

9th Inverness Film Festival 2011

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THE Global Film initiative phrase “every person has a voice, every voice tells a story and every story reveals a world” certainly resonated in this year’s Inverness Film Festival programme, representing an expanded world of diverse, inspiring and visionary cinema.

Featuring 20 Scottish, 1 UK and 2 world premieres, this year’s programme was an invitation for discovery, cementing the festival’s growing reputation as a major event both locally and nationally. Consistently presenting films of exceptional quality, the festival continues to be distinctive for the element of adventure and risk. The commitment of IFF Director Paul Taylor in screening the very best international product and introducing audiences to emerging and independent film makers was very much in evidence in the selection of this year’s programme.



The White Meadows

The haunting visual poetry of Iranian Director Mohammad Rasoulof’s *The White Meadows*, Raha Erdem’s intriguing and poignant *Kosmos*, Andrea Arnold’s reimagining of *Wuthering Heights*, Michel Ocelot’s magical *Tales of the Night*, exciting new work from first time feature directors such as Pabio Giorgelli’s *Las Acacias* and Mike Cahill’s *Another Earth*, together with outstanding performances from Michael Fassbender in *Shame* and

Michael Shannon in *Take Shelter* were just some of the memorable highlights of this year's festival. Australian film *Red Dog*, directed by Kriv Stenders, received the 2011 IFF Audience Award designed by Isle of Harris-based artist Steve Dilworth for the most popular film as voted by festival audiences.

Directed by Terence Davies, *The Deep Blue Sea* opened the festival with excellent performances from Rachel Weisz, Tom Hiddlestone and Simon Russell Beale. Adapted from Terence Rattigan's 1952 play, this is a story told primarily through dialogue, and as such misses the opportunity for Davies' cinematic genius to be seen and felt consistently throughout, subsumed as it is by Rattigan's melodrama.



The Deep Blue Sea

Three strong lead performances carry the film through staged dialogue and emotive musical cues more at home on stage than on screen. Although the subject matter is consistent with the themes explored in Davies' previous work in relation to individual freedom and societal constraint, human memory and collective identity, the project might have been better served by Davies taking the bones of Rattigan's play and its triad relationship and writing his own screenplay. Davies is a director capable of incredible subtlety and depth, illustrated beautifully in the films shown at last years' festival as part of a retrospective of his work; *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, *House of Mirth* and *Of Time and the City*.

There are sequences in *The Deep Blue Sea* where we catch a glimmer of his mastery; a single shot at the end of the film, for example, where the camera pans from Hester (Weisz) standing at the window having symbolically opened the curtains on her life, moving down and onto the movement of everyday life on the street below. The camera finally comes to rest upon the burnt out wreckage of a bombed building and in a single take with no

dialogue we see the individual character and her situation with clarity and hope, together with the collective emotional and physical wreckage of post war Britain. Such visual eloquence seems at odds with the trappings of Rattigan's melodrama which, however well acted, remains tethered to its own time. At his best Davies' work is timeless, faithfully depicting the world his characters inhabit but thematically transcending it.

Andrea Arnold's arresting and visceral adaptation of Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights* is perhaps closest to the dark epicentre of the book, stripping away the storyline and choosing instead to visually bind the characters to the landscape and each other.



Wuthering Heights

Irish cinematographer Robbie Ryan, who also worked with Arnold on *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, immediately sets the tone of the piece in the opening sequences; scratched drawings on the interior cottage walls, a palette of cold cobalt blue and greys and the dominance of black within the frame. We recognise immediately that this is not the language of a Romantic costume drama but a story anchored in human fallibility and cruelty; life carved out of stone and mud. The insular, isolated world of the Earnshaw farm is further defined by the dimensions of the screen which also contribute to the intimacy and intensity of the composition.

The only expansion is in the natural world, the minutiae of flora and fauna and the vistas of sky, mountain and moorland. It is nature at its most unforgiving; howling wind and unrelenting rain that by the end of the film have seeped into your bones. Use of close up and hand held cameras are particularly effective in establishing intimacy and motive. A sequence with Cathy and Heathcliff on horseback where the audience like Heathcliff, have their face buried in Cathy's hair, cutting to a hand on the flank of the animal, makes the connection between love and

instinct. There are many such images in the film, with parallels drawn between human behaviour and animal instinct, but this robust insistence on life is ultimately eclipsed in the opening and closing images of dust in sunlight and fireflies illuminated in darkness, such as we are.

