

Wisconsin Film Festival Delivers Exceptional Films

28,700 Attend 2007 Festival

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POSTED: 4:58 pm CDT April 18, 2007

UPDATED: 3:58 pm CDT May 1, 2007

MADISON, Wis. -- The ever-growing Wisconsin Film Festival had another record-breaking year.

With a total attendance of 28,700, this year's festival shattered the previous attendance record of 26,000 tickets in 2006.

The first film I saw at the 2007 Wisconsin Film Festival, a 10:45 p.m. showing of the documentary "Air Guitar Nation" on the first day of the four-day event, set a high bar for quality. Happily, the several other films I was able to catch over the weekend also mostly met or exceeded my already-high expectations.

"Air Guitar Nation" came about after some guys attending the Air Guitar World Championships in Finland (of course) noticed that America wasn't represented in the event. They subsequently created a U.S. contest, which is where this hilarious documentary begins, capturing the hopes, motivations and challenges of contestants for the air guitar crown.

The filmmakers begin by documenting the sold-out first New York regional playoff, where a rivalry soon developed between two promising air guitar hopefuls -- Dan "Björn Türoque" Crane and David "C-Diddy" Jung. While basing their narrative largely around this rivalry for air guitar domination, the filmmakers also touch on the origins of the World Championships and the phenomenon and culture of air guitaring itself.

From early shots of over-the-top air guitar solos cut with interviews of people making serious pronouncements on the art and craft of air guitar, the film initially comes across almost as a mockumentary. But the contests are real and, as the documentary makes clear, the Air Guitar World Championships are taken very seriously by a surprising amount of people.

Like all exceptional American documentaries, "Air Guitar Nation," through the lens of an obscure event and cultural phenomenon, offers insight into a larger aspect of modern America. In this age of "American Idol" supremacy, it's not surprising that a contest in which the most outrageous performers are plucked from obscurity and bestowed with a type of fame would be popular. Who wouldn't want to be treated like a rock star -- especially if actual talent and the burden of producing listenable music were taken out of the equation? (C-Diddy and Mr. Türoque would argue that they in fact possess an excess of talent -- for air guitar. You can read into that however you'd like.)

Indeed, virtually all of the performers adopt not only stage names, but stage personas. Air guitaring, more than just rock 'n roll, offers performers a way to reinvent themselves, a chance to be the rebel they've always secretly wanted to be.

Another common motivation for performers is the ability to say that they are "the best in the world at something." It's good news for filmgoers that that something -- air guitar -- makes for captivating, idiosyncratic footage. In this tremendously entertaining film, the filmmakers need only place a camera in front of the already oversized personalities in the contest and cue the music.

'Severance'

Festival director Meg Hamel introduced the British slasher flick "Severance" at its 9 p.m. Saturday screening at the Orpheum Theater main stage. She said that in past years, the festival didn't show a late film at the Orpheum on Saturday night because a film festival party was held in the lobby during that time.

This year, Hamel made the wise decision to move the party to a different venue and allow a large audience to fill the Orpheum to enjoy a crowd-pleasing film that is sure to find a loyal following.

I was a bit skeptical going into this film because the festival guide touted it as both hysterically funny and truly scary. In my mind, I couldn't imagine how this film could be successfully frightening and intense, since the comic relief would deflate any real sense of horror. I was amazed and pleasantly surprised that, against all odds, "Severance" did masterfully balance shock and comedy in a taut, skillfully made and highly entertaining

film.

The movie's plot revolves around UK office colleagues at a weapons manufacturing company who embark on a work retreat into the Hungarian countryside for a weekend of team building. After their bus breaks down, they manage to find shelter deep in the woods -- only to soon realize that menace is lurking in the woods around them. Imagine the BBC's "The Office" melded with a slasher flick and you won't be far off.

I was struck by Christopher Smith's assured and sophisticated directing. For a horror movie, the shot compositions were exceptional and worked to intensify the level of suspense. Interestingly, the clever camera work also produced some unexpected visual humor. The film is also fairly graphic, which is of course necessary to keep step with the current gore-fests that play in theaters. The movie makes good on the promise of its title -- and not exactly in the form of severance pay for the unlucky office gang.

