

HIGH PLAINS READER

Fargo Film Festival in Review

The 8th annual Fargo Film Festival has now passed into history. It was five nights and four days of movie screenings, panel discussions, wining and dining, networking with other filmmakers, and just an overall good time (despite a few technical glitches and the North Dakota winter weather). I was able to see most of this year's afternoon and evening screenings (but missing the morning schedules), driving back and forth from Grand Forks each day.

Appropriately kicking off the festivities was a movie that celebrates the sometimes uneasy blend (or is it "collision") of the can-do independent spirit and the mega-budget Hollywood spectacular. In 1981, three pre-teen boys were so impressed by "Raiders of the Lost Ark" that they were inspired not just to make movies, but to remake their own version of Spielberg's epic, virtually shot by shot, with a primitive home video camera. It took them seven years, but they managed to pull it off, finding usable locations, building their own sets and costumes and recruiting friends and neighborhood kids to help.

The resulting amateur remake, while moderately diverting on an entertainment level (much more so if you're familiar with the original), is a mind-boggling and inspiring demonstration of how persistent, single-minded moviemakers, whatever their age, experience, and budget, can turn a seemingly impossible dream into reality.

The rest of the week saw a wide variety of independent visions from two minutes to two hours in length, all interesting to see and some truly impressive. The judges had difficult decisions to choose the winners and honorable mentions in the various categories, but the "Best of Show," "Best Director," and "Best Documentary Short" all went to Hanna Polak's haunting depiction of homeless children in Moscow, "The Children of Leningradsky."

Several notable features were screened, with "Best Narrative Feature" deservedly going to Greg Chwerchak's "Greetings from the Shore," a heartwarming character drama of a girl trying to earn money for college but getting mixed up with some shady dealings going on at an upscale resort town. Incredibly, the filmmakers revealed it was made for only a half-million dollars, yet it looks like it cost ten times that.

The honorable mention for feature went to the reality-style romantic comedy-drama, "Say I Do," by Ron Vignone. Alternately funny, engrossing, and touching, it was made on DV as though it were the video shot for a wedding that goes horribly wrong when the limo breaks down during an unplanned side trip on the way to the ceremony.

Stars Tanna Frederick (who won the festival's "Best Actress" award) and David Proval participated in the Saturday luncheon panel about making it in Hollywood, and were on hand at the Friday night screening of their similarly-themed film "Hollywood Dreams," a very funny, sometimes poignant, and all-too-realistic comedy-drama directed by noted independent filmmaker Henry Jaglom.

"The Reawakening," narrative feature winner in the "Native American Voices" division, is a thought-provoking dramatization of the clash between traditional native values, assimilation, and the hot issue of reservation gambling casinos. The well-structured plot effectively blends murder mystery, corporate thriller, cultural identity crisis, and romance, but has a disconcertingly abrupt conclusion, as if time was running out and the movie had to be finished.

"Maria Tallchief" is a fascinating portrait of the Native American girl who rose from obscurity in 1920s Oklahoma to become the first American ballet superstar, one of the founding members of the New York City Ballet with her husband George Balanchine in the 1940s, and continues to teach ballet in her 80s. It won overall "Documentary Feature" as well as Documentary Feature in the Native American Voices division and the Bill Snyder Award for Documentary Film Making.

Some of the other memorable documentaries included "Ed & Vern's Rock Store," by Christopher Leps, and "Ridin' & Rhymin'" by Dawn Smallman and Greg Snider, "Long Haul," by Erin Hudson, and "The Fighting Cholitas," by Mariam Jobrani.

Beautiful to look at, if sometimes a bit repetitive, is Ann Levy's "Waterscape: Illusions," an honorable mention in the Experimental category for its lovely nature photography and in-depth profile of swans.

"Cuba Libre" is an entertaining dark comedy from Spain. It is centered around the media coverage of a group of free-spirited anarchists in Madrid who take refuge in the Cuban Embassy just as Castro announces free elections and the ambassador is poised to campaign for president against him.

"The Call of Cthulhu" is an amazingly gripping horror fantasy adapting the H. P. Lovecraft story to the screen in the carefully stylized manner of a black and white silent expressionist film, with outstanding photography intensified by its evocative orchestral music score. It's difficult to believe it was shot on mini DV with a minuscule budget.

Philippe Spurrell's "The Descendant" is an oddly gripping ghost story/coverup conspiracy drama from Canada, inspired by little-known actual incidents regarding Canada's involvement with slavery during the 19th century.

Three of the creators of “305” comprised the Friday luncheon panel and introduced the world premiere of their feature-length mockumentary, which they expanded from their YouTube short spoof of the recent green screen sword and sandal action epic, “300.” While often a bit silly, they manage to sustain their story of five less-known bumbling Spartan soldiers for 85 minutes, with impressive computer graphic effects.

A few of the many memorable shorts included Daniel Chamorro’s cleverly constructed allegory “Catharsis,” Dustin Riccio’s moody “A Place to Bury My Heart,” Justin Ullyott and Levi Moch’s “Work,” Travis Lynn Mattick’s “The Lost Road: Penis Stab-Match,” Jeff Solylo’s “Fear Leaps Out,” Gayle Knutson’s “Prisoner 32,232,” and Kak Lee’s heartfelt tribute to the late professor Rusty Casselton.

The annual Fargo Film Festival is a valuable asset to the region. It’s a great place for audiences to see new independent films and a great place for moviemakers to be inspired (or re-inspired) by viewing what others have been doing. And, as one of the panels pointed out, it can serve filmmakers as an important link in leading to future productions through meeting others in their business.