. Wajda has been ruminating on these very same themes since *Kanal*, but more seems to be at stake for him than ever before (his father died in the Katyn Forest massacres, which aren't depicted until the film's harrowing closing passages) and the picture is certainly as powerful as anything he's crafted since *Man of Iron*.

Plenty of marital strife was on display amidst the world and international premiere narratives. Irishman **Declan Recks'** *Eden*, from Eugene O'Brien's play, takes an almost comedic look at the dissolution of a marriage in the run-up to the couple's tenth anniversary. **Aiden Kelly** and **Eileen Walsh** are both very good and the pic has a legitimately dynamic visual style that manages to transcend the smallness of its stage origins, but the inevitable betrayal and attempts at betrayal never sting as much as Recks wants them to and its not saying anything especially novel about the state of modern love. Walsh deservedly walked away with the fest's best actress prize for her portrayal. Aussie **Christopher Weekes'** un-ironically titled *Bitter and Twisted*, much buzzed about by certain critics during the festival, does have a host of serviceable performances by people who look like real life, exurban Aussie losers, but its visual style, with a few exceptions, is pure TV movie and the whole thing is staged at a lighter weight pitch than the material, which has shades of *The Sweet Hereafter* or *Snow Angels* in it, seems to want it to be. Meanwhile, the divorcee female truck driver confronted with the son she never wanted, as portrayed by svelte **Michelle Monaghan** in *Trucker*, isn't even capable of maintaining boyfriends, favoring half night stands in seedy motels instead. Writer-Director **James Mottern** has a terrific script and he clearly has a keen visual eye, his HD lensed pic full of sumptuous visual treats, but in Monaghan and **Benjamin Bratt**, both of whom act with conviction and nuance, he casts people who don't fit into the world he's creating – their collective in-authenticity bounces off the walls of the screening room. He probably would have been better served by casting the sandpaper voiced **Joey Lauren Adams** as the title character and reserved Monaghan's soaring cheek bones for the dying man's new belle.

Two of the three titles swallowed up by Sony Classics at Sundance and subsequently screened (in secret, sort of) at SXSW, both of which are second films by promising filmmakers, **Jonathan Levine's** *The Wackness* and **The Duplass Brothers'** *Baghead*, failed to rouse me upon there New York debuts, although the starlets of both pictures, **Olivia Thirlby** and **Greta Gerwig**, clearly have big things ahead of them. Both are likable enough, with strong casts (I could watch **Jane Adams** read the phonebook. For a week.) and plenty of humor, but are underserved by formulaic writing in the former's case and mediocre directorial execution in the latter's. Now if someone set a mumblecore tinged, tongue in

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cheek horror movie among depressed, Jewish, pot dealing, hip-hop obsessed, ice cream salesmen in 1994, they'd have one helluva picture.

Among a largely disappointing field of world premiere narratives was **Richard Ledes'** snoozer private dick/corporate corruption thriller *The Caller*, which inexplicably took home the "NY, NY" narrative prize. I guess it's a step up from last year's winner, ex **Limp Bizkit** frontman **Fred Durst's Jesse Eisenberg** vehicle *The Education of Charlie Banks*. **Robert Celestino's** Chazz Palminteri/Christine Lahti dice hustling with an autistic son movie *Yonkers Joe* would have been a more appropriate choice, with its earnest, attractive performances and fairly predictable but satisfying cadences, yet that's not saying much and I'm sure the jury was as psyched as I was to see **Elliot Gould** play a private detective again, even if *The Caller* was never going to be a worthy successor to **Robert Altman's** classic Philip Marlowe deconstruction *The Long Goodbye*.

Winner of the World Narrative Competition and soon to hit screens via **Mark Cuban's** Magnet, Swede **Tomas Alfredsson's** grisly and sensual *Let The Right One In* is easy to like for a movie in which middle aged men drug, string up and drain innocent, dog walking teenage boys to feed the twelve year old vampire they shack up with. Uber-stylish, teeming with long lense shots that would make **Tony Scott** envious, Alfredsson gives his vampire girl a love interest in the form of an awkward blond kid who lives across the courtyard in a quaint apartment complex and occasionally, when not being bullied by near homicidal middle school hooligans, is stabbing trees and asking them why they aren't squealing. Alfredsson deftly imposes the angsty alienation of adolescence onto a vampire coming of age narrative and thus makes it okay for us to take pleasure in the beheading of middle school bullies. Great. This is a beautiful, engaging movie that has cult classic written all over it, but its not quite as smart (or, shall I say moral) as **Abel Ferrara's The Addiction**, **Bill Gunn's Ganja and Hess**, **Claire Denis' Trouble Every Day** or **Larry Fessenden's Habit** and left me kind of cold thematically. It's teeming with life though and at least the word vampire isn't used until the second to last reel.

The narratives definitely bottomed out for me with *The Blair Witch Project* co-director **Daniel Myrick's** horrendous *The Objective*, a not so slick, seemingly made for Sci-Fi Channel *Predator* rip-off that plunks a horrifyingly similar scenario (to both that film and his previous movie) in the middle of our troubles in Afghanistan. As one of its producers is known to say, it has more implication than drama, but its deeply embedded derivativeness, wooden performances and generally unspooky 90's revival of *The Twilight Zone* vibe wear thin real quick. It has the makings of a camp classic if viewed in the right circumstances. Call the kid from *The Wackness*.

The legacy of **John McTiernan's** imminently quotable Schwartznegger vehicle ("If it bleeds... we can kill it") also factors prominently in **Christopher Bell's Bigger, Stronger, Faster**, a terrific look at the intersection of 80's popular culture and steroid use, in Bell's family as well as in the worlds of bodybuilding and professional team sports. Its one of the pair of docs, along with **James Marsh's** wonderful *Man On Wire*, that Magnolia scooped up at Sundance and NY Premiered at Tribeca. These will both figure heavily in year-end award buzz among the doc set.

Perhaps the doc that lingers in my film battered brain the most is Brazilian **Paula Gaitan's Days In Sintra**, her chronicle of returning to the Portugese city she and deceased husband **Glauber Rocha**, a major figure in Brazilian cinema of the 60s, exiled themselves too in the midst of Brazilian's political implosion. Mixing contemporary video footage of the beautiful if mildly decaying city with archival film footage of her final years with Rocha in the late 70s/early 80s, the film is a minor marvel, lyrical and tedious in equal measures, but a nonetheless gorgeous and mature work by someone searching for truth and beauty among the shards and fragments of her former self, using this thing we call memory to illuminate the personal and the political-historical. In its loose, jazzy rhythms, meticulous traveling shots and romantic eye it recalls the work of avant-gardists **Jonas**

Mekas and **Stan Brakhage**, particularly Brakhage's monumental *Anticipation of The Night*. You know, the one where he was going to hang himself at the end and then didn't.

So if I learned anything at this year's Tribeca Film Festival, other than the fact that producer **Mike Ryan** drives something akin to a pimpmobile (so cool), actress **Natasha Lyonne** is in a bowling league at The Port Authority (equally cool) and multi-hyphenate **Melvin Van Peebles** has the ass end of a VW Bus coming out of his living room wall (the coolest of them all), its that there's no place to see a movie quite like New York. Only our town could put on a festival quite like this one. Even at its trimmest and classiest level yet, it still is a big bad metaphor for our love of the loud, profane and massive. I can't wait until next year.

posted by Brandon Harris @ 5/05/2008 12:16:00 AM

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