

# Inverness Film Festival 2010

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## Eden Court Theatre and Cinemas, 3-7 November 2010

**PUNCHING far above its weight, the 8<sup>th</sup> Inverness Film Festival was the strongest yet, delivering a programme distinctive for its quality, audacity and imagination.**

With an astonishing line up of Scottish, UK and World Cinema past and present, including 15 Scottish and 3 UK premieres, the festival has certainly come into its own this year; seeing a significant rise in audience numbers and clearly addressing an increasing appetite for diverse independent product.

Arguably the greatest pleasure of any festival is the uncovering of hidden gems. This year's programme gave ample opportunity for unexpected discovery (and rediscovery) of the work of both emerging and established film makers, which otherwise would not be seen by a wider Highland audience.

Since the opening of the refurbished Eden Court Cinemas three years ago, audience expectation has consistently been raised due to the vision of Eden Court Film Programmer and Inverness Film Festival Director, Paul Taylor.



The American

While this year's programme featured major releases such as *The American*; the third instalment of Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy, *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest*; *Another Year*, *The Debt* and *Never let Me Go*, the inspired selection of independents such as *Symbol*, *Café Noir*, *The Eagle Hunter's Son*, *The Trotsky*, *Ruhr* and *Animal Kingdom*, together with a tribute to British Director Terence Davies, were just some of the memorable highlights of IFF 2010.

A unique screening of the 1957 comedy *The Smallest Show On Earth*, starring Peter Sellers, for a limited audience inside Eden Court's projection booth was one of the more unusual events, imaginatively placing the audience in the live centre of the cinema.

Receiving its first screening in Scotland at IFF, director Daniel Alfredson's *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest* received the Inverness Film Festival Audience Award (designed by Isle of Harris based artist Steve Dilworth) for Best Film.

Amongst the showcase of new Asian cinema the comically absurd and brilliantly insightful *Symbol Shinboru* by Japanese Director Hitoshi Matsumoto was an unexpected delight. Watching this film is like taking a ride to an unknown destination, the split narrative suitably intriguing and entertaining to hold us transfixed until the end.

While the connection between a man in a locked room inhabited by virtual angels in the walls and a Mexican wrestler, Escargot Man, appear completely unrelated, the film cleverly progresses like an exercise in gaming. The director visually enables the audience to move up a level as the wider implications of the lone prisoner's actions are gradually revealed on a global scale.

The world of the isolated room where "the education" consists of pushing buttons producing an accumulation of objects is a potent symbol for modern existence. This truth, however, is delivered with hilarity, the antics of the lone prisoner in polka dot pyjamas and his efforts to escape an immediate source of identification and laughter.

As the parallel narratives converge, culminating in an acceleration of images and consciousness, the film concludes with a magnificently ambiguous ending. Unashamedly strange and supremely entertaining, *Symbol* was one of the undeniable gems of this year's festival.

The debut feature from South Korean film critic Jung Sung-IL, *Café Noir*, was another unexpected revelation. From the opening scene of a girl eating a burger enshrined in a halo of chrome and neon, the film's incredible cinematography, often delivered in long takes, added much to its dazzling visual style.

Intimate conversations and monologues interspersed with sweeping vistas of the city of Seoul provide a portrait of characters conjoined in love and loss, and of life in contemporary Korea. Drawing on Goethe and Dostoyevsky, the film is densely layered in its textural references to literature, music and film; however, aided by the seemingly effortless camera work, the stream-of-consciousness structure (while sometimes disorientating) is completely immersive.

The film switches between black and white and colour, delivering some ravishingly beautiful sequences; a scene beneath a bridge where a woman is followed while holding a lantern, a vision of unrequited pursuit in exquisite monochrome, is completely unforgettable.

While the characters are resigned to fate the film never descends completely into nihilism, with enough moments of the sublime to elevate it beyond the disappointment and isolation of everyday life. Infused with religious references, the whole film can be seen, like the child's self-penned school production depicted in one scene, as a convincing passion play minus the resurrection.

A firm favourite with the IFF festival audience this year was *The Eagle Hunter's Son*, directed by René Bo Hansen. Set in the vast and beautiful landscapes of Western Mongolia, the film tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy Bazarbai and his journey from his homeland to the industrialised fringes of the city.

