

ON THE SCENE



Outside the Orpheum in Madison during the Wisconsin Film Festival. Photo courtesy of the festival.

FESTIVAL DISPATCH | Like Butta: Wisconsin Fest Tastes a Line up of Merit

by Charlie Olsky (April 20, 2007)

In searching for the perfect title for the donor's fund for the **Wisconsin Film Festival**, which celebrated its 9th year running last weekend, festival director **Meg Hamel** hit upon the idea of "The Real Butter Fund". "I didn't want to call it the 'Platinum Fund' or the 'VIP Club' or anything so exclusive," says Hamel. "I figured Wisconsin, dairy. It has to be butter... real butter represents the deepest, truest essence of what's good in Wisconsin, and what's good in film." Hamel, in her second year as director (and seventh involved in the festival), knows her audience well; applause met each mention of The Real Butter Fund during the trailers for all 185 films in the festival's four-day run.

The **Sundance Institute** clearly has the same faith in Madison's film-goers. Next month, the group will use Madison to launch the first of its new line of cinemas, Sundance 608 (for the area code, following in a few months is Sundance Kabuki in San Francisco), a six-screen art-house multiplex with stadium seating, a cafe, a restaurant and two bars. "Madison is a fantastic market for art film," said Sundance's **Nancy Gribbler**, citing the **University of Wisconsin** and the city's position as state capital. "Patrons have supported film here historically."

The arrival of the Sundance name in Madison dominated the audience's conversation before Hamel's inspired choice of opening film, "**Chalk**," **Mike Akel's** enormously entertaining mockumentary about high school teachers in Austin. "How many people here are teachers?" asked Akel of the education-friendly Madison crowd before the screening, and fully a third of the audience raised their hands. Small wonder, then, that the reception was so overwhelmingly positive with huge peels of laughter erupting every few seconds.



Festival director Meg Hamel and "All the Days Before Tomorrow" director Francois Dompierre. Photo by Charlie Olsky.

The film deserved them; a heavily improvised, situational take on the education profession along the lines of a particularly humane **Christopher Guest** film, "Chalk" is clearly the work of people intimately familiar with their subject (Akel and cowriter/star **Chris Mass** were both teachers). The film never hits a false note, remaining chock full of keen observations and perfect moments, such as a bored administrator taking a break from penning a satirical version of 'The Safety Dance' for a school talent competition ("We can teach if we want to/ we can leave no child behind") in order to practice her own prodigious piano skills.

A few of the best films screened seemed to have come from nowhere. Such is certainly the case in the most startling example, **Wickes Helmboldt** and **Laszlo Fulop's** harrowing Katrina documentary "**Tim's Island**," the home video footage of one group of mechanically-minded hippies holed up in a factory building in New Orleans during the hurricane and subsequent flooding. An uneasy blend of "*Lord of the Flies*" and "**The Blair Witch Project**," the film shows how the group dynamic breaks down from the nervous exhilaration of

the initial storm into true panic and desperation during the isolation that follows, and they are imprisoned in the midst of anarchic devastation.

Among the seldom-screened gems was **Francois Dompierre's** lovely "**All the Days Before Tomorrow**," a gorgeously filmed, episodic confection about two people whose awkward friendship may or may not make for a romantic partnership, as well as audience favorite "**King Corn**," **Aaron Woolf's** hilariously alarming documentary about modern agriculture.

The festival afforded Madison audiences to see limited releases that would might otherwise not play at a smaller market, such as **Andrea Arnold's** harrowing "**Red Road**," or **Milestone's** laudable re-release of **Charles Burnett's** hypnotic haunting 1977 feature "**Killer of Sheep**." Hamel smartly paired **Hal Hartley's** latest offering "**Faye Grim**," with a retrospective screening of the director's "**Henry Fool**," (1997) to which it is ostensibly a sequel (and, for the director's fans, a return to form). Representing the documentary front were **Alexandra Lipsitz's** crowd-pleasing "**Air Guitar Nation**" and Audience Award-Winner "**War/Dance**," **Sean Fine** and **Andrea Nix's** beautifully shot story of Ugandan war orphans who form a dance troupe.



Outside the new Sundance 608 cinema in Madison. Photo by Charlie Olsky.

Predictably on hand were a number of "festival films," offbeat and mildly edgy comedies that have come to be associated with the word 'Sundance.' To this category belongs **Goran Dukic's** almost-successful dark comedy (and festival Audience Award Winner) "**Wristcutters: A Love Story**," a winsome fable about an alternative after-life populated by suicides which skirts the edge of preciousness for its understated first hour before getting lost in an unexpectedly burdensome plot in its final act. Also not quite successful was **Paul Fox's** "**Everything's Gone Green**" (written by Generation X author **Douglas Copeland**), patterned after the "**Little Miss Sunshine**" school of heaping quirk-upon-quirk and goading the audience into laughing at the uneven results (His ex-girlfriend quotes motivational speakers! His parents grow pot! There's a dead whale! etc).

In keeping with its casual air, the festival does not sponsor any awards beyond its audience prizes and thus has no competition features, though it does feature a number of sidebars sponsored by University of Wisconsin departments, among them such University-appropriate titles as Film.Able: Disabilities on Screen--which featured sweet-natured "**Star Wars**" geeks done good documentary "**Heart of an Empire**" alongside the much darker "**When Pigs Fly**", a complicated portrait of a disabled woman who grows obsessed with raising pigs. Also in similar vein was **Diaspora Melancholy: Asian American Film**, featuring **Justin Lin's** new slapstick "Finishing the Game." The entire festival is, in

fact, subsidized by the University ("I am 100% a University employee," says Hamel "and my assistants are students"), and this allows Hamel the opportunity to program based upon merit, with little regard for ticket sales or premieres. Madison being the University town that it is--practically every screening is sold out.

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