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Energy, Passion, Film: Report from Sundance 2007

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Energy, Passion, Film: Report from Sundance 2007

Abstract

This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2007.

Beth Ritter and Brianna Smith

Levi Elder and Paul Williams

There seemed to be less snow on the ground and the temperatures seemed milder than in previous years, but even when the snow is deep, the wind swirling and the temperature plummeting, the Sundance Film Festival always provides a warm welcome to the *Journal of Religion & Film* representatives. We want to thank Patrick Hubley, Brianna Smith, Levi Elder and the entire Press Office of the Festival for making our stay so enjoyable and productive. We simply could not see all the movies that we are able to see and see them under such ideal circumstances without the help of everyone in the Press Office. Thank you.

During this year's Festival several of my colleagues noted how exhausting it was to watch some of the very powerful movies that they had seen. At the time I didn't pay much attention to this, but shortly thereafter I was off to review *The Devil Came on Horseback*, a movie about the genocide occurring in the Darfur region of Sudan. Over 400,000 people killed and two and one half million people displaced.

I saw the images. I heard the story. I realized as the characters in the film realized that the rest of the world was not going to intervene and save the lives of thousands more. The next movie I was to review was *For the Bible Tells Me So*, a movie about the hatred and persecution of gays and lesbians by people using the Bible as their justification. In this movie you hear from the parents of gays and lesbians, all people who identify themselves as Christians, talking about their children. Dick Gephart talks about what unconditional love means, a mother talks about how she could not accept her daughter until after her daughter had committed suicide – parents talking about their original shock and misgivings and how they now would not change a thing. After seeing these movies, I paid attention to what my colleagues had been saying about the power of film.


Trolley on Mainstreet in Park City, Utah

Many of the stories are powerful in themselves, but putting them on film and doing it well gives them so much more power. Since the Sundance Film Festival supports independent film, we get to see stories that Hollywood movies will never tell and since the standards of the Festival are so high, the movies we see are some of the best examples of filmmaking. Anyone can produce a tear jerker, but really good

movies break your heart. So it is with some gratitude and sense of satisfaction that I can say that the Sundance Film Festival is often a real heart breaker.

— WLB

Angel-A

Spectrum

In the beginning of filmmaker Luc Besson's *Angel-A*, another of his amoral fables, Andre (Jamel Debbouze) quakes on the wrong side of a bridge railing in Paris bemoaning his fate. Before him runs the river Seine indifferent to his impending suicide and behind him some sinister creditors who threaten to do more this time than just beat him or dangle him off the Eiffel Tower if he doesn't come up with $48,000. Andre, like many of Besson's protagonists, think Nikita, Leon or Korben (*The Fifth Element*), has spent his entire time on earth at either end of his flight or fight instinct unable to take control of his life let alone save it. Certain death awaits him at either end. It's not much of a choice, but just at the peak of his indecision he, we, suddenly notice he is not alone. Not yards away, also poised for a jump, stands a very leggy model of imperfection in a simple, short black cocktail dress with none of Andre's reserve.

When Angela (Rie Rasmussen) leaps, limbs akimbo and dress a flutter, impulsively and ironically Andre follows without a clue but perhaps sowing the seeds of his own salvation in typically overt Bessonian verve and style. Our flawed "hero" sits on a bridge, flies into a river, saves another though this bird has a broken wing (Debbouze lost the use of an arm in a childhood accident) and can't swim. When she recovers, Andre alternately berates her suicide attempt while lamenting his own inability to accomplish same. He's right back where he started, on land and with no hope. The grateful Angela offers to solve his silly, pathetic problems, but he laughs it off unable to see what we determined before the film started by the title alone. Angela is A(n) angel in Besson's Angel-A, and all the chicanery and overt symbolism in this twisted take on This Wonderful Life, as well as other versions of the genre, could be easily dismissed if the film weren't so darn entertaining and beautifully imaged and imagined.

Shot in glorious black and white to take advantage of Paris at dawn, the film captures the city's multiple layers, textures, venues and avenues which match visually, in its shades of gray, the prevailing moral ambiguity of Besson's vision. You see, in this very noirish world, Angela is a fallen angel, no less. She relishes in her ability to help a good thief and combat evil with her angelic as well as sexy gifts which she does cleverly and provocatively, making monkeys out of the men who threaten Andre. But, like all bette noirs, Angela has a secret. She'd give it all

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up for the love of a good man and a new beginning. "I don't know who I am," they each tell the other in their own way. Resolution and self discovery occur back at fateful bridge, but Besson can't leave it alone. One minute sad and profound, the next funny and ironic he settles for a sentimental denouement with one too many twists and perhaps one too many happy endings.