For an adaptation of a literary classic there is little dialogue present, just the enormity of nature and the all-consuming passion that ultimately destroys Cathy, Heathcliff and everyone around them. Arnold's previous work, rooted in gritty urban surroundings and human need, is stylistically consistent in this latest work. Her interpretation of *Wuthering Heights* is an anti romance, defying expectations of Gothic Romanticism and period costume drama.

While the unflinching vision of this production is to be admired, weaknesses do lie in the casting of unknowns on this occasion in roles which require a knowing that inexperience cannot convey. Young Heathcliff and Cathy, played by Solomon Glave and Shannon Beer, get away with natural tentativeness and youthful exuberance, qualities lived rather than acted. Their adult selves James Howson and Kara Scodelario are more problematic.

Howson gives a brooding but mute performance in terms of emotional gravitas and whilst Scodelario shows promise as the duplicitous Cathy, what actually creates the intensity and depth within the relationship isn't the chemistry or acting ability of the two leads but very clever editing in the second half of the film which visually creates their haunting of each other; innocence and bitter experience established through flashbacks. Fragments of imagery such as Cathy's eye framed by a crack in the barn door with Heathcliff locked inside, the two forever separated, is a powerful distillation of the thematic content of the film and the ultimate fate of its characters. Returning to Eden Court in December, *Wuthering Heights* is a bold and refreshing adaptation that warrants viewing.

Co-presented by the Global Film Initiative as part of their Global lens 2011 film series, *The White Meadows* (Keshtzar Haye Sepid) by director Mohammad Rasoulof reveals a vision of Iran we would not ordinarily see. Sentenced to imprisonment in December 2010 with Editor Jafar Panahi, Rasoulof's life and art are a vivid illustration of the need for freedom of expression and a reminder of the privilege of sitting as part of a film festival audience we take entirely for granted. His stark and hauntingly beautiful allegory of a boatman travelling through a dream-like archipelago collecting tears remains anchored in the harsh reality of political oppression and intolerance.



The White Meadows

Rasoulof's film is a rare and powerful piece of work, full of multi-layered narratives and poetic distillation of language. This is a world in which the saltiness of sea and land will only be cured by the sinlessness and sacrifice of the resident population. The director's positioning of the human figure within a pitiless salt encrusted landscape and horizonless ocean create unforgettable imagery; a young bride sacrificed to the sea in an act of submission amongst floating lamps of fire or a sequence in which a floating graveyard is revealed, each piece of wood signifying the weighed down body of an exile. Particularly affecting is the collection of inaudible "petitions" of speech in jars, we see a woman through a curtain speaking imploringly into a jar then sealing it, the collective jars to be taken deep into a fairy well, the carrier sacrificed in order to serve the greater good.

One of the most affecting sequences depicts a painter who "sees wrongly so he paints wrongly". He refuses to acknowledge the accepted colour of the sea as blue and is tortured, submerged in the blinding salt of the ocean, made to climb a ladder and commanded to look at the sun. When the painter refuses to lie to save himself animal urine is poured into his eyes and he is exiled, preventing him from corrupting others.

Blindness is the outcome of seeing a different colour, or imprisonment in the case of the film's creators. The boatman as witness and protagonist is complicit in procuring tears which are ultimately returned to the sea, continuing the cycle of appeasement of the state. What appears to be a cleansing or healing rite is also one of endurance and survival. The poetic element of Rasoulof's work is ironically a product of cinematic language which evolves out of political oppression, abstracted and interwoven with earlier traditions of storytelling. While the narrative is fragmented, the truth of the tale is inescapable, communicated visually in images which once seen are etched into the mind.

Winner of the Special Jury prize at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, director Mike Cahill's collaboration with writer/lead actress Brit Marling, *Another Earth*, is an impressive debut feature. Shot and edited by its director, it is an unexpectedly profound meditation on the randomness of life, the illusion of reality and self knowledge/determination. The film's grainy, earthbound visual style succeeds in combining extraordinary possibility with the everyday, allowing suspension of disbelief.



Another Earth

Having been accepted to an astrophysics programme, promising student Rhoda Williams (Marling) gets drunk to celebrate, crashing her car and killing a mother and son at the exact moment that a duplicate earth becomes visible. The appearance of Earth 2, a visible manifestation of a parallel world, ever present throughout the film, taps into the eternal question of “what if?” The very best science fiction always has humanity at its core and this is very much the baseline of *Another Earth*, which raises infinitely more questions than it answers.

