

2009 Wisconsin Film Festival, Day Two: 'We Like It Here'

by Dean Robbins

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The Wisconsin Film Festival doesn't usually have events on Friday afternoon, but the fest made an exception for Stephen Jarchow, a Madison native, UW grad and very funny film guy. Jarchow is the chairman of Here Media and Regent Entertainment, whose sister company Regent Releasing is distributing the Academy Award-winning Japanese film *Departures*. It screened at 12:30 p.m. at the UW Cinematheque, and Jarchow gave a talk at a 3 p.m. He answered questions from moderator Tino Balio and a classic Madison audience -- smart and just a bit too talkative.

Departures is about an out-of-work cellist who stumbles into a job in the funeral trade. He's the guy who prepares bodies for burial, working on the borderline between life and death. Jarchow says that the film was a longshot for a Best Foreign Film Oscar, and that he just about fell out of the Kodak Theatre's balcony when it won. Selling it to an American audience is another longshot, given the subject matter. But Jarchow thinks an exceptionally good trailer should help make the film a success -- success, in this case, meaning about \$2 or \$3 million at the box office.

Jarchow is impressed with the Wisconsin Film Festival's interest in foreign films. "Madison is a sophisticated film town. It's one of the best cities for foreign films in the U.S., outside the major markets."

Meg Skinner, of Madison, raved about *Departures* before Jarchow's talk. "It's moving and humorous, on a subject you wouldn't think would lend itself to humor." She and her husband, Neil, had two more films to see on Friday, plus three on Saturday and three on Sunday. Then there were the two they saw on Thursday.

Jarchow's admiration for Madison filmgoers was starting to make sense.

Coffee break

A barista at University Square's Coffee Bytes says business has been booming during the film festival. Clearly, people like Meg and Neil need many grandes to keep them going through their 11-film journey.

"We Like It Here!"

At the UW Memorial Union, the film festival's intense director, Meg Hamel, fretted about the weather. Yes, the sunny, beautiful weather. She worries that, on a nice day, people will skip the festival to clean their garages. "I always say that sleet is the best weather for the festival," she says.

Hamel notes that audiences have adored the festival's trailer, shown before every screening. It's a cleverly reworked version of a 1966 state promotional film, brimming with cheesy music and imagery. The film proudly trumpets the 1966 state motto, "We Like It Here!" Hamel suggests that this motto is preferable to the one recently unveiled by the state to almost universal dismay. She's toying with suggesting "We Like It Here!" as a replacement in her introduction to the Saturday screening of *Winter of Frozen Dreams*. Gov. Doyle is scheduled to be in attendance.

Volunteers

A group of volunteers stood outside the Union's Play Circle, breaking the bad news to people who didn't have tickets to *Handmade Nation*. The documentary about the indie craft movement was sold out, with little hope of rush tickets.

I asked the volunteers why they decided to donate their time to the festival.

"It's fun," one said.

"And social," said another.

Not profound, maybe, but true. So true.

From Shreveport to Madison

Jeffrey Goodman's *The Last Lullaby* is an absorbing indie thriller about a hit man who falls in love with his next victim. Tom Sizemore (*Saving Private Ryan*) inhabits the role of a heartless assassin who turns out to have a heart after all. Sasha Alexander (of CBS's *NCIS*) is the troubled beauty he first stalks, then takes under his wing. *The Last Lullaby* is a skillfully directed mood piece about a couple of loners, but just as you begin to sink into its silences, a shocking outbreak of violence makes you jump in your seat.

I spoke with Goodman before the film's 10 p.m. screening at MMoCA. This is no creepy Hollywood operator. For starters, Goodman lives in Shreveport, Louisiana. He's also the nicest filmmaker you'd ever want to meet, gently passionate about his work. How can you not adore a guy who became infatuated with movies after seeing Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* and reading reviews by Pauline Kael? He's in the business for love, not money.

That's not to say he doesn't have to think about money. A lot. Raising funds for the production was a Herculean task. Goodman went door to door in Shreveport, asking for \$50,000 increments from local doctors, dentists and real estate folks. He feels obliged to pay back his investors, and that's partly what drives him from festival to festival, drumming up interest. He's also worked out an unconventional distribution plan, with a run in one city at a time outside of New York and L.A. He'll be on hand at every location to appear at high schools, rotary clubs — wherever he can reach a potential audience. With only about one indie film per year breaking through to the mainstream — a *Juno* here, a *Slumdog Millionaire* there -- it will be an uphill battle.

Goodman didn't have to work quite so hard at the Wisconsin Film Festival. *The Last Lullaby* sold out over a week before the screening. "I'm blown away by the attendance here," he says, amazed that, for once, he won't have to hustle up a crowd. "It's such a luxury to arrive in a city and have the film festival director call and say, 'That part of your job is done.'"