— MJK

Away From Her

Premiere

The trend among many directors and screenwriters—including Sir Anthony Hopkins—at this year's festival is to abandon narrative in order to portray the ultimate meaninglessness of life. Eschewing this trend, Canadian actor Sarah Polley makes her directorial and screenwriting debut with a beautiful film that examines love, identity and meaning in the face of a disease that threatens to strip away all of these.

Away From Her is adapted from a short story, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," by Alice Munro, one of Canada's finest writers. In the film, Grant (Gordon Pinsent) and Fiona (Julie Christie) are an older, active couple who are very

much in love. The warmth between them is a beautiful counterpoint to the stark winter landscapes. There is, however, a sense of creeping loss, of things somehow not being quite right. Eventually, Fiona receives the diagnosis of Alzheimer's. While Grant nearly shatters with anguish, Fiona reacts with grace and strength. When the time comes, Fiona enters a care facility. For the rest of the film, we watch as many aspects of Fiona's memory and life fall away. Grant remains a constant, although often unrecognized partner. The presence of another patient, Aubrey (Michael Murphy), and his wife Marian (Olympia Dukakis) complicate the lives of Grant and Fiona even more.

Despite the somber topic, this film is a testament to the difficult and sometimes contrary beauty of true love. In his quest to care for Fiona, Grant must confront his own guilt, selfishness and grief. By recognizing and transcending these, he becomes a more compassionate human.

Sarah Polley has given the audience, and the actors, a remarkable and sensitive film. Fans of Julie Christie should take note - this is the role of a lifetime.

— MD

Bugmaster

Spectrum

Bugmaster is a non-narrative imagistic drama by director Katsuhiro Otomo (Akira). With interlocking stories and layers upon layers of metaphors, the meaning of this film remains largely unclear. It requires a great deal of energy to follow, but the fantastical images, inspired by the original manga artist Yuki Urashibara, sometimes make this effort worthwhile.

Bugmaster takes place just over a century ago in Japan. The protagonist, Ginko (Joe Odagiri), even as a young boy, can see bugs (Mushi). Bugs here are not the insect kind, but rather something that exist but cannot normally be seen. They are spirit forces or specters that are sometimes malevolent or parasitical. There is also Tokoyami, a very powerful Mushi, which seems to reside in the bottom of a magical pond. Tokoyami is pure darkness and it eats light.

In the film, Ginko is a Mushishi, one who studies the bugs and protects people from their harmful effects. He is rescued as a child, then mentored, by a mysterious and powerful Mushishi named Nui (Makiko Esumi). Ginko, as an adult, also has a powerful connection with Tanyu (Yu Aoi), a beautiful young woman

whose congenital Mushi allow her to record the history of the bugs and the stories of bugmasters.

Throughout the film there are references to light and darkness, to balance versus harmful parasitism, to bridges and rainbows. The look of the film is exquisite, which makes up somewhat for ambiguities in the plot and meaning of the film.

— MD

Conversion

Shorts Program

Filmed amidst the iconic landscapes of the easternmost reaches of the Navajo Nation Reservation, *Conversion* dramatizes the tragic consequences of an actual incident between a Dine' (Navajo) Medicine Man and Christian missionaries. Set in 1950, the film opens with archival footage of a Navajo weaver, a silversmith, and four medicine men (all male relatives of the Navajo Director/Screenwriter Nanobah Becker).

As the story unfolds, we learn that "Auntie" has been summoned because "Grandfather," a Medicine Man, has suddenly fallen ill. "Auntie" learns that her father's illness began after a visit from Christian missionaries who convinced him to throw away his medicine bag. He complied with their wishes, returned to his hogan, and has not risen since. Secreting a bible card with a portrait of Jesus on one side and a bible verse (John 17:3) on the other, a young Dine' relative offers to guide "Auntie" to the location of the discarded medicine bag. Auntie quickly retrieves the medicine bag. She then confiscates the bible card, tears it in three pieces, and lectures her young relative, exhorting, "This is not ours. Not for us. Not for you."

The consequences of discarding the traditional Dine' medicine bag are both symbolic and real. Conversion makes a powerful statement about the literal and figurative cost of surrendering one's religion.

— BR

The Devil Came on Horseback

Two years ago the Sundance Film Festival screened a movie entitled, *Shake Hands With The Devil*, the story of General 's experience in trying to deter the genocide in Rawanda. This year Sundance brings the devil back in *The Devil Came on Horseback*, and it's pretty much the same devil.