The wonderful cast contributes much to the wit and bloodshed of the script, which also takes some wry, timely shots at the war on terror. The movie also displays an unassuming self-awareness while toying with some horror-movie clichés, only to subvert them with fresh comic timing.

'Finishing The Game'

"Finishing the Game" is a mockumentary with an intriguing premise. Bruce Lee shot some scenes for "The Game of Death" in 1972 but died before anything was completed. According to the festival guide, "A few years later, a stand-in was hired for footage that was combined to odd effect with the few minutes that existed of the real martial arts star. That actually happened."

Director Justin Lin took that idea and ran with it in his fictional documentary, in which he creates his own take on a 1970s casting call and auditions for a Bruce Lee stand-in to finish shooting "The Game of Death."

Lin's intent is to skewer "the ludicrous world of mid-1970s kung fu cinema, where anyone of color is pigeonholed into ridiculous acting stereotypes," and he makes his point. Although there are some funny moments, I was a little underwhelmed by the film, which, at 88 minutes, seemed to drag on.

Because the film is structured around an open audition, the action is fairly static. Lin relies on his characters to get laughs, but the caricatures auditioning for the role fail to invoke much feeling or empathy. When you don't care about the characters and when you already get the joke about the movie studio's absurd idea to salvage "Finishing the Game," there's ultimately not much left to hold interest.

"Air Guitar Nation" prompted more laughs in a documentary than "Finishing The Game" manages in its duration. Lin's film is certainly proficient and spirited, but to my mind, mockumentaries are tricky to pull off. Given a choice, I prefer to see the real thing.

'Radio On'

"'Radio On' is ripe for rediscovery by viewers attuned to its dramatic understatement," according to the film festival guide.

I think in this case "dramatic understatement" might be an understatement. Let me explain: In the first 30 minutes, there might be approximately three lines of dialogue. Although in the second half of the film, people actually begin to converse, the words are few and far between shots of driving across the British landscape and the film's new-wave soundtrack, which plays a key role.

Shown as part of the festival's "Restorations and Revivals" programming category, this 1979 film follows a man driving from London to Brighton to investigate the mysterious death of his brother. It's essentially a road movie with many Godard-inspired shots of the protagonist driving through the gray English countryside and dilapidated cities.

Audiences steeped in modern movies who have grown accustomed to brisk editing and frequent cuts between shots will likely grow impatient and have a difficult time adjusting to the long, uninterrupted shots where nothing much is happening on the screen. These shots make up the majority of this deliberate, graceful and enigmatic film.

The soundtrack, which includes songs from David Bowie, Kraftwerk, Lene Lovich, Ian Dury and Wreckless Eric, functions as the driving force of the film. When he's not driving, the protagonist is mostly concerned with listening to music, and the film encourages the audience to really actually listen to the songs because there is nothing else happening onscreen to divert attention. Whereas music often serves as a backdrop in movies, "Radio On" pushes its soundtrack front and center in dramatic fashion.

"Radio On" is a melancholy, challenging film that many won't enjoy watching. Beautifully shot in black and white, it's also a wonderful example of a film that opts to tell its story through striking visual images instead of character development. In fact, characters drop in and out of the film without explanation. But the film is far more concerned with raising questions and establishing a feeling and atmosphere than developing a plot.

During its 102-minute run-time, the film's leisurely pace made me grow restless at times. But the film's masterful cinematography and brilliant shot compositions are some of the best I've seen.

Even a day after viewing it, I find that my mind has returned often to "Radio On," revisiting the interplay of the film's music and its stark, poetic images. For a film in which not much happens, it's a testament to the skill of director Christopher Petit and cinematographer Martin Schaefer that its subdued beauty lingers on long after it ends.

Afterward, leaving the darkness of the Cinematheque and waking into the bright sunlight of Sunday afternoon, a friend who saw the film with me commented, "They don't make them like that anymore." No, they certainly don't.

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