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2>The World, 2 Hours At A Time

The Capital Times :: LIFESTYLE :: B2

Monday, April 16, 2007

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Here's a few vignettes from a weekend spent at the movies. For a complete recap of four full days of festival-going, visit The Capital Times' festival blog at www.madison.com/tct/blogs/thomas.

* "It's Happiness," 7:15 p.m. Saturday, Wisconsin Union Theater.

It's not every post-show question-and-answer session at the Wisconsin Film Festival that adjourns to the Essen Haus for further discussion. But that's where the filmmakers, and likely most of the audience, were going after a rowdy screening of the Wisconsin polka documentary "It's Happiness."

Filmmakers Craig DiBiase and Timm Gable didn't know much about La Vida Polka when they got the idea for the film. They were shooting a commercial for Pabst Blue Ribbon that featured some polka musicians, and this one very insistent elderly man began pushing the idea of them making a movie.

That man was John Pinter, president of the Wisconsin Polka Boosters, who was at the screening, waving a hunting-vest orange sign that read "Polka is on a Roll!" He's one of many colorful characters that the film is built around. Others include Vi Bergum, a polka teacher who was convinced that all of society's ills could be cured with a little more polka, and Art Altenburg, who owns Art's Concertina Bar in Milwaukee, and is rumored not to serve accordion players.

During the Q&A, the filmmakers were put on the spot as to whether they could polka themselves.

"Of course we do," DiBiase said, and to prove it, they invited Bergum onstage to dance. But there was no music, so as if on cue, the audience began clapping their hands and lustily singing "Roll Out the Barrel." They knew all the words, too.

* "Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait," 3:30 p.m. Sunday, Orpheum Main.

One of the many nice things about the Orpheum is that, when a great sports movie like "Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait" comes along, you can really get into the spirit of things. At the concession stand, I bypassed the popcorn and loaded up on a sports fan's culinary essentials - a brat with spicy mustard and deep-fried cheddar cheese curds. Granted, this may have been a better meal for "Favre: A Late 20th Century Portrait" than a film about a soccer star, but you work with what you've got.

"Zidane" is actually unlike any sports movie, fictional or documentary, that I have ever seen. The filmmakers basically train their many cameras on Zinedine Zidane for the entire length of a game, from the

first kick to the final whistle. There's no narration, no real sense of what's actually going on in the game aside from the occasional furtive glance at the scoreboard. Instead, we focus on Zidane at the office, watching his every move, his every expression, his every reaction to what's going on on the field.

Festival programmer Tom Yoshikami said during his introduction that "Zidane" was his favorite film of the festival. He first saw it at the Toronto International Film Festival last fall, where the filmmakers were present.

"When asked if they gave any instructions to Zidane, they said, 'We told him to do whatever you do during a game,' " Yoshikami said. "'Just don't get a red card.'"

* "Poison Friends," 5:30 p.m. Sunday, Orpheum Main.

In the opening scenes of "Poison Friends," a character says, "And that's why the critic is a necessary contributor to the existence of literature." Yes! Finally, a movie that dares to tell the truth about the really relevant issues!

Oh, but of course that character has to turn out to be the villain of Emmanuel Bourdieu's elegantly acidic film about the young Parisian literati. He's Andre, a brilliant but cruel Sorbonne student who has several more impressionable friends following in his wake.

Andre's manipulation of his friends, to the point that one of them actually throws his completed novel in the garbage, is good middlebrow fun. It reminded me of something by Moliere or Voltaire, especially when it's revealed that Andre's is something of a poseur, and he eventually gets his humiliating comeuppance at the hands of his more successful friends. For such a cerebral film, "Poison Friends" has the pacing of a thriller.

* "Ghosts of Cite Soleil," 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Orpheum Main.

"I feel like killing you to take your camera."

That statement by a Haitian man into the lens makes overt what runs like an exposed live wire all through the incredible documentary "Ghosts of Cite Soleil," by Asger Leth. The filmmakers are deep into very dangerous circumstances in this film, set in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cite Soleil.

The time is 2003-2004, and Haiti is crumbling as various rebels, gangs, former army officers and other factions all clash in the streets, and time seems to be running out for President Jean-Baptiste Aristide. Everyone is turning on everyone, and while it may be hard to separate one faction from another, they've all got guns in their hands.

In the midst of absolute chaos, Leth focuses on the almost Shakespearean story of two brothers, gang leaders 2Pac and Bily, as they try to maintain control over their "soldiers" and negotiate a crumbling, hostile city.

"Ghosts" underscores that one of the valuable functions of great filmmaking is its ability to take you to places and introduce you to people that you probably would never ever experience otherwise, and certainly not in such a personal, visceral way.

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On Sunday I spent time in the slums of Haiti, in the salons of Parisian intellectuals, and on a soccer field in Madrid. Over the past four days, I've also been on a farm in Iowa, in the Los Angeles ghetto in the 1970s and in a run-down Scottish housing project.

The noted film scholar Natalie Portman (hey, Queen Amidala is actually a very smart person) once said in an interview that one of the important things about movies is that they're "empathy practice." In the safety and sanctity of a dark theater, we meet people onscreen, fictional or not, and we get the gift of learning what it's like to live in their shoes for two hours.

Hopefully, if we get enough of this practice, when we meet real people, no matter how different their backgrounds or circumstances are from ours, the movies we've experienced will make us a little better prepared to step into their shoes. That's the hope, anyway.

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