This film is the story of Marine Captain Brian Steidle who served as an unarmed military observer for the African Union in Sudan. Steidle's photographs and reports have helped to bring the world's attention to the genocide in Darfur where Arab Muslims (Janjaweed) from northern Sudan are slaughtering the non-Muslim residents (non-Baggara people) of southern Sudan. More than 400,000 people have been killed and more than two and one half million people displaced - many of those have fled the Darfur region for refugee camps in neighboring Chad.

Although this movie is the story of Brian Steidle's courage and persistence in trying to stop the genocide, the devil we meet is essentially the same devil we met in Rawanda - those who kill and rape and destroy without conscience. In Darfur the devil is the Janjaweed militias who operate under the protection of the Sudanese government in. "Janjaweed" means "devil on a horse." The Sudanese government

denies any genocide, but the signs are everywhere and the actions of the government continue to allow the genocide to continue.

But, there is a second devil in this story (as there was in Rawanda) - the failure of the United States and other countries - the rest of the world - to intervene on behalf of those who are being slaughtered and displaced. The devil may come on horseback, but those who come on horseback do so because the rest of the world stands by and watches the slaughter. Thus, we and our governments are also the devil. Brian Steidle made the world aware of the genocide in Darfur, but he was unable to get the world to stop the genocide. Those who could prevent the slaughter also must count as the devil. In the end, the Janjaweed are merely the henchmen of the devil (the Sudanese government), but the Sudanese government can carry out this genocide only because the rest of the world stands by. By standing by, the rest of the world becomes the real devil.

In addition to identifying the real devil, the movie raises the question of why we use the term, "devil," in reference to those who commit genocide. The devil (or devils) in various religious traditions are part of a cosmic battle between good and evil. At this moment in Darfur, and previously in Rawanda, the devil is winning that battle. What does genocide, then, tell us about the nature of God?

— WLB

Enemies of Happiness

World Cinema Documentary

Whatever the original title of Eva Mulvad's award-winning, enlightening documentary, *Enemies of Happiness*, something is lost in the English translation of this film from Denmark. The true story of Malalai Joya, a 28-year-old Afghani woman, who struggled to get elected to the Loya Jirga (Afghanistan's National Assembly) in 2005, this hour-long film is less about something as ephemeral as happiness and more concerned with political reform in a war-torn country that hadn't had a democratic election in over 30 years. Title aside, the film's impact was not lost on the Sundance audience or judges as it won the 2007 World Cinema Jury Prize for Documentary.

By Mulvad's own admission, her film is not propaganda on behalf of Islamic culture and religion except where it deliberately dispels Western myths perpetrated in the media. As she says in her artist statement, "Muslims are not a monolithic villainous entity just like we in the West are not. We can understand each other." The "enemies" in this film are those who oppose equal rights and opportunities for women, a fundamental issue for and a mutual understanding to be shared, by even the most democratic nation. Thus, Joya's personal crusade for reform is neither

political nor religious but both as her campaign best resembles the united effort of a peace and justice advocate for human rights in any institution.

Yet, Joya's struggle for equality is more dangerous than most due partly to her own brashness and the enemies she makes within the power structure. "Enemies of Happiness" begins in 2003 with the rebellious Joya being thrown out of the Loya Jirga after verbally attacking several members of the assembly as criminals, warlords who have oppressed the poor and women in their effort to maintain the status quo. Later she begins her own campaign to her subsequent election two years later but not before she survives four attempts on her life. One night, much to her chagrin, she escapes a death threat by wearing the dreaded burqua, a symbol of anonymity she had persuaded other Afghan women to disavow.

The documentary also reveals a more humanistic side of Joya's struggle for election, her full realization of her role in the community as an elected representative. Gradually, she ingratiates herself within the system by serving as an intermediary between a drug lord and his unhappy, intended teen bride and by intervening between warring clan members. Her quality of mercy and forgiving justice help to get her elected and win the grudging respect of her newly elected fellow officials who, Joya included, realize at film's end as they ride the bus to the assembly, that they are all on the same journey together, happily or otherwise.

— MJK

The Fighting Cholitas

Shorts

Honorable Mention in Short Filmmaking

The Fighting Cholitas is a colorful, short documentary film about the phenomenon of Indigenous Bolivian women who participate in Lucha Libre (a blend of Mexican and American professional wrestling). Dressed in their distinctive multi-layered skirts and small, bowler hats, the Cholitas wrestle each Sunday at the "Multifunctional Auditorium" in El Alto, Bolivia, a sprawling lower income suburb of La Paz. The matches are classic struggles of good versus evil pitting Technicas (a "technical" or "good" fighters) against Rudas (wild, unruly, ill-mannered fighters). The Luchadoras are a popular past-time for families who attend every week for an afternoon of live entertainment and "justice served in the ring."