Sent to prison, Rhoda is later released and learns that the driver/father in the other car, composer William Burroughs (William Mapother), survived the accident, setting her on a path of redemption. She anonymously makes contact with him, offering her services as a house cleaner and their relationship slowly develops, hinging tension on discovery of the truth. When Rhoda enters a competition offering a shuttle journey to Earth 2 the possibility of changing past, present and future emerges. Although conceptually dense it is the emotional core of the film and its central performances that make *Another Earth* such an engaging piece of cinema. Longing for a different life, having regret over past mistakes and the need for forgiveness are universal human experiences. *Another Earth* leaves you contemplating the opportunity and mystery of life’s choices, the nature of what makes us human and “the coming true of your most improbable dream” long after the film has ended.

Winner of the Sutherland Trophy at the 2011 BFI awards, the ACID Award, Golden Camera and Young Critics Award for Best Feature at Cannes 2011, director Pablo Giorgelli’s debut feature *Las Acacias* is a beautifully understated study of the beginning of a relationship. The simplicity of the story; a truck driver giving a lift to a woman and her child, gradually develops into a deepening bond through the largely silent cumulative exchange between them. The gift is watching what the characters draw out of each other.



Las Acacias

German De Silva as Ruben and Hebe Duarte as Jacinta are perfectly cast, conveying stoicism, reserve and loss, a product of experience in relation to their respective pasts, but it is the infant Anahi, played by Nayra Calle

Mamani, in her innocence and wide eyed engagement with the world that binds them together. Defying expectations of the road movie, this journey between Paraguay and Argentina in all its tentativeness is quietly observed, brilliantly executed and extremely moving.

Another thoroughly engaging first feature, *Mad Bastards* from Australian director Brendan Fletcher, utilises a largely non-professional cast, drawing on the film maker's work in documentaries and the personal experiences of its actors to create an absorbing and insightful portrait of an outback community. The story of a father travelling from the city to meet a son he has never known is also a study of masculinity, familial bonds and the wider cultural issue of reconciliation.

Like Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah*, *Mad Bastards* is an uncompromising view of the plight of Aboriginal Australians, and while the dialogue is laboured in places, the investment of actors in telling their own stories is immediately palpable. Nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and co-written by Fletcher and actors Dean Daley Jones and Greg Tait, the honesty of this production has real integrity, humour and self determination at its core. Interviews with the actors at the end of the film make the audience directly aware of the impact of the real life stories they have just witnessed. An interesting combination of fiction and documentary with further scope for creative development, *Mad Bastards* is a convincing debut.

The world premiere of David Hutchinson's *Graders* showed promise, and it will be interesting to see the director's work develop in future projects. Excellent use of locations in Lochinver, Kinlochbervie, Buckie and Edinburgh, together with interesting camera work by director of photography J Daniel Pacey, contributes much to the visual style of the film. Accents of red; liver in the kitchen being made into pate, a suspended heart in a car interior seen against snow and the red interior of a caravan heighten our sense of danger, and while the opening sequence of a girl fleeing through a forest is familiar, this immediately captures the imagination.



Graders

The sinister secrets of an Innisaig fish factory and its link to the global organ trade are slowly revealed, together with a healthy dose of red herrings to keep the audience guessing. Comic/ surreal elements might have played a larger part in proceedings and contributed more stylistically to the film. Thankfully Hutchinson defies

contemporary Horror conventions and doesn't show the audience too much too soon. The main weakness in this production is the casting, the pace and trajectory of the story out of kilter with the strength of delivery from many of the actors. Some of the acting is extremely awkward, and the horror of discovery underplayed. Had the writing and delivery equalled each other this might have resulted in a much tighter production. Nevertheless it is refreshing to see Highland locations being used for a different genre of storytelling.

Winner of the Critics Week Grand Prize and the SACD Award at this year's Cannes Film Festival, Jeff Nichols second film *Take Shelter* is a compelling study of fear featuring a truly gripping performance by Michael Shannon. Living on a knife-edge between truth and madness and plagued by apocalyptic nightmares, Shannon's character Curtis articulates the unease of our world where man no longer controls nature. While there have been plenty of doomsday films made in the last few years based on the premise of environmental disasters, pandemics and invading zombies, there can really be nothing more terrifying than the human mind turned in on itself.

