

Join the crowd

The Wisconsin Film Festival entertains onscreen and off

by Amelia Cook

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For over a decade, the Wisconsin Film Festival has been transforming us through films that go beyond standard cinema fare, movies we might not otherwise have the opportunity to see. The films at this year's festival, April 2-5, are risky, hilarious, devastating and so fascinating that you might sacrifice a popcorn refill to stay in your seat. Each one is an adventure in learning something new, connecting to the community and growing.

I have often thought of watching a film as a solitary experience. Going to the movies makes a terrible first date or outing with a rarely seen friend. Sure, you show up together, sit next to each other, but then you immerse yourselves individually in the action on that big screen. So last year — my first Film Festival experience — I headed out to the festival unaccompanied. I was expecting a lot of silence: waiting in line, finding a seat, reading a book until the film started and quietly watching the shadows on the screen. Boy, was I wrong.

While I saw a lot of great films last year, my warmest memories are of the things that happened before and after the movies themselves: laughing with strangers in the rush line and the odd but friendly conversations in the hushed excitement of a theater full of people awaiting the dimming of the lights. There really wasn't a lot of silence. Instead, I found the camaraderie of a bunch of people who felt lucky to have tickets in their hands, who weren't taking for granted a break in the rain as they stood outside the Bartell. The people I met last year weren't film experts or cinema snobs, but just people who loved film and thought of going to the movies as something *more* than an activity for a stormy Saturday afternoon.

2009 marks the 11th year of the Wisconsin Film Festival, and this 11-year-old is starting to feel grown up. I'll save you its life story, but the Wisconsin Film Festival was born in 1999 with just a few venues showing a couple dozen films. Three thousand film buffs showed up that first year. Since then it's grown and grown, and this year over 200 films will be shown in 10 venues throughout downtown Madison. When all is said and done, it's likely that over 30,000 tickets will have been sold.

As it's grown, the Wisconsin Film Festival has developed its own funky personality, characterized by plenty of films that take a look at the stranger side of life. From grown men who collect animatronic animal bands to choreographed snowmobilers, the wacky goodness continues this year with a lineup of films that are as diverse and quirky as ever. I asked Film Festival director Meg Hamel about the tradition of showcasing the odd.

"Some of the most interesting films, by any measure, are those that take chances," says Hamel. "It's terrific to see filmmakers sticking to their ideas, no matter how improbable, and creating something that's really memorable."

So think of *your* favorite film. What makes *it* memorable? Probably, there's something in there that's quite familiar. Maybe the setting reminds you of your hometown. Perhaps the main character makes you think of your mother or an old boyfriend, or — surprise, surprise — yourself. Upon my first scrutiny of the festival listings, it seemed that nearly all of the films were chosen with me in mind. I had a really hard time narrowing them down to the ones highlighted here. Of course, I realize that the films *haven't* been selected only for me. Instead, this year's selections are films that many of you — of us — will connect to.

This is Meg Hamel's goal. "As I pull together the festival's program, I'm very intentionally trying to include a range of styles and subjects, to give the hardcore festival-goers variety and to suit many different tastes. This combination of films exists only here in Madison. Although many of these films will play in hundreds of places around the world, this particular mix is unique. When people choose which of these films to see, they are creating their own mini-festival. Of the thousands of people who attend, few people have made identical choices — everyone has their own Film Festival."

What a cool idea. There's not just one Film Festival in town next weekend — there are thousands. And one of those can be yours.

The Rock-a-fire Explosion

Bartell Theatre, Thursday (11:15 pm) & Sunday (5:45 pm)

This documentary — which at times feels surreal enough to be a mockumentary — is likely to stir up some long-forgotten memories in audience members who were young children (or parents of young children) in the 1980s. For those of you whose

parents weren't awesome enough to take you to Showbiz Pizza as a kid, the Rock-afire Explosion was the creepy, but cool, animatronic band that delighted kids and weirded out parents as they ate the mediocre pizza at the now-defunct restaurant chain. As we follow Chris Thrash's quest to reunite the band in his Alabama home, we meet other Rock-afire Explosion devotees as well as the man who started it all — Aaron Fetcher, inventor and creator of the Rock-afire Explosion. The stories and people in this film are quirky and rough around the edges, making for a nice bit of voyeurism into the extreme passion of Showbiz aficionados. Once you get past the shock value of seeing old friends Billy Bob, Fats Geronimo and the rest of the band, *The Rock-afire Explosion* is about how hard it is to say goodbye to childhood, and it leaves us wondering if we really have to let it go.

Handmade Nation

UW Memorial Union's Fredric March Play Circle, Friday (5 pm) & Saturday (8:45 pm)

Don't worry. There are absolutely no tea cozies or Kleenex box covers in this film. Instead, you'll meet the crafters responsible for latch hook rugs that look like Penthouse centerfolds, Milwaukee screen printers who create band posters, and a group that tags signposts with hand-knitted wraps (it's not vandalizing, they say, it's "fun-dalizing"). *Handmade Nation* takes a close look at the indie craft revolution that has reinvented traditional handicrafts like quilting and embroidery with the goal of creating one-of-a-kind items that are hip. Whether this movement stems from punk rock or simply from the need of young adults to keep creative in a world ruled by business suits and boring day jobs, indie crafts are rising up against mass production and soothing souls who long for something beautiful that comes from someone's kitchen, not a factory in a Third World nation.