Despite their popularity, the Luchadores have faced considerable criticism for fighting as women but especially for fighting in their traditional clothing that identifies them as Indigenous women. Their

William L. Blizek, *JR & F* and Teresa Deskins, Editor/Producer of The Fighting Cholitas

traditional clothing is viewed as sacred and some feel that they are defying tradition and commercializing their identity. The Luchadores view the criticism as another form of discrimination and remain committed to the Lucha Libre.

— BR

For the Bible Tells Me So

Documentary Competition

For the Bible Tells Me So is a heartbreaking movie in the sense described in the introduction this movie takes on the religious persecution of gays and lesbians. That it does so in such an understated manner makes the movie's message even more powerful. The message of the movie is that the Bible is being used to justify the hatred and persecution of gays and lesbians.

The movie includes three elements. One part is the interviews of parents whose children are gay or lesbian. Some parents embrace their children when they learn that they are gay or lesbian. For other parents, learning to embrace their children is a long and difficult journey. Yet others, the saddest cases, never do embrace their children again. Dick and Jane Gephardt talk about how unconditional love is the only Christian response they can give their children. Another mother

talks about how she was influenced by James Dobson and Focus on the Family and was unable to accept her daughter. Her daughter committed suicide and now the mother works on behalf of gay and lesbian rights. A father tells us how, when he discovered that his son was gay, he would have waved a magic wand and changed his son and how now he wouldn't change a thing. All of these parents identify themselves as Christians, so the debate in this movie is not between good Christians and secular America. It's a debate between one group of Christians and another.

The second element has to do with "what the Bible actually tells me." The people interviewed in this part of the movie are clergy who explain both how to understand the Bible and how to interpret particular passages, especially those that seem related to homosexuality as a sin. The Rev. Dr. Laurence Keen (Disciples of Christ) explains that "When the term 'abomination' is used in the Hebrew Bible, it is always used to address a ritual wrong – it never is used to refer to something innately immoral." Thus, lying with a man as with a woman is not innately immoral, it is a ritual wrong. Rev. Peter Gomes (Harvard) claims that the literalists "are failing to read the Bible within the context of its authors and of its original culture." Rev. Susan Sparks (American Baptist Church) says "To me that's the important thing to recognize: the historical context in which this was written. That particular section on a man not lying with a man goes to procreation. It is about a nation trying to grow." And Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Nobel Peace Prize Laureate) says that

he cannot imagine God saying to him that he is going to punish him because he is black. He cannot imagine God saying to a woman that He will punish her because she is a woman. And he cannot imagine God saying to someone who is gay that He will punish him because he is gay. Again, this is not a debate between Christians and secular America. This is a debate within Christianity, between the literalists and the contextualists. And according to the contextualists, the Bible does not condemn homosexuals for their behavior - the Bible does not tell me what the fundamentalists say it does. Rev. Mel White says of the Bible: "Now it is being used, misused, to condemn gay people - it's an old trick. Fundamentalist Christians have been using it throughout the ages, and now they're doing it again."

Finally, the third element of the movie is video clips of various religious figures ranting against homosexuality. From James Dobson (Focus on the Family) to Jimmy Swaggart, from Franklin Graham to Jerry Falwell. Even Anita Bryant is shown attacking the gay community. It is this element that provides some comic relief in an otherwise sad and painful story about how the Bible is used to harm people. All of these elements are interwoven throughout the movie, showing the power of reason in the face of hatred and bigotry.

— WLB

"Gays, Faith, and Film:" A Panel Discussion

Scott Piro of the Queer Lounge and William L. Blizek, founding editor of *JR & F* visit during a Sundance event.

On Monday afternoon, January 22, the Queer Lounge sponsored a fascinating panel discussion on "Gays, Faith, and Film." The panelists included Dan Karslake, director of *For the Bible Tells Me So*, and the Reverend Mel White who appears in that movie; Robert Cary, director of *Save Me*, and Judith Light one of the stars of the movie; and Sandi Dubowski, director of *Trembling Before G-D* and one of the producers of a new movie on gays in Muslim societies with the working title of *Jihad For Love*, along with Steven Greenberg, the focus of *Trembling Before G-D* and the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi.

One of the first questions concerned Judith Light's portrayal of "Gayle" in *Save Me*. Light responded by saying that she did not want to demonize the character, but rather to humanize her. To demonize "Gayle" would be to make her a representative of religion - the demon, the devil, a representative of evil. But Light wanted to show her as a person of goodwill who had been misled by some of her beliefs. In doing so, the movie is more interesting because the character is more complex and less stereotypical. But, this portrayal also changes the political tone of the movie. *Save Me* is thereby saved from being a "good guys versus bad guys, us

versus them" movie. It becomes an exploration of individual human beings and this is where Light and the producers of *Save Me* think that the discussion belongs. They did not want the movie to create a situation between opposites, but instead be an exploration of our humanity and in doing so they hoped that the movie would contribute to a serious consideration of its issues rather than encouraging more of the name calling and antagonism that so frequently characterizes the public discussion of homosexuality and religion.

