

Wisconsin Film Festival announces 2009 audience awards, attendance up once again

Busy days over, more ahead for fest director Meg Hamel

by Kenneth Burns

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The filmgoers have spoken. Audiences at the 2009 [Wisconsin Film Festival](#) rated their favorite flicks, and here are the results of the tallying. In the narrative category, the winner is the Oscar-winning Japanese film *Departures*, about an accidental funeral professional, and taking the documentary prize is *Being Bucky*, about the guys who run around football fields dressed as the UW mascot Bucky Badger.

The films could hardly be more different. That's perfect, according to festival director Meg Hamel. "It's great to have an audience that's broadly appreciative," she says. "It's cool that there is both a film that's extremely local -- could it possibly get more local, more Wisconsin than Bucky Badger? -- and that the narrative film is something so exquisite from Japan, a story that's an example of the best cinema can do."

The festival ended Sunday after a four-day run that saw 32,645 attendees, up from 30,028 last year. Sunday evening saw Hamel making her final public remarks to festival patrons, before the Orpheum Theatre screening of the animated musical *Sita Sings the Blues*. Although the festival had no official closing film, Hamel thinks of the last screening at the Orpheum as the one audiences take home with them. Speaking before that last screening, she says, "That's when I try to choke back the tears and thank the audience, and everyone."

Just after a fest, a film festival director has busy days. First, earlier this week, Hamel had to ship lots of films to their next destinations, especially other festivals. "You learn the value of karma," Hamel says of this process. "You depend on other fests doing the right thing and getting the films to us for our fest." Then she hopped into a rented truck and returned projection equipment and film reels to their home in Chicago. After the frenzy of festival, the trip felt like a mini vacation: "We stopped at the mall. I bought four pairs of shoes."

What is Meg Hamel's most vivid memory of this year's festival? It's the audience members who enthusiastically sang along with the Wisconsin Film Festival trailer. That kind of participation is a good sign. "It's hard for any festival to create a trailer people won't mock," she says. "What it means to me is that people's affection for this event and their connection and participation and ownership are strong. People really liked being there."

Hamel is looking ahead to the 2010 festival, scheduled for April 15-18 -- later in the spring than this year's event, thanks to UW-Madison's spring break. Helping her with the logistics is the festival's newest hire, and its other paid employee: operations director Allen Ebert (no relation to that other Ebert). She can't disclose any details about the upcoming festival -- some of next year's films haven't been made yet -- but she can say that she is committed to featuring African films. "They have been underrepresented at recent festivals," she says.

It's fitting that the film festival concludes with the results of the audience polling since, as Hamel notes, there would be no festival without the audience. "If nobody came, there'd just be lights going on and off," she says. "This experience is all about watching movies in the dark. I'm so happy people take advantage of the opportunity."