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Wisconsin Film Festival: Foreign films play by own rules

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One of the appeals of foreign films is that they don't need to play by the rules of Hollywood cinema. Even the most low-budget American indie film many times still adheres to basic mainstream movie conventions -- the guy gets the girl, the underdog prospers, good triumphs over evil.

But foreign filmmakers don't need to play by those rules, which can lead to that thrilling, unnerving moment midway through a film where the viewer realizes, "I don't know where this is going."

"Mermaid" and "Fear Me Not" were two films, one from Russia and the other from Denmark, that definitely provoked that moment in audiences at the Wisconsin Film Festival on Sunday.

The fact that "Mermaid" was even screened at all was a minor miracle. The Wisconsin festival was waiting for the print of the film to arrive from a film festival in California, but the print didn't arrive until just after the scheduled 3:30 p.m. start time. Once it finally showed up, the print had to be hustled up to the projectionist booth and then spliced to fit the Orpheum's ancient projector.

The audience was remarkably patient about the delay, a testament to the goodwill built up for the festival over the years, and at about 4 p.m., the movie started. "Mermaid" is, for the most part, a dizzyingly entertaining fable about an adorable misfit girl named Alice (as in Wonderland) who gets batted around by circumstance but still believes in true love.

Mariya Shalayeva was memorable as the quirky Alice, who believes she can make other people's wishes come true but not her own. As a young woman, Alice affects green hair and a winningly crooked smile as she navigates the mean streets of Moscow dressed as a giant cell phone. Eventually, she falls for a shady post-Glasnost entrepreneur who sells real estate on the moon and is convinced that true love will conquer all.

Does it? Up until the last two minutes of the film, you'd assume so, as "Mermaid" seems to have a lot in common with a film like "Amelie." But the sudden, jarring ending undercut the lighter, fabulist tone that the film had labored to sustain. It was certainly a bold choice, but not necessarily a smart or well-earned one.

"Fear Me Not" actually had a fairly conventional ending -- it was the disturbing journey before that had my stomach in knots for the last half of the movie, half-wishing it would just end already. It's the sixth film in a row to play the film festival by Danish screenwriter/director Anders Thomas Jensen (his work includes "Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself," "Brothers" and "Adam's Apples").

Jensen co-wrote "Fear Me Not," a thriller that features Ulrich Thomsen ("Brothers" and "Adam's Apples") as a mild-mannered father named Mikhael who is in a bit of a rut and decides to take part in a clinic trial for a new anti-depressant. The new drug initially makes him feel more cheerful and more focused, but other patients are seeing nastier side effects, such as violent outbursts, and the trial is terminated.

But Mikhael has several months of pills still and doesn't want to give them up. The film charts the kind-hearted family man's slow transformation into a full-blown sociopath, capable of terrorizing a teenage hitchhiker or playing cruel mind games on his wife. What makes the film extra creepy is Thomsen's performance: He plays Mikhael as almost unflinchingly sweet and docile, even when he's thinking and doing the most horrible things.

Movies like this would usually portray the Mikhael character as unabashedly evil, but "Fear Me Not" doesn't let us off so easy, suggesting such terrible urges lurk in even the nicest men. It was well made, thoughtful, suspenseful, and I was really glad when it was over.