Christopher Racster, one of the producers of *Save Me* and William L. Blizek, founding editor of *JR & F* visited.

Both the panelists and the audience seemed to enjoy the discussion very much and one member of the audience asked how she could keep the "conversation" going in other circles. It struck me here that one reason movies (stories) facilitate starting a conversation and keeping it going is that the conversation is about the film and the fictional characters in the film. We start by talking about someone or something other than ourselves. Once the conversation has begun and we trust our conversation partners, then we can turn the conversation to our own feelings and experiences. This means that good movies have a crucial role to play in having conversations with others about topics that would be difficult, if not impossible, for us to discuss otherwise. It is possible, of course, for movies

to be part of the name-calling public interaction of important issues - I think Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was such a movie - but good movies can serve as the instigation of important conversations between individuals and between groups whose views differ from one another in rather dramatic fashion. This is why Judith Light's characterization of "Gayle" was so important. It contributed to a movie that encourages conversation rather than stirring up animosity.

Another issue that the panel discussed was the role of faith in the lives of many people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. Since so many people who identify themselves as religious use religion to persecute and discriminate against the LGBT community, one might wonder why the LGBT community doesn't simply abandon religion altogether. (The word "persecute" might seem to be too strong a term here, but consider that Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church, had to wear a bullet proof vest to his sanctification because of the death threats.) There are two responses to this possibility. First, faith is as important to the queer community as it is to the heterosexual community. Why wouldn't it be? If faith has much to offer the straight community, why wouldn't it have just as much to offer the queer community? The LGBT community doesn't have anything against religion. Religion or faith plays the same role in the lives of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered as it does in the lives of heterosexuals. The fact that some people use religion to

persecute and discriminate against the queer community does not make faith any less important to that community. Second, as Judith Light pointed out, many people, regardless of sexual orientation, believe that their religion or faith calls for love, compassion, and inclusion, as opposed to hate, scorn, and discrimination. When the GLBT community continues to participate in religion it does so by calls upon various religions to reach for higher moral standards. In this sense the queer community has an important role to play in calling religion to its higher standards. Not only, then, is religion important to the queer community, but the queer community, insofar as it calls upon people of faith to stand up and be counted, is equally important to various faith communities.

Another feature of the panel discussion was the issue of healing. That is, engaging others in conversations about things over which there is disagreement is a way of healing the rift between different individuals and different groups when those rifts create a painful divide. To use a phrase from the first paragraph, demonizing the other creates a separation that is painful to all of the parties involved. Healing is the process of overcoming the separation and thereby easing the pain. Since this panel took place during the Sundance Film Festival, and since it included movie directors, producers, and actors, I think that it is not unfair to say that good movies provide an excellent opportunity to establish and continue conversations, conversations that can lead to a connection between human beings

(thus the humanizing of the characters rather than the demonizing of them) that heals the separations we so often experience. Movies have an important role to play in the healing of lives torn apart by the use of religion to attack the LGBT community. If movies can play this role in the rift between religion and the gay community, can't they also play a similar role in other rifts of color, ethnicity, gender, and so on?

— WLB

Four Sheets to the Wind

Independent Film Competition: Dramatic

Jury Prize for Acting to Tamara Podemski

Four Sheets to the Wind, the feature debut of Seminole/Creek filmmaker Sterlin Harjo opens with a traditional Muskogee rabbit and bear story (voiceover in the Muskogee language). The main character Cufe (which means rabbit in Muskogee) is a young Native man burdened with the responsibility of disposing of his father's remains after he commits suicide. His father, Frankie, provides the Muskogee narration throughout the film and we learn that he did not want a funeral. He just wanted Cufe to sink him in their favorite fishing pond. Cufe fulfilled his father's final wish

at dawn, before his mother discovered the body, sprinkling tobacco over the watery grave. Cufe's mother, Cora, knew that the community would expect a formal Muskogee funeral and that is precisely what the family produced (closed casket, of course).

Frankie's death and subsequent funeral act as a catalyst to release Cufe from his life in rural Oklahoma, a life that holds little opportunity. His sister, Miri, invites him to visit her in Tulsa and he experiences both the liberation and alienation of life in the big city.

Four Sheets is an unabashedly Native comedy, ripe with Indian humor and symbolism. Yet, it is also a universal human story of coming to terms with love and loss.

