

Wisconsin Film Festival 2009: What to watch?

Tips for picking your movies

by Dean Robbins

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The [Wisconsin Film Festival](#) can be daunting. It features close to 200 movies at 10 venues over four days from April 2-5. Most of the movies are unknown quantities. How are we supposed to pick the ones we'd like best?

I don't agree with festival director Meg Hamel, who simply suggests throwing a dart at the schedule.

"I tell people not to worry too much about which films they choose," she says. "People always get hung up trying to figure out what the best movies are. But it's not possible. There's no way to look at the festival and say, 'This is what I'm going to like more than any other film.' The most successful way to go through the fest is to do it a little more randomly."

I see where Hamel is coming from. She wants festival-goers to experiment, try new things, be surprised. For some people that's fine, but I'm the type who wants to know what he's getting into. So I pressed Hamel -- the only person in town who's seen every one of these films -- to provide recommendations in different categories.

It wasn't easy, given the fact that Hamel feels affection for every movie she chose for the festival. But under duress, she came up with a few suggestions in various categories.

Inventive Animated Film

[Sita Sings the Blues](#)

Sunday, April 5, 8:15 pm, Orpheum Main Theatre

Nina Paley's animated film is about a San Francisco woman named Nina whose husband dumps her while he's away in India. Nina picks up the *Ramayana* and reads the story of the Hindu goddess Sita, whose situation is similar to her own.

"It's an extraordinary film, and it's going to have wide appeal," Hamel says. "It's incredibly inventive and extremely funny. Paley uses different animation styles to tell the interwoven stories. It throws all these clever ideas into a bag and works beautifully as a whole film. It's been hugely popular at festivals."

Hamel has slotted *Sita Sings the Blues* in a traditionally high-profile slot: the last screening of the weekend at the Orpheum Theatre.

Quirky Documentary

[Bunnyland](#)

Saturday, April 4, 3:30 p.m.; and Sunday, April 5, 1:15 p.m., Memorial Union Play Circle Theatre

Brett Hanover's documentary is simply about a man who lives in Appalachia. "It's just the story of this guy," Hamel says. "Things start to unfold as he tells about what he's been up to, and it becomes a very interesting and suspenseful story. The film is very straightforward and fresh, made by a young filmmaker without any pretension behind it. The best way to experience it is to just sit back and see where it's going to go."

Hamel also talks up [The Rock-afire Explosion](#) (Thursday, April 2, 11:15 p.m.; and Sunday, April 5, 5:30 p.m., Bartell Theatre), about cultists who repurpose the animatronic animal bands from Showbiz Pizza restaurants.

Straight Documentary

[Earth Days](#)

Thursday, April 2, 9:15 p.m., Wisconsin Union Theater

Robert Stone's film looks at the origins of the environmental movement, profiling nine Americans who helped make it all happen in the 1960s and '70s. "It's a classic documentary," Hamel says. "It's beautifully made, and it looks terrific."

Hamel also mentions [Food, Inc.](#) (Friday, April 3, Orpheum Main Theatre, 9:45 p.m.), which blows the lid off America's food industry.

Wisconsin Film

[Fishin' for Tradition: The Lutefisk Saga](#)

Friday, April 3, 7 p.m., Monona Terrace

Hamel thinks that, among locally made films, the shorts stand out most. "Fishin' for Tradition" is about that quintessential Wisconsin fish, lutefisk. Director Eric J. Nelson takes us to Norwegian lodges, church suppers and lutefisk-eating contests around the state.

"The film is clearly made by somebody who enjoys this subject," Hamel says. "And it's a lot of fun to watch. It educates us about the heritage of this fish and how it gets made, but it also celebrates the culture of Wisconsin."

Hamel also recommends [Being Bucky](#) (Saturday, April 4, Monona Terrace, 6:15 p.m., tickets available at door only), which profiles students who don the UW mascot outfit; and [Tracks](#) (Sunday, April 5, Monona Terrace, 11:15 a.m.), which follows the travails of two Milwaukee high school girls.

International Film

[Of Time and the City](#)

Friday, April 3, 7:30 p.m.; and Sunday, April 5, 3:45 p.m., Orpheum Stage Door Theatre

Terence Davies' film is a highly personal look at his hometown of Liverpool.

"It's a nostalgic piece about the city, and what it was like growing up there, done in a poetic, artful way," Hamel says. "It's so special that it defies categorization. It would be a great choice for people who want to see something distinctive and different."

Hamel also recommends Japan's [Tokyo Sonata Revanche](#) (Saturday, April 4, 9:45 p.m.; and Sunday, April 5, 11:15 a.m., Orpheum Stage Door, tickets available at door only), about a prostitute who gets mixed up with a bank robber; and France's [The Beaches of Agnes](#) (Thursday, April 2, 5 p.m.; and Sunday, April 5, 1 p.m., Madison Museum of Contemporary Art), an idiosyncratic memoir by director Agnes Varda.

English Language Narrative Film

[The New Year Parade](#)

Saturday, April 4, 3:45 p.m., Wisconsin Union Theater

This film tells the story of a working-class family's breakup, set against the backdrop of South Philadelphia's Mummers parade, which features elaborate costumes and floats.

"It's a marvelously nuanced story, rooted in a sense of place," Hamel says. "It couldn't be made anywhere else but in Philadelphia."

Hamel also recommends [Special People](#) (Sunday, April 5, Orpheum Theatre, 1:30 p.m.), part of the festival series "Film*Able: Disabilities on Screen." It's about a pretentious director creating a movie with three disabled teens.