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German drama a surprise film fest sellout

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So if you were a Hollywood studio head, and wanted to deliberately craft a movie that would be the top ticket-seller at the Wisconsin Film Festival, what kind of movie would it be?

Based on how tickets are selling for this year's festival, it would be a thriller in which a masseuse murdered a beloved campus mascot. And it would be in German.

Tickets went on sale at 10 a.m. last Saturday for the festival, which runs April 2-5, and early sales were very strong, strong enough that some folks hoping to buy tickets at wifilmfest.org had some trouble logging on. By noon, more than 10,000 tickets had sold for the festival.

Typically, early sellouts are films with strong local ties, since friends and family members can take up a lot of seats for a major premiere. The first sellout of the 11th annual festival was "**Winter of Frozen Dreams**," a noir thriller starring Thora Birch and Keith Carradine, and based on the notorious real-life Barbara Hoffman case in Madison from the 1970s. Hoffman was convicted of murdering one of her "massage" clients.

Close behind was the documentary "**Being Bucky**," which chronicles the lives of seven UW students fortunate enough to wear the head of Bucky Badger. Both films screen at Monona Terrace on Saturday night, April 4, and if you're hellbent on seeing either one, get to the theater early for a shot at the rush tickets that are usually available.

But the third sellout, "**Cherry Blossoms**," doesn't fit the pattern at all. It's a German drama about a middle-aged couple who, after the husband becomes seriously ill, find out they really don't know much about each other at all. It screens April 4 at the Bartell Theatre, and it sold out Saturday afternoon. This basically blows my theory out of the water from last week's column, that you "don't have to jump quite as early for foreign films" when buying tickets. Shows what I know.

Film festival director Meg Hamel said a couple of factors may have contributed to the quick sellout of "Cherry Blossoms." The 7:30 p.m. Saturday night start time is very convenient for most people, and the 200-seat Bartell is a small but very comfortable venue.

Oh, and it's a good movie.

"It's an extremely rich, moving film by one of Germany's most interesting and experienced female directors," Hamel said. "The audience here is quick to appreciate a rare opportunity to see such world-class cinema right here in Madison, and at such a decent price."

Tickets for most everything else are still available on the Web site, and film fans can also sign up for the festival's Twitter feed as well.

Incidentally, one of the big tickets at this year's festival is "**Art and Copy**," the new film by documentary filmmaker (and Madison native) Doug Pray about the world of advertising. Pray will be coming back to Madison to present the film on the festival's opening night.

To get warmed up, you can catch Pray's last documentary, "**Surfwise**," at a free screening at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 12, in the Fredric March Play Circle in the UW Memorial Union, 800 Langdon St. "Surfwise" was one of my favorite documentaries of last year, a fascinating account of an unorthodox family of surfers who basically dropped out of society and spent years hitting the beach. As idyllic as that sounds, it's equally fascinating to see what happens when the kids grow up, rebel against their authoritarian dad and try to drop back into society.

With spring break starting on Friday, the other on-campus film series are on hiatus, which cuts down on the options for film fans. Sundance is opening one new film, "**The Secrets**" (see Frances Provine's review on page 36) and is holding onto "**Wendy and Lucy**" for another week.

Sundance is also bringing back the second part of Steven Soderbergh's "**Che**" after taking it off the screen for a week. So if you've only seen "Che Part I" (the good times in Cuba), come back and catch "Che Part II" (the not-so-good times in Bolivia). Sundance has a nifty "Che" program with photos from the film that audience members can nab with a paid admission.