— BR

Grace is Gone

Independent Film Competition: Dramatic

Audience Award: Dramatic

Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award

In the opening scene of *Grace is Gone*, Stanley Phillips (John Cusack) declares to the deployed spouse's support group, "I was proud to see her go." But the true cost of the Iraq war hits close to home when Stanley learns of his wife's

death in the line of duty. Set in the Midwest, Stanley is an "every man"; a manager of a large home supply store and staunch patriot. An impromptu family roadtrip to the " Enchanted Gardens" theme park in Florida ensues as Stanley struggles to come to terms with his survivor's guilt and his responsibility to break the devastating news to his two young daughters. Along the way, Stanley transforms from a repressed middle-aged man in deep denial to an uncharacteristically impulsive Dad who seeks to bring a little happiness into the lives of his daughters. The "new" Stanley whips donuts in a freshly plowed field and lets his daughters pierce their ears.

Grace is Gone avoids overt political commentary on the war, but does not shy away from examining the very personal price of patriotism. Cusack's intimate portrayal of Stanley is achingly poignant. Ultimately, Grace is Gone is the tale of one man's struggle, transformation, and redemption on the road of life.

— BR

Hot House

World Documentary Competition

Special Jury Prize

Hot House is an unusual story about Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Of special significance is the fact that prison life has a democratic quality about it that mirrors the social structure and organization of Palestinians outside of Israel. Some of the prisoners seem to have considerable influence on the world outside of the prison - some were even elected to political office in the Palestinian elections of January, 2006. This was the thrust of the movie.

But there were two features of this documentary that stood out for me. One was that there was no discussion of religion at all in the interviews. Prisoners were shown praying, but the issues focused upon the 1967 borders, having their own autonomy, creating a state, and fighting against the enemy - "protecting themselves" as one woman put it. Two ideas seemed to take center stage. First, terrorism is effective. Most of the prisoners believed that terrorism had pushed the Israelis out of Gaza and they were encouraged to continue their terrorism because it brought results. Second, the Israelis were the enemy because they took the land

that Palestinians believe (at least now believe) is theirs. So, all of this terrorism and fighting is about justice for the Palestinians.

The second feature was an interview with a woman (mother of four) who chose a pizza restaurant as the target of a suicide bombing and then transported the suicide bomber to the site. (She is now in prison for the rest of her life.) She was asked if she knew how many children had been killed in that bombing and with a chilling smile she guessed "three." When she was told that eight children were killed, she seemed disbelieving. She was then asked if she thought about the children she would kill in the bombing. She said "no." When people are willing to kill others without considering the consequences, we have moved to a different level of warfare, one for which new tactics must be invented and utilized.

— WLB

I Just Wanted To Be Somebody

Shorts with Features

This short film, *I Just Wanted to be Somebody*, tells the story of Anita Bryant, who "just wanted to be somebody." She did become somebody, of course, an anti-gay activist and spokesperson in the 1970s and 1980s. But the somebody Bryant wanted to be

probably is not the somebody she became. She was somebody - a vocal bigot. The somebody she became helped bring national attention to discrimination against homosexuals and united those who sought justice for all.

For the Bible Tells Me So was preceeded by this short, *I Just Wanted to Be Somebody*.

— WLB

The Island

(Ostrov)

World Dramatic Competition

The Island, by Russian director Pavel Lounguine, is a powerful portrait of guilt, penance and Russian Orthodox monasticism.

Anatoli, brilliantly played by Russian pop star Pyotr Mamonov, is consumed by guilt and haunted by cowardice. The film begins in 1942, when a Russian coal carrier is captured by a Nazi ship. The Nazis uncover Anatoli hiding in the coal. Under threat for his life, Anatoli surrenders his captain to the Nazis. Captain Tikhon (Yuri Kuznetsov) remains poised and present in the face of death, but the groveling Anatoli allows himself to

be forced by the Nazis to shoot his captain. The captain falls overboard and disappears. The Nazis then leave Anatoli on the coal ship, after wiring it to explode.

Following this brief prologue, the film jumps to 1976. Anatoli now lives in a secluded northern Russian Orthodox monastery. While most members of the monastery live in community, Fr. Anatoli, wild-eyed, dirty, and crazy-haired, maintains a largely eremitic existence. He spends his days transporting wheelbarrows of coal from the wrecked coal ship to the monastery boiler; playing tricks on the other monks - especially Fr. Job (played by the magnetic Dmitry Dyuzhev) - and helping lay people, who believe that Fr. Anatoli is a holy man and healer.