Nichols successfully builds suspense throughout the film, aided by strong central performances from Shannon and Jessica Chastain as his wife Samantha. We are never certain what's coming, the elusiveness of the truth succeeds in making the impending doom whatever we imagine it to be, whether of biblical or environmentally global proportions. Interestingly the penultimate scene in human terms comes before the climax. Having built a hurricane shelter below ground to protect his family, Curtis is unable to open the door because he doesn't believe that the storm has passed. In that moment he becomes the sum of all fears that drive people into their own four walls of confinement. Having taken the journey with this character, strangely, we want him to be right, to be vindicated and have his sanity intact. When the actual storm does come we are left to imagine what follows, and this ambiguous ending between natural and supernatural forces succeeds in encouraging the audience to question their own belief.

One of the great pleasures of IFF 2011 was Michel Ocelot's *Tales of The Night* (Les Contes De La Nuit), six folk tales created and introduced in the setting of an old cinema by an aged technician, a boy and a girl, moving fluidly between continents and history and bringing each story to life in glorious animated silhouette. Illuminated by vividly colourful backdrops, Ocelot's film is an absolute joy, not just for its visual qualities but for its effect on the audience. It was impossible not to smile from the first frame to the last.

The stories are timelessly appealing, but this film also feels very much like a tribute to cinema in its earliest form; as a source of magic and wonder, flickering out of the shadows and igniting the collective imagination. What is so inspiring about Michel Ocelot's vision is that he embodies the film maker as magician so completely; incredible artistry suspending our disbelief and utterly transporting the audience. There is something very ancient in his aesthetic, like shadow play in firelight which is universally resonant regardless of age or cultural background. Ocelot combines this idea of the archetypal cave with the fantastic and whimsical. (Who could possibly resist a dancing porcupine or a French speaking iguana?)

F.W. Murnau's 1927 silent classic *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* with a new score performed live by the Graeme Stephen Quintet, provided an enjoyable accompaniment to this morality tale from an age of industrialisation. While a fusion of jazz, folk, and classical influences in the soundtrack brought elements of the

story and its thematic content to life, the score meandered somewhat between ambient accompaniment, aural illustration and engagement between the actual crafting of the images and musical form.

Arguably the latter approach provided the most seamless and convincing relationship between sound and image; illustrated by one of Murnau's city montage sequences accompanied by overlapping rhythms, the technique of the film maker and composer in synthesis with each other to convey the feeling, energy and impetus of urban life. More obvious musical illustrations in the soundtrack were less convincing, providing sound effects rather than adding layers of interpretation to the imagery on screen. At its very best the art of accompanying silent film is in a performance where the audience are not consciously aware of the musician(s), a level of integration that moves beyond aural illustration. Whilst there were such points of intersection in this performance this was not consistently sustained, resulting overall in a very entertaining but at times superficial interpretation of the film.



Kosmos

Part of an exciting wave of new Turkish cinema, *Kosmos*, by director Raha Erdem, was one of the most surprising and thought-provoking films of the festival. The arrival of a stranger Kosmos (Sermet Yesil) who rescues a drowning child and is at first welcomed into a close-knit community becomes a catalyst for a wider examination of the human condition. Kosmos emerges as an intriguingly complex and erratic character; archetypal fool, vagrant and mystic/holy man who against a backdrop of military control and constant gunfire begins to perform miracles, curing the residents of what ails them.

Use of animal cries and howling juxtaposed with human interactions, together with recurrent images of cows being slaughtered throughout the film, creates an image of humanity in terms of mortality. Though Kosmos imparts wisdom like "a great dervish" and begins to transform lives through healing, the inhabitants he rescues are crucially unable to heal themselves and begin to regress. A woman whose leg he heals remains dependent on her medication, a mute boy who he cures becomes sick and dies, fortunes are reversed and the saviour

becomes a hunted foreigner/outsider. The film ends as it began with the lone figure stumbling through the snowy expanse of landscape and the moon reduced to a distant star, the world contracted by human perception and fallibility.

