

## 2007 SEATTLE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL JOURNAL

I'll be in Seattle for the film festival's press screenings starting Tuesday, May 1, 2007. I'll commence my journal at that time. Thanks for checking in.

I'm in Seattle now (April 30) getting set to start the festival press screenings tomorrow. I have already seen the new McCaw Hall SIFF dedicated theater. I love the stadium seating and the great rake of seating (with a high screen nobody is ever going to be missing any subtitles.) The seats themselves are only adequate, leg room better than Broadway Performance Hall, but worse than Pacific Place. It'll be a good venue, I think, especially since I sprang for a parking pass in the lot across the street. So now, on with the 7 weeks of festival!

**All films rated with \*\*\*\* being best.**

### **IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOON** (d. David Sington)

There have been other documentaries about the NASA space program; but none as focused as this one: the story of the Apollo moon trips through the testaments of the living astronauts (with the huge exception of the reclusive Neil Armstrong, who is only glimpsed in some of the generous archival footage.) The film features large head close-up interviews with several astronauts, ranging from amusing anecdotes to spiritual awakenings. Especially interesting were Michael Collins and Buzz Aldren (two of the three Apollo 11 astronauts) and the amusing David Scott, from Apollo 12. The film was very well edited; and some of the footage from the moon was new to me. I lived vicariously through the space program, with more than casual interest at the time. This film brought back memories, and occasionally was quite moving. \*\*\* 1/4

### **RUNNING ON EMPTY (Der Lebensversicherer)** (d. Akinci Bülent)

This German film is about a traveling insurance salesman who hardly ever leaves the autobahns in his hunt for clients. The film is hard to categorize, not quite a thriller, more a character driven drama of despair. The main thing the film has going for it is a fascinating performance by Jens Harzer as the young salesman at the cusp of changing his life. The film is slow going, seems longer than its 1 3/4 hour running time. Yet it held my interested throughout, mainly because of the tension of not quite getting what was going on. \*\* 3/4

### **A WALK INTO THE SEA: DANNY WILLIAMS AND THE WARHOL FACTORY** (d. Esther B. Robinson)

Danny Williams was a Harvard graduate, class of '62, who became a Warhol Factory habitué: a speed freak, probably one of Andy's lovers, and an extremely talented, if unknown and mostly forgotten, experimental filmmaker and film editor. One day he disappeared, possibly into the sea - his body was never found. This film is a documentary by Williams' niece and combines interviews with his family and surviving Warhol luminaries who recall Williams with varied reactions, along with generous examples of Williams' surviving films. I felt a particular connection to this film, much the way I related to the [Cockettes](#) documentary at SIFF a few years ago. Maybe if I had made it to Harvard in the early '60s instead of M.I.T. this might have been about me. I, too became a film editor and a prototypical '60s gay druggie; but my life played out very differently from Williams'. \*\*\*

### **FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO** (d. Daniel Karlake)

Maybe it's just preaching to the choir (so to speak); but this almost perfectly wrought documentary about five families of GLBT offspring (including Richard Gephardt family and his lesbian daughter, and Anglican

I wasn't at all impressed by the trailer for this film, couldn't understand why the festival programmers were so enthusiastic. Then I experienced this revelation of human nature at its most bizarre, and all I can say is wow! I had never really followed the events of this film (a very different sort of love story) as they unfolded in the pop press and such tv junk news as Sally Jessy Raphael, Geraldo Rivera and Mike Douglas. Maybe had I lived in New York during the late '50s on, I probably couldn't have avoided it. But it made a fascinating documentary, although the filmmaking style is very straightforward (lots of big head close up interviews; but very well integrated with live action from the period). This is going to be one of the most popular documentaries at this festival. \*\*\* 1/4

**THE BET COLLECTOR** (d. Jeffrey Jeturian)

I've gotten in trouble in the past for panning Philippine films (after a poor review of a film at TIFF, somebody in Manilla wrote me a threatening e-mail, saying I had no right to criticize the film because I don't understand the culture.) Oh, well. I'm not going to criticize this film too harshly, so nobody write me threatening e-mail, ok? This is a meandering film about a middle age married lady who operates as a bet collector for the illegal numbers game which is apparently a huge business in the Philippines. It doesn't have a strong narrative, mostly it is a slice of her life as she goes about her business, grieves for her dead son, comforts another grieving grandfather and so on. By the end I felt wistfully grateful that I could share this lady's life for a while; but a number of people walked out when nothing seemed to happen and the film dragged on. \*\*

**SANCTUARY: LISA GERRARD** (d. Clive Collier)

Lisa Gerrard wasn't a familiar name to me. Yet it turns out that I know a lot of her music, especially her film score work in such films as *The Insider*, *Gladiator* and *Whale Rider*. Only I had always assumed that her ethereal, Celtic or Arab sounding non-verbal vocalizing was done by Enya. Dumb me. This music documentary is most successful (for me, at least) when it shows interviews with filmmakers and fellow film composers which delve into the creative process of creating film scores. Gerrard herself when interviewed spouts a lot of New Age platitudes. But her music is sublime, and that counts for a lot. \*\* 3/4