Along with finely drawn characters, *The Island* gives us a beautiful glimpse of life in a Russian Orthodox monastery. Director Lounguine films the loving creation of icons; lives governed by the rhythms of liturgy; and the deep faith of monks and laypeople alike. The Island also shows the 4th century Christian practice of hesychasm. Hesychasm is a meditative prayer-practice in which the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on this sinner") provides a focus while breathing, walking, and, in Fr. Anatoli's case, rowing and hauling coal.

By the end of the movie, Fr. Anatoli is reconciled with his life, Tikhon, and Fr. Job. Dir. Lounguine never offers an easy answer for us regarding whether or not

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Fr. Anatoli is holy or crazy, a healer or a trickster. This ambiguity though only adds to the luminosity and intelligence of this thoroughly wonderful film.

— MD

Khadak

World Cinema Competition: Dramatic

Khadak is a largely non-linear, imagistic film about the conflict between the traditional culture of nomadic Mongolians and modernity in the form of Chinese communism. The film combines the talents of directors and screenwriters Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth (*The Virgin Diaries*) with remarkable performances from Mongolian actors. Brosens holds a Master's degree in visual anthropology. His 'Mongolia Trilogy' documentaries have won numerous awards. Filmed in Mongolia, *Khadak* provides the perfect vehicle for a fable on the toll of modernity, the clash of cultures, and the quest for a spiritual destiny.

Bagi (Batzul Khayankhyarvaa) is a young man from a traditional sheep herding nomadic family. Although he receives visions and premonitions, he resists his destiny as a shaman. When Bagi falls ill due to a serious seizure, the local female

shaman (Tserendarizav Dashnyam) is called upon to heal him. In one of the most riveting scenes in the film, the shaman drums, sings and prays "Holy tree, Mother, lost soul of this boy...come here quickly. Listen to the wind!" Through contact with Bagi in his dream, she restores him to a precarious health.

The remainder of the film appropriately blurs the lines between dream and conventional reality. The families in Bagi's area are relocated by officials who tell them that a terrible disease, potentially fatal to humans, is affecting their animals. The pain and confusion of losing the sacred place that gives meaning and life to a culture is powerfully portrayed, especially by Damchaa Banzar who plays Bagi's grandfather.

Violent images of concrete, barren city life and mining (the real reason the land was stolen) batter the senses in the scenes that follow. Bhagi meets a group of young "criminals" (poets, musicians, dissidents) and eventually learns the truth about the animals and the land. Throughout this, he comes to embrace his role as a shaman and to fulfill his destiny. "Your ancestors are dreaming of you. Waiting for you." Bhagi's journey to realize this, on many levels of reality, is visually arresting and fittingly ambiguous. There is resolution, of a sort, and a sacrifice.

This is a powerful film that offers us a glimpse of traditional Mongolian culture and beliefs. Beyond this though, the themes of dislocation, loss, and a

journey to spiritual awakening are universal. Your ancestors are dreaming of you too.

— MD

The Legacy

(*L'Heritage*)

World Dramatic Competition

Special Jury Prize

The Legacy is not a movie about religion in general or any particular religion, but it does have a message for any religion with rituals that end up being harmful to human beings. Even if rituals have an acceptable purpose in the beginning, they can become harmful and when they do we need to change them. But rituals are difficult to change because we come to depend upon the ritual and fail to consider its origin.

Three young people from France take a bus trip to a castle one of the young people has inherited. During the two day trip, the bus stops at a village and takes on an elderly gentleman, a young man (his grandson) and an empty casket. The

young people learn that the grandfather is traveling to the village of his enemy where he will be killed as part of a blood feud - thus, the casket.

The young people follow the grandfather and grandson to the enemy village to see what happens. The grandfather walks across the bridge where he is to be shot by his enemy. As the grandfather gets close to the end of the bridge his body jerks and he falls dead at the side of the road. The viewer thinks that the grandfather has been shot, but it turns out that he has died of a heart attack. The result is that the feud has not been settled and it is the grandson who must now be killed. The French try to protect the grandson, but he runs and is shot and killed nonetheless. The feud has been settled. The shooter regrets that the grandfather died before the feud was settled without further death, but none of the feuding parties questions the very idea of the ritual of the feud.

The kind of feud we see in the movie is similar to the kind of long standing feuds in which people of various faiths participate - think Middle East. But the lesson of the movie is not so much that the continuing feud is a bad thing, but that the participants are unable to see its outcome as a bad thing.

— WLB

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Miss Navajo

Spectrum Competition

Miss Navajo is a Sundance Film Festival world premiere documentary about a Native beauty pageant and so much more. In the Dine' (Navajo) worldview, the meaning of "beauty" is inextricably woven into what it means to be Dine'—especially for Dine' women who strive to emulate Changing Woman, the most beloved and benevolent of the Holy People, the one whom they believe gave birth to humans.