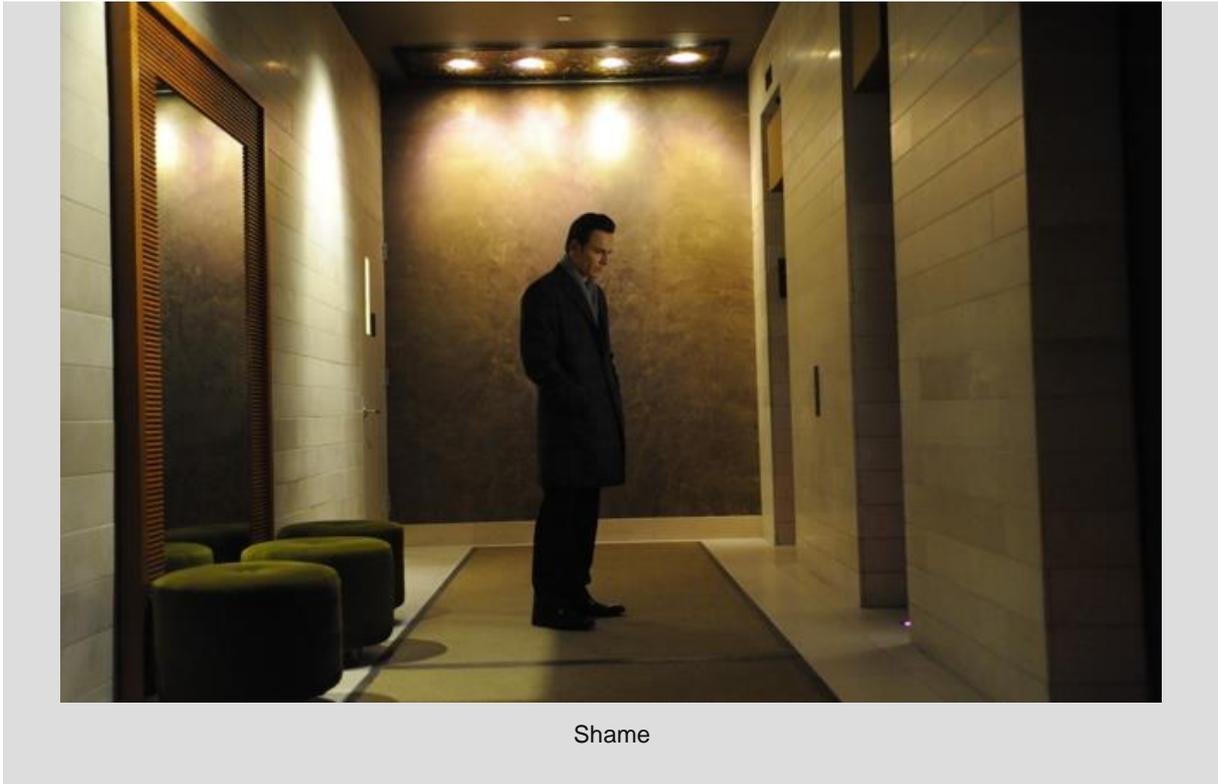
Like the work of Nuri Bilge Ceylan there is a certain bleakness of vision present, thankfully tempered by episodes of comedy and extraordinary beauty. The idea that “gravity doesn’t pull down, gravity in our bodies comes from the love we have” is made visually manifest in one of the most uplifting moments in the film, an interior sequence where human flight is realised. Life is presented in light of possibility; the arrival of a crashed satellite could be a sign from another world or just a rocket fired from across the border. Throughout the film Kosmos is a captivating figure; we have the sense that he could redeem the world if only we could redeem ourselves. Watching him disappear into the distance, presumably to stumble upon another settlement it is impossible not to feel that the choice of its residents will not be exactly the same the world over. Delightfully left field and affectingly poignant, *Kosmos* was one of the great discoveries in this years programme.

Focusing on Scottish film making and Highland connections, art historian, film maker and author Timothy Neat was the focus of this year’s retrospective, showcasing his work in independent documentary and film, including *The Summer Walkers*, *Hallaig*, *Time is a Country*, *Journey To a Kingdom*, *Rathad Nan Ceard*, *The Tree of Liberty*, *Play Me Something* and *Walk Me Home*.