The film's mystical element, the ancestral bond with the eagle, is beautifully grounded by the intimate depiction of familial bonds between father, son and brother and the fragility of traditional ways of life in the face of urbanisation. A rite of passage tale simply told *The Eagle Hunter's Son* was completely captivating from start to finish.



The Trotsky

The UK premiere of writer/ director Jacob Tierney's wonderfully offbeat Canadian comedy *The Trotsky*, starring Jay Baruchel, was positively teeming with originality, optimism and wit. Believing he is the reincarnation of Leon

Trotsky, high school student Leon Bronstein's life is guided by his destiny; to marry first wife Alexandra, meet Lenin and stage a revolution, overthrowing his fascist principle and youth apathy in the process.

It is impossible not to cheer him on; Baruchel is instantly likeable as Leon, possessing all the earnestness of belief and geek-ish sweetness to endear his cause to the audience. Winning Best Film Direction, Writing and Best Male Film Performance at last month's Canadian Comedy awards, *The Trotsky* is a quirky and refreshing take on disenchanting youth accompanied by an excellent soundtrack.

This year's Terence Davies Retrospective featuring *The House of Mirth*, *The Long Day Closes*, *The Terence Davies Trilogy (Children, Madonna and Child, Death and Transfiguration)*, *Of Time and the City* and *Distant Voices Still Lives*, offered the rare opportunity to discover the work of one of Britain's finest directors.

Davies possesses that rare gift of being both poetic and uncompromising, a quality which pervades his entire work. His unique visual language, the juxtaposition of sound and image in layered remembrance, is both deeply personal and universal in its appeal.

Davies consistently reminds us of the dual function of cinema, of human recognition and escape sitting alone and collectively in the dark; the light from the projectionist's box illuminating all of our dreams and memories. Images of grinding poverty and repression are consistently tempered by the immediacy of sound; an element which contributes so strongly to the emotional resonance and spiritual clarity in his work.

In a film such as *The Long Day Closes*, Davies utilises sound clips from old movies, popular, classical and folk music to inform our reading of grim Northern streets, seeing romance and magic in the everyday, amidst a characteristically dismal atmosphere of relentless rain. Although in the opening sequence Davies tellingly confronts us with a brick wall barrier, equally there is an emanation of radiance in how scenes are lit throughout the film, evocative of the transformative imagination of the lone child protagonist.

Overhead shots of congregation and cinema audience are bound by the same kind of illumination. Each of Davies's films feels like an act of transfiguration, the trials of everyday life become exalted. In *Distant Voices Still Lives* memories of abuse and hardship are counterbalanced by a sense of community and belonging, united in song and by a visual aesthetic which feels as though it were lovingly hand coloured in the manner of a precious family photograph.

The quiet dignity of many of his central characters pitted against the harsh confines of religious or social institutions is deeply poignant and ever present from the earliest works in his *Trilogy*; stunningly composed in stark black and white. This unflinching vision informs all subsequent work, including Davies's only foray into period drama set outside his native Liverpool, *The House of Mirth*.

Davies elevates the costume drama to a whole new level in his adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel, aided by an exceptional performance by Gillian Anderson as tragic heroine Lily Bart. The director portrays a sublimely lit world of social graces and civilisation, conveying a deep understanding of the plight of his central character, the grim reality of her circumstance and subsequent demise.

Davies's 2008 documentary *Of Time and The City* feels as much a self-portrait as homage to the director's birthplace and childhood home of Liverpool. His narration is often wry and profound, the soundtrack of an individual life and of an age combined with archival and more recently filmed footage. Cycles of growth, demolition and decay are steeped in individual and collective reminiscence, reading like a magnificent symphonic poem; a celebration of the environment that ultimately shaped Davies's unique creative vision and a valediction for times now past.

The Scottish premiere of David Michôd's impressive first feature *Animal Kingdom* provided excellent closure to the festival. Grand Jury Prize winner at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and recipient of a record 18 nominations in this year's AFI awards (winners to be announced in December), *Animal Kingdom* features a fine Australian cast including Ben Mendelsohn, Joel Edgerton, Guy Pierce, Jacki Weaver and newcomer James Frecheville as J.



Animal Kingdom

Michôd defies our expectations of the Crime Drama, centring our attention on a teenager placed unwittingly at the centre of an underworld family at war with itself and the police. The ensuing game of survival in this environment is beautifully paced, Michôd building tension gradually aided by Frecheville's brilliantly understated performance and a chillingly controlled turn by Mendelsohn.

