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A scene from Christopher Weekes' "Bitter & Twisted." Image courtesy of the Tribeca Film Festival.

TRIBECA CRITICS NOTEBOOK 3 | Some Gems at TFF: "Bitter & Twisted," "Bart Got a Room," "Days in Sintra"

by Howard Feinstein (April 30, 2008)

Now that I have seen dozens and dozens of films in this 7th Tribeca Film Festival, I want to correct myself. I was wrong in my first report. Tribeca is unique, and occupies a certain niche in New York that belongs to it alone. It is neither film festival nor film market. It is closer to Las Vegas's Showest, or Orlando's Show East, which are more mainstream in their focus than, say, artier events like the New York Film Festival, although it is eclectic enough to include "high art" movies, too.

The Great Films

Since I wrote here last, I found some incredible works that I might never have been exposed to without Tribeca's existence. The one that really got my juices going is "Bitter & Twisted," a \$200,000 Australian drama about loss that was slipped in by screener to programmer **David Kwok** late in the game. This is a masterpiece, a

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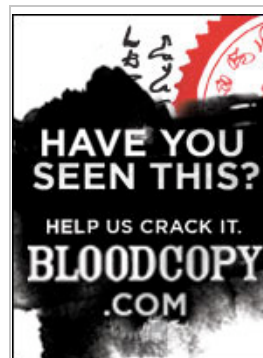


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screened to programmer **DAVID KWOK** late in the game. This is a masterpiece, a project largely homemade in the tacky ex-urbs south of Sydney by **Christopher Weekes**, a young director with enormous talent, and his friends. Three years after the unexpected death of a twentysomething son, the movie tracks the daily lives of his parents, surviving brother, and girlfriend. Without cheap sentiment, it explores the shifts in their lifestyles, the alteration of daily routines -- the subliminal effect of loss on one's psyche.

Weekes himself portrays the surviving brother, but it is Aussie icon **Noni Hazelhurst**, real and dumpy at 53 (forget the botoxed Aussies who conform to Hollywood convention, the Kidmans and Blanchetts who were once fresh-faced human beings) as the mother who is at the center. All the loved ones act out in different ways, only to ultimately face their demons and move on. This is touching and probing, both universal and specifically Australian (with no concessions to marketing a certain Aussie "otherness.") I get the feeling that the fest's priorities are finding talents who can work in the biz, so I don't know where this puts a foreign artist like Weekes. Maybe he's a fluke in this arena.

On the commercial side, "**Bart Got a Room**" is the finest of the indies I saw. Director **Brian Hecker** has an uncanny sense of comic timing in this sort-of-teen, sort-of-Jewish movie about a geeky high schooler's desperate search for a prom date in gulagish Hollywood, Florida. Hecker knows when to cut for maximum humorous effect, how to work with actors to tickle the spectator's funny bone. Like Weekes, he doesn't go for glamorous faces or pumped-up bods, but for real people, almost like the ones you see interviewed in the primary states. He honors us and offers us a mirror. With proper handling, this film could take off, could find an audience.

The doc "**Days in Sintra**" is not to everyone's taste because it's somewhat avant-garde, a gorgeous study in textures and recall that is part of an experimental section that, to the fest's credit, is not labeled as such. **Paula Gaitan** surveys the Portuguese town where she and her influential filmmaker husband, **Glauber Rocha**, who died young in 1981, stayed during Brazil's junta. Gaitan focuses on bricks and tiles, other textures, to connote the period and her relationship, moving from the material to the spiritual and emotional. "Days in Sintra" is a work of beauty that demands patience, and Tribeca is noble to projecting such fare. Once again, kudos to **Jon Gartenberg** for his taste and to head artistic honcho Peter Scarlet for supporting such diversity.



William H. Macy and Steven Kaplan in a scene from Brian Hecker's "Bart Got a Room." Image courtesy of the Tribeca Film Festival

The Bad Ones

Unfortunately, for every good film in Tribeca there are probably 20 bad or mediocre ones. Many critics, even publications, have given up on it. Other festivals compete for titles, and Tribeca insists on a lot of premieres. Here are some of the worst I experienced:

"From Within," by **Phedon Papamichael**: a midnight movie that contains every

cliche of the genre and doesn't fully make sense plotwise.

"The Objective," by **Daniel Myrick**: the co-director of "**The Blair Witch Project**" makes essentially the same film but sets it in Afghanistan. There is little evidence of evolution in the nine years since "Blair Witch."

"Baghead," by **Jay Duplass** and **Mark Duplass**: They call it mumblecore, as if the improvisation in a **Cassavetes** film is so lightweight that one can just mimic it. Well, it's not, and the characters and plotlines (four people go to a country house to write a script) are banal and absolutely uninteresting.

"Paraiso Travel," by **Simon Brand** (Colombia): Brand's formula is to take large chunks of "**Maria Full of Grace**," "**Padre Nuestro**" (aka "Sangre de mi Sangre"), and "**Choking Man**," throw them into a blender, and come up with a script idea. This

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story of a young Colombian man and woman who go to New York to better their lives is shamelessly derivative.

"**Tennessee**," by **Aaron Woodley**: This is the one in which **Mariah Carey** underplays and fits into an ensemble. The problem is Knoxville-born **Russell Schaumberg**'s overlaid script about three lonely people on the road in the Deep South. Way too much info, so that Torontonian Woodley, who is gifted, just can't keep up with the too-plentiful signifiers.

"**Green Porno**," by **Isabella Rossellini** and **Jody Shapiro**: These are eight one-minute shorts with Rossellini dressed as various insects talking about their sex lives. It is juvenile and completely devoid of interest. But wait a minute: Pal Scorsese does the retrospective films (weak this year: **Curtis Harrington**'s 1961 "Night Tide?"), and Rossellini is not only famous but a downtown princess.

(posted on Apr 30, 2008 at 11:23PM | filed under [Festival Dispatches](#), [Lead Story](#), [New York](#))

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Howard Feinstein doesn't know what he's talking about regarding Paraiso Travel. The 'script idea' he talks about comes from the acclaimed novel by Jorge Franco, as indicated on the film, and that book was published long before Maria Full of Grace, or Padre Nuestro were made. So this is no 'formula' made up by Brand.
(posted by [jonsang86](#) on May 1, 2008 at 11:34PM)

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(posted by [jonsang86](#) on May 1, 2008 at 11:35PM)

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(posted by [jonsang86](#) on May 1, 2008 at 11:38PM)

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(posted by [jonsang86](#) on May 1, 2008 at 11:50PM)

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