A strong selection of short documentaries included screenings of Ruth Reid’s *Night Shift*, Tali Yankelevich’s *The Perfect Fit* and Amy Rose’s *Twinset*, while in the short fiction category *Rite*. directed by Michael Pearce, the story of a father trying to reconnect with his son, Calum MacDiarmid’s *Worship*, a cleverly stylised meditation on faith and the human psyche, and Johnny Barrington’s *Tumult*, a humorous collision between ancient warriors and a Highland tour bus, provided exciting glimpses of emerging new work by Scottish directors.

While festival screenings provide a professional context for work by local and emerging Scottish film makers, the opportunity for the event to be a meeting point between audiences and film makers and to foster greater appreciation through education should not be overlooked. There are many ways into film through viewing, discussion, focussed master classes and workshops, and while budget constraints do not always facilitate creative exchanges of this kind, the festival provides a natural focus for such activity. This year’s world premiere of Ara Paiaya’s *The Suppressor* accompanied by a workshop on ‘How To Film a Fight Scene’ led by the director was an isolated example, and hopefully scope for wider participation in such events might be explored in future programmes.

Premiered at the 68th Venice Film Festival, where Michael Fassbender deservedly won a Volpi Cup for Best Actor, *Shame* received its Scottish premiere at IFF this year as the closing night film. British Turner Prize winning artist and director Steve McQueen affirms his reputation as one of the most exciting directors in the country following his superb debut *Hunger* (2008), also screened as part of this year’s festival. Fassbender plays New York yuppie sex addict Brandon whose life spirals out of control into increasingly risky encounters as he tries in vain to connect with life.



Shame

Ever the chameleon Fassbender is perfectly cast – an actor whose presence and being are contained behind his eyes. Last seen in Cary Fukunaga’s adaptation of *Jane Eyre* as Mr Rochester, Fassbender turns what is on paper an unlikeable and unsympathetic character into a figure of empathy. As an audience we cannot judge him because we could never hate the character as much as he hates himself; his prowess is emptiness, his confidence and charm hiding vulnerability and emotional damage so deep that his soul seems irretrievable.

A scene where he engages in a threesome is painfully protracted, overlaid with elegiac music that kills any eroticism, and when Brandon looks to camera at the moment of climax the look of despair on his face is consummate. Scenes of New York are incredibly devoid of people, accentuating the character’s loneliness and isolation and the intimacy of sex is characterised by absence. McQueen is never gratuitous nor overtly explicit, given the subject matter; we feel that the cycle of behaviour could relate to any addiction fuelled by human need for love, acceptance and forgiveness.

The arrival of Brandon’s sister Sissy (brilliantly played by Carey Mulligan in what is perhaps her most challenging role yet) provides the catalyst for a deepening understanding of his character. We never actually learn their backstory, but from her physical self harm and his internal war of attrition we know the damage is shared. Sissy simply remarks: “We’re not bad people, we just come from a bad place”, leaving the audience to imagine what has brought them both to this point, infinitely worse than anything McQueen could show on screen because it allows the audience to place themselves in the frame. Sissy’s rendition of ‘New York, New York’ in a nightclub defines her predicament, a fragile performance in a minor key which turns the hope and optimism of the lyrics into an expression of despair and ultimate defeat, the reaction of her brother accentuating the bond of experience and self loathing between them.

While Brandon's behaviour is extreme, Fassbender's performance and McQueen's intelligent, sensitive direction succeed in not alienating the audience. Like the promotional poster for the film consisting of a reflective surface, we are presented with a mirror, the emotional weight of the title belonging to everyone to some degree. Like *Hunger*, hard subject matter is beautifully framed, the opening shot of Brandon on a bed from above exquisitely composed which sets the tone of the entire film. Brandon's lifestyle is defined with clarity in the opening sequence with a view of his apartment hallway, a white/black/white triptych which the character moves through like a revolving door, an answering machine playing repeated messages from his pleading sister punctuating the slickly decorated interior of his insular world. This is a thoroughly engrossing film with one of the year's finest performances from one of the best directors in the country, an appropriate conclusion to a festival which continues to define itself by the sheer quality of its programming.

Every screening revealed a world, and the inclusion of more challenging independent product provided some of the festival's most memorable highlights. This element of risk is also an essential source of innovation and potential discovery for the audience. Part of the festival experience is being able to see work that may not be distributed widely or at all and it is gratifying to see such a strong commitment to diverse creative voices showcased both during the festival and in Eden Court's year round cinema programme. IFF has gone from strength to strength in each consecutive year, which bodes extremely well for the festival's 10th anniversary in 2012.

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