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Wisconsin Film Festival Review 2009

With nearly 200 options, The Badger Herald chooses 5 top films to see this weekend

by Tony Lewis Wednesday, April 1, 2009 21:45

Introduction

The month of April is like film purgatory. You can see the light up ahead where the summer blockbusters and Oscar hopefuls roam, but you are not yet able to attain this celluloid ecstasy. Fortunately for us Wisconsinites, we have the Wisconsin Film Festival to temporarily fill the void. With nearly 200 films playing at 10 theaters, this four-day film heaven is sure to sate just about any moviegoer's appetite.

Determined to provide a wide variety of films to choose from, Wisconsin Film Festival Director Meg Hamel has been studying and learning about the world of contemporary filmmaking since last July in order to get this year's festival just right.

"I wanted to find films that explore social justice issues," Hamel said. "I wanted to find films that explore arts and humanities. And I wanted to find comedy, films that are just plain funny."

With categories ranging from "The Cream of the Crop: Farming and the Land on Film" to "Film-Able: Disabilities on Film," the selected films showcase current trends in storytelling and technology, Hamel said.

But in the end, the decision of what to see is entirely up to you.

"What is interesting is that everyone will have their own combination of films," Hamel said. "I like the idea that everyone makes their own film festival of sorts."

Taking on Hamel's advice, I have created my own festival below containing what I believe to be the top five films people should go see over the next four days. To see what else the Wisconsin Film Festival has to offer or to start buying tickets to your own festival, visit wifilmfest.org.

"JCVD"

Friday, April 3, midnight at the Orpheum Main Theater

Everybody thinks they know an action-hero actor, but do they know the man behind the muscles? Jean-Claude Van Damme, who plays himself in an alternate reality, is a washed-up actor with little money who leaves Hollywood for a quiet life in Brussels where he is still recognized as a national hero. Once there, he stops at a local bank to get some cash, only to find himself caught up in the midst of a robbery — a robbery that everybody else in the town thinks he committed.

Directed and written by gifted newcomer Mabrouk El Mechri, this highly original and imaginative film meshes both action and a witty screenplay loaded with biting sarcasm. After spending decades in low-rate action flicks, Van Damme plays a well-developed character with a heart for once and shines in what is by far his best role to date.

“One of my personal favorites of the Festival,” Hamel said. “It is a really fun, interesting, clever story that I know is going to be a hit this weekend.”

“Tracks”

Sunday, April 5, 11:15 a.m. at Monona Terrace

Cat is an average student at Milwaukee’s Shorewood High School with a typical suburban family. Yet, she feels like she needs a little more vitality in her life. In comes Claire, a free spirit with just the spark Cat is looking for. Together the two wrestle with everyday high school issues like drugs, sex, self-injury and family violence.

One of the four winners of this year’s “Wisconsin’s Own” Jury Prize, which is awarded to the festival’s top films based on artistic and technical merit, “Tracks” captures high school life in a way that is realistic, yet gritty and captivating. In his directorial debut, Josh Rosenberg, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2006, creates a story guaranteed to shake the emotional core of anyone who has suffered through the hardships of being a teenager.

“A very smart film and very well made with two very wonderful actors in the lead role,” Hamel said. “What is so impressive about this film, though, is the participation of so many people in the greater Milwaukee who pitched in to make this film.”

“Being Bucky”

Saturday, April 4, 6:15 p.m. at Monona Terrace

You see him at sports events and just about every campus-related event, but what is it like to actually *be* Buckingham U. Badger? That is the concept behind this hilarious documentary that stars the seven students who played Bucky during the 2007-08 school year. The film goes behind the head to reveal the trials, tribulations and sometimes pure ecstasy these seven men go through during Bucky boot camp, game day and everyday life.

From the remixed version of Nelly’s “Hot in Herre” [sic] playing during the film’s trailer to the clips of Bucky hopefuls competing against each other at boot camp to see who can perform more of those symbolic football game day pushups, this one looks like a surefire winner. Who among us has not wondered what it would be like to be Bucky for a day, and what better way to find out than from the mouths of those who played Bucky for an entire school year. Also fantastic is the director, Scott Smith, who happens to be a Madison native. So take a deep breath and hold on because word is, it truly reeks inside of that iconic head.

“Lightbulb”

Saturday, April 4, 8:15 p.m. at Wisconsin Union Theater

Have you popped the top off a cold brew with one of those talking bottle openers and thought to yourself, “How in the hell do people come up with ideas like this?” Well, this film is the story of the guy who invented that opener and how he had to go through numerous bad inventions — like a wristwatch that spins random lottery numbers — and severe financial strain before finally hitting it big. Set in Tucson, Ariz., the film is a colorful look at the bittersweet frustration of delayed dreams and effervescent hopefulness.

Having screened at a number of film festivals throughout the nation, this film has already garnered quite a bit of praise. Written and produced by Mike Cram, an inventor who lived the life that provides the loose inspiration

for the story, this film is bound to ring true with audiences as we battle through the current economic recession.

“It is a really fun story about optimism and friendship and really persisting until you reach your goal, combined with this beautiful city,” Hamel said. “Tucson is really picturesque. The three actors who play the leads are also all marvelous and extremely talented people who we will be seeing a lot more of in the future.”

“Harvard Beats Yale 29-29”

Friday, April 3, 9:00 p.m. at Wisconsin Union Theater

Deemed one of the best college football games of all-time, the 1968 Harvard/Yale matchup was a battle of the undefeateds in which Yale was highly favored to win, but lost after Harvard scored 16 points in the final 42 seconds to tie the score, inspiring the Harvard Crimson to print the headline “Harvard Beats Yale, 29-29.” This unique documentary combines interviews with a number of players from these two college teams and some old black and white footage of the game itself to tell a truly captivating story.

Did you know Oscar winner Tommy Lee Jones not only played offensive tackle for Harvard, but also roomed with Al Gore? How about that a Yale fullback from the 1968 team was dating two-time Oscar winner Meryl Streep and his teammate had a roommate by the name of George W. Bush? This fascinating real-life story is like a fictional movie only Hollywood could come up with but ten times better because Hollywood would never be able to match the film’s effortless charm.

“The fact is we know the outcome of the game, it is no surprise because it is even listed in the title,” Hamel said. “Yet, what is so amazing about the film is it is still really entertaining and it does that without special effects or any kind of inventive camera work.”

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