**THE CHAMPAGNE SPY** (d. Nadav Schirman)

For some reason (namely the description in the press screening flier), I thought this was a fiction film. Turns out it is yet another documentary (TOO MANY DOCUMENTARIES IN THESE PRESS SCREENINGS!) This one is by an Israeli crew, mainly interviewing the son of an Israeli spy who worked in Egypt during the late '50s an early '60s. The subject matter is inherently interesting; and the filmmaking, especially the editing, held up. \*\*\*

I was supposed to also watch *GYPSY CARAVAN* as the third film today, yet another documentary. It was highly recommended by people here who saw it in Vancouver; but I don't seem to be able to abide three documentaries in a row...so I skipped the screening. I know I'll regret it.

**AMERICAN SHOPPER** (d. Tamas Bojtor & Sybil Dessau)

What defines a mockumentary; and how does one separate this from a straight-on documentary? That is a question that this film begs. And the answer in this case is that it doesn't matter. What we have here is a superior, original work which defies categorization. I don't care whether it was written and acted, or whether it is on the level...the film is a pure pleasure. It's all about a new sport, invented in the wacky town of Columbia, MO. The sport is "aisling", a creative, timed shopping spree competition. I would think if fight clubs have caught on after their novel/film invention, that this fun, harmless sport has a chance to make it. In any case, the film is flawlessly shot and edited. It's very much in the style of a Christopher

Guest mockumentary, only with real people instead of seasoned professional actors. I've been complaining that the pre-festival press screenings have been too heavy with documentaries; but if they all were as captivating and joyous as this one, then I'd gladly watch documentaries all day. \*\*\* 3/4

**SEVERANCE** (d. Christopher Smith)

This is a well written and well acted horror-comedy mixture. It breaks no new ground. Yet it is quite entertaining. A group of workers for an English defense corporation think-tank get together in the Hungarian forests for a retreat to build team spirit. They land in the soup, so to speak. I could pretty well predict the outcome; but the journey was worth taking. And Danny Dyer is a fox. \*\*\*

**AACHI & SSIPAK** (d. Joe Bum-jin)

This Korean anime was completely outside of my sphere of interest. I was bored out of my skull, didn't get it (something about a future world controlled by excrement used as the sole energy supply); but since nobody else was leaving, I stuck it out to my regret. Some people were obviously amused. And I'll admit that the animation had a certain 2-D kinetic energy...only it was all unremitting chase sequences and stupid potty humor. Even as a midnight movie this was horrible. 1/2\*

**THE ELEPHANT AND THE SEA** (d. Woo Ming Jin)

This Malaysian film is an aimless slice-of-life about two guys: one a middle aged fisherman whose wife has died; the other a teenager subsisting on odd jobs. The pacing is glacial, dialog (what little there is) halting and uninformative. It has something of the feeling of Joe's [inside reference] [Tropical Malady](#)...but without any of that film's beauty or allegory. The only saving grace is that I really felt that I was getting a true look at the miserable lives led in the social strata covered in this film, sort of a fictionalized documentary. However the lack of structure and disconnection between the two stories made for a film which failed to work for me. \* 1/2

**KING OF KONG** (d. Seth Gordon)

Yet another documentary, only this one works. It's about the video game Kong and the titanic struggle of a nice guy from Washington state to unseat the evasive former world champion (who established his all time record in 1982), and set an accepted Guinness world record score himself. It's one little man against an entrenched establishment. The passions and grandiosity of these video game fans make for an involving and occasionally amusing film. \*\*\*

**BIG RIG** (d. Doug Pray)

Continuing the spate of mediocre documentaries, this one is about truckers and their endless treks across America. They're a fairly homogeneous bunch in this film: mostly southern redneck (or at least with accents that indicate such). The film has a great soundtrack of classic American songs (lots of Johnny Cash and stuff of that ilk). There's a lot of fast cut montages of highways and byways across the U.S., too many even. The photography is quite splendid...the film just goes on far longer than its material warrants. \*\* 1/2

**THIS IS ENGLAND** (d. Shane Meadows)

I got the feeling watching this affecting film that it was the English '80s version of Truffaut's *400 Blows*. Now, I have no reason to believe that Shane Meadows (a director I have admired in the past) is telling the story of his own early teens here; but he is the right age and the film rings incredibly true. The film is the story of a short period in the life of a 13 year old who recently lost his father in the Falkland war (we're heavily steeped in Thatcher times here). He gets involved with some skinheads, and he comes of age in their company. Thomas Turgoose may not be an actor of the future caliber of Jean-Pierre Léaud; but he's