It Takes a Cult

Bartell Theatre, Saturday, 5:15 pm

Everyone in the Love Family has the same last name. Their first names — monikers like Serious, Brotherhood and Calm — represent a value important to the community. Children are raised communally, and all personal property and money are forfeited to the group upon joining. The members refuse to handle cash, lugging pillowcases of bills to the supermarket to buy necessities, the grocery clerk taking what is needed and putting the change back into the pillowcase. There are no marriages and no birthdays — people are eternal and therefore have no need for these constructs — and, of course, there's sex, drugs and folk music. Wisconsin-born director Eric Johannsen grew up in the Love Family, a self-labeled spiritual tribe that had its heyday in the 1970s, and his film offers a well-rounded and personal account of the complexities of life in the group.

Being Bucky

Monona Terrace, Saturday, 6:15 pm

Whoop, college! At times *Being Bucky* feels like being in a frat house — what with all the crazy college boys running around with tablecloths on their heads, jumping into trash cans and simply goofing off. But there's a lot of substance here, too. It takes real dedication and passion to play the UW mascot, don that fiberglass badger head and jump around on the sports field. *Being Bucky* profiles the young men whose goal is not only to be Bucky Badger, but to be the best Bucky out there. From the hilarious yet demanding tryouts to all of the Bucky's (there are seven of 'em) piling on the bus that heads to Mascot Camp, you'll never look at our mascot the same way again.

A Wink and a Smile

Chazen Museum, Friday, 9:30 pm

High heels? Check. Feather boa? Check. Sparkly, fringed pasties? Check. School supply shopping is a bit different when you're registered for Miss Indigo Blue's Burlesque 101. *A Wink and a Smile* follows 10 women through a six-week course where they learn how to shake, shimmy and prepare for onstage disasters like bras hooked on fishnets. The class culminates in a graduation performance where each lady gets the chance to strut her stuff. While there is titillation to be had, burlesque isn't about stripping. In fact, most burlesque performers keep some strategically placed clothing on throughout their act. Instead, for the women we meet, it's about understanding their own femininity and accepting their own beautiful and imperfect bodies. For those of you who were smitten by *Girls Rock* at last year's festival, *A Wink and a Smile* makes a perfect sequel. Well, for those of you who are over 18, that is.

Lake Tahoe

Orpheum Main, Saturday, 1 pm

Lake Tahoe begins with a car accident. Juan's crash into a pole on a deserted highway on a sunny morning is never explained, but it seems intentional. Uninjured from the accident, he finds himself on a voyage from shop to shop, trying to find the specific part needed to get his Nissan moving again. Like other cinematic journeys, *Lake Tahoe* features messengers along the way with their own subtle lessons — an old man who feeds his dog cereal at the kitchen table, a single mom who longs for a night out to hear a punk band, and a kung fu-obsessed mechanic. It's these people who force Juan out of his sullen self and allow the

audience to catch glimpses of who he really is. As Juan completes his journey with a little help from his new friends, we start to understand the reason for his leaden demeanor and the catalyst for his crash.

Food, Inc.

Orpheum Main, Friday, 9:45 pm

If you've read *Fast Food Nation* or *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Food, Inc.* shouldn't be too surprising. In fact, the authors of both books are interviewed at length in this film. Still, it serves as a well-crafted reminder that much of the food we eat comes not from a farm, but from a factory. While the subjects and images will certainly induce strong emotions, this documentary is a very factual and fair look at the food industry. Of course, the major players — conglomerates like Perdue and Tyson — declined to be interviewed, but the film backs up its claims with solid numbers. Strangely enough, *Food, Inc.* doesn't leave the audience depressed. Instead, it leaves viewers armed with information and strategies to make a difference in the health of their environment, community and families.

Vincent: A Life in Color

Monona Terrace, Saturday, 3:30 pm

Vincent's certainly a character. Around Chicago, he's known by many names, including "The Man of 1,000 Suits," "Riverace" (which rhymes with Liberace) and "Suit Man." Every day, all summer long, he can be seen on the bridges above the Chicago River, wildly dressed in flamboyant suits in colors that rival Easter eggs and highlighter pens. With a devilish grin, he waves and turns and puts on a quick fashion show to the delight of the tourists on the boats below. He's made a name for himself and appears regularly on Chicago radio and television shows. Why does he do what he does? Vincent doesn't really say, but the film tosses around all sorts of theories. Vinny is a tough egg to crack, but in *Vincent: A Life in Color* we learn more about this complicated public figure who makes life in Chicago more colorful for residents and visitors.

32A

Orpheum Main, Friday, 7:30 pm

Set in late-1970s Dublin, 32A is a lush narrative that examines the heartbreak and mystery of the fuzzy time between childhood and adulthood. Thirteen-year-old Maeve and her friends are navigating the newness of boys and bras and are starting to see that their parents are nothing other than real people. The story is simple, but unfolds delicately through lifelike dialogue and beautiful imagery that suggests the world as seen through the eyes of a young girl. As Maeve, Ailish McCarthy is stunning — her black hair and blue eyes are otherworldly on the screen. As someone who once was a 13-year-old girl herself, let me say that 32A does an uncanny job re-creating the extremes of growing up.

Darius Goes West

Monona Terrace, Thursday, 5 pm

Darius Weems is one really cool kid. He's smart and thoughtful, loves to write raps and cracks up his friends on a regular basis. He also suffers from a fatal disease. Darius, 15, has Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a rapidly spreading form of muscular dystrophy that's the most common fatal genetic disorder in children. Kids with DMD rarely live past their early 20s — Darius' brother Mario died at age 19 from the same disease. Darius gets worse every day, and DMD has left him confined to a wheelchair. Knowing that his time is limited, Darius is determined to make the most of each day. With the help of his buddies, he goes after his biggest dream: to get his wheelchair tricked out on the MTV show *Pimp My Ride*. Darius and his buddies head out west, planning to spread the word about DMD along the way. When he boards the RV in Athens, Ga., he has no idea how many lives will be touched by his journey. *Darius Goes West* is a testament to the difference that one person can make in the lives of others.