

2009 Wisconsin Film Festival, Day One: Recession proof? Waterproof?

by David Medaris

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To die. In the rain. The facetious conjecture about how Hemingway might have answered the question regarding the chicken's motivation for crossing the road sprang to mind as the line to get into the Orpheum to see *500 Days of Summer* grew longer and longer and lo-o-o-o-onger Thursday night. The line for the 6 p.m. screening was already well established by 4:30 p.m. last night.

From the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's rooftop sculpture garden, the sight was impressive – people dashing across State Street at mid-block between the cross-traffic of bikes and Madison Metro buses, and growing numbers of pedestrians crossing the Dayton and Johnson street intersections as if drawn by some cinematic gravity. By 5 p.m., the line extended from the Orpheum's front door up State Street, turned the corner at Dayton and continued to the State Street Capitol parking ramp, where the line's tail found shelter.

Why would hundreds of people stand in line? In the rain? To demonstrate that their commitment to the Wisconsin Film Festival rivals that of Hemingway's chicken to cross the road.

Early reports of ticket sales suggest the festival may be resistant to the recession. The lines suggest the festival may thrive throughout the recession. The chatter in lines to get into Thursday night's screenings, and the looks on the faces of ticket holders and volunteers alike, suggest the festival may be an antidote to recession and provide a weekend of sanctuary from the relentless economic storms.

One volunteer, insulated from the rain and chill by nothing more than a film festival T-shirt (and pants, of course, and shoes, but the point is he was walking around in a T-shirt with no rain jacket or even an umbrella, demonstrating by his actions that he is among those of use who believe it's always T-shirt weather in Wisconsin no matter what), was patrolling the line, making sure everyone understood that this was the line for ticket-holders, and that those hoping to score rush tickets needed to move to a separate line. He reported that the vibe among those in line was one of excitement and anticipation.

Festival volunteers were feeding off the enthusiasm of the first-night audience, he reported. Indeed, volunteers' faces were animated, their enthusiasm palpable, their engagement enthusiastic.

I got into my first line of this year's festival an hour later, to see the 7:15 screening of *Jerichow*. This line was sheltered indoors, but it snaked through the hall leading to the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's multimedia auditorium. Its length suggested the room would be filled, and it almost was.

The woman sitting next to me had just dashed up State Street from the Chazen, where she had seen *Tokyo Sonata*. She said the movie had dispelled some of her preconceptions regarding Japan, which appeared less dense in population than she had imagined. Her brisk dash up State Street was another example of the audience's commitment to the festival. She had not had time to mark the ballot grading the film, but would have given it four, maybe 4.5, on a scale of five.

That's what I gave *Jerichow*, a taut German variation on the James M. Cain thriller *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It is not the sort of movie you can write about in detail without risking spoilers. Transplanted to rural Germany, it plays with the basic premise of love, trust and betrayal in ways that render the familiar story fresh and irresistible. Overlaid with European sensibility, its structure is crafted with exquisite patience and discipline. It grabbed me and didn't let go. The twist at the end is pure inventive brilliance, and caught me utterly off-guard.

I was heading back to the car when I heard my name. It was Meg Hamel, the festival's director. Her face was placid under an umbrella. She was pleased about how this first night was going, she said. Asked what I had seen so far. Listened to my enthusiasm for *Jerichow*. She had a long few days and nights ahead of her, but it's clear she has grown in her role: Hamel appeared relaxed, self-possessed, confident in her anticipation of prospects for this year's cinematic feast. The annual event has shaped her into a festival director in full. "Have a great weekend," she said, dashing off to her next obligation. To serve film. In the rain.