Veteran of stage and screen Jacki Weaver is excellent as matriarch Janine Cody, whose malevolent affection is a binding force throughout. Examining in greater depth themes explored in his award winning 14 min short *Crossbow*, screened prior to the closing night gala, *Animal Kingdom* places an innocent between family and

authority, devoid of protection from both. The result like Michôd's remarkable preceding short is a compelling portrait of dispossessed youth.

Local production *Fighting Back*, the first martial arts film produced in the Highlands, had its debut screening as part of this year's selection of short films. Directed by Douglas McDowall and Jamie MacDonald and featuring comedy, romance, action and wire work, this ambitious production, part spoof, part homage to Asian cinema, signifies a promising beginning for future collaborative work.

David and Colin Robertson, local black belts in kempo, featured in the film's fight sequences, with varied camera work by Mike Webster adding appropriate dramatic focus to key scenes. Kevin Douglas's performance as the villain was convincingly menacing and showed potential for development in future projects. Filmed in just one week, *Fighting Back* is a great beginning, a refreshing example of storytelling not tethered and bound by its Highland location.

Shot in Glasgow, Colin Kennedy's 12-minute short comedy *I Love Luci* involving two addicts, lost dentures and a dog was a thoroughly enjoyable alternative to typically grim urban subject matter, delivered with warmth, humour and a complete lack of stereotyping. Scott Graham's third short film, *Native Son*, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year, was another highlight of the shorts programme.

His bleak yet compassionate focus on human loneliness and isolation in a rural landscape has become more distilled and accomplished in this latest work. With the prospect of a feature film imminent, Graham is definitely a director to watch out for. What impresses so much about this film is the depth of character he manages to achieve in 20 minutes.

We have a back story (shown not told) which is extremely effective in creating empathy for the central character played by Sean Harris, in spite of his extreme behaviour. As a study of repression, masculinity and the fundamental need for human contact, Graham creates a memorable statement which very much feels like an episode from a more substantial work in the making.

This year's festival workshops included Scheduling and Budgeting, Film in a Weekend for 13 to 19-year-olds, The Edge of Dreaming workshop with Director Amy Hardie, and the national touring workshop Unravel: The Longest Hand Painted Film In Britain, led by artists Chris Paul Daniels and Maria Anastassiou.

Working with communities and film festivals across the UK to create 16 hours of footage ( one frame for every metre of distance between John O'Groats and Land's End), Daniels and Anastassiou have conceived of a project that will bring thousands of participants into contact with the immediately tactile medium of celluloid.

Working directly onto 16mm film stock and found footage, people from all ages have hand painted, drawn and etched marks directly onto film, with screenings in participating venues. The process of working sequentially within the frame or directly onto longer sections of film is completely engrossing and it will be fantastic to see the cumulative results of this activity from people all over the UK.

A special live performance of Steven Severin's new score for Jean Cocteau's 1930 film *Le Sang D'un Poete* (*Blood Of A Poet*) presented a mesmerising synthesis of sound and image, heightening appreciation of the surreal and enigmatic nature of the original work. Cocteau's combination of live, drawn and sculptural elements found its aural counterpart in Severin's suitably textured score, a synthesised, highly atmospheric soundscape drawing the viewer rhythmically into the imagery on screen.

Although Cocteau's staging can often feel contrived, it was impossible not to become immersed in the dream-like and voyeuristic world of his creation to due to the immediacy of Severin's hypnotic score. The second work in his on going series Music For Silents, the composer/ musician has clearly grounded his interpretation in an understanding of Cocteau's visual language which is wonderfully compelling.

Throughout the four days of the festival it was pleasing to see audiences taking a chance on cinema without the instant draw of big stars or well known directors. The popularity of films such as *The Eagle Hunter's Son* are proof positive that audiences becoming accustomed to the quality of Eden Court's regular film programming are more willing to engage with a greater variety of film.

The screening of James Benning's *Ruhr* was surprisingly well attended given the stillness of his moving images. This is challenging, absorbing and rewarding cinema, part of a diverse and dynamic programme which continues to evolve in each successive year. Although IFF 2010 is a very hard act to follow, it is certain that audiences can continue to expect the very best in 2011.

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