Director/Producer Billy Luther (Navajo) reverently opens a window into his culture, one that has maintained a strong matrilineal clan system despite generations of assimilation policy. The concept of female beauty celebrated in Miss Navajo is strikingly holistic, emphasizing Dine' values and cultural competence rather than superficial Western standards. Contestants in the Miss Navajo Nation contest must speak Navajo, answer complicated questions about tribal culture, history, and religion, make frybread, and butcher a sheep (all while dressed in traditional Navajo finery, dripping with silver and turquoise jewelry).

The Miss Navajo Nation pageant began in 1952 as part of the Navajo Nation Fair. Luther's documentary follows 21-year old contestant Crystal Frazier in the 2005 pageant and also features interviews with several former Miss Navajos, including Luther's own mother Sarah Johnson Luther (Miss Navajo Nation 1966). We learn that Miss Navajo Nation is a role model and ambassador for the Dine' people, accordingly, she must radiate hozho (balance, beauty, happiness, and all things good).

— BR

The Monastery: Mr. Vig and the Nun

World Cinema Competition: Documentary

Another documentary from Denmark made in association with the Danish Film Institute, *The Monastery: Mr. Vig and the Nun*, has very little in common with Enemies of Happiness thematically or aesthetically. While the latter is noteworthy for its treatment of contemporary social issues and ills, and its gritty realism, "The Monastery," directed by Pernille Rose Gronkjaer, is an eloquent and elegiac portrayal of matters spiritual shot in a lyrical, Romantic style. Ostensibly, the film's title says it all. Mr. Vig is Jorgen Lauersen Vig, an 82-year-old confirmed bachelor, who is determined

to turn his austere castle Hesberj in the Danish countryside into a monastery. To that end he offers it to an order of Russian Orthodox nuns led by the indomitable Sister Amvrosija who soon discover the gift is more than they bargained for. Though certainly a documentary in form, shot over a period of five years, *The Monastery* plays more like a beautifully written drama with an uplifting story, well-developed characters and a good deal of suspense and irony taken full advantage of by the filmmaker.

At first Gronkjaer tries to maintain her distance as her interviews and camera track Vig's quest from the moment he returns from Moscow with the Russian patriarchate's acceptance and awaits the nuns' first visit. Keeping a detached point of view isn't difficult as Vig is wary of women in general and leery of revealing too much of himself emotionally or spiritually. But, as they say, the camera doesn't lie and it is both Vig's reticence and reluctant vulnerability in this impossible endeavor to convert this broken-down piece of history into holy ground that endears him to both the lens and the audience. The lord of the castle is a gaunt, fragile, white-haired and bearded octogenarian who looks like a character from a Sergei Eisenstein doc a century ago and who seems to cast a spell on time and place. As the director says in her artist statement, "I have always dreamed of creating a fairy tale…in the process of filming I discovered his pain and shortcomings and realized the conflict of his romantic dream." At times she physically shared his pain

by stepping into the frame to help Vig move furniture or tend to the grounds so heavy was his burden in this quixotic endeavor.

In spite of the emotional, physical and financial drain on Vig during this drawn out transformation, his biggest adjustment is a war of wills as he learns to compromise with the authoritative Sr. Amvrosija who knows her way around failing boilers and rotting roofs. She can bargain with the best but one thing the good sister will not tolerate is competition as she insists on the removal of Buddhist images from the walls left over from a bygone era and soon to be replaced with proper medieval icons. Gradually, Vig bends to her convictions as she learns to accept his eccentricities. It becomes a heart-warming bond of faith and loyalty not unlike that between Ingrid Bergman's Sister Mary Benedict and Henry Travers' Horace P. Bogardis, minus the sentimentality, in *The Bells of St. Mary*.

After all, he and the nun share a common goal. Castle Hesbjerg will be a monastery for the order's spiritual work here on earth and a monument to Mr. Vig's healing and quest for eternal life. By film's end the former is achieved even as the nuns begin to accomplish the latter as their first official order of business.

— MJK

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Teeth

Dramatic Competition

Speical Jury Prize for Acting presented to Jess Weixler

Teeth is a biting horror-comedy that combines the vagina dentata myth with a modern Christian purity campaign. The vagina dentata myth occurs, in various forms, in a number of cultures and religions. The myth, in which a woman has more than one set of choppers, is usually interpreted as a sign of men's fear of women's sexuality.

In director and screenwriter Mitchell Lichtenstein's film, Jess Weixler plays Dawn, a conservative Christian high school girl who is the spokesperson for the local abstinence, save yourself until you're married, movement. Dawn is ignorant of her body and sexuality due to strict taboos regarding masturbation and sex education. When Dawn develops a relationship with one of her peers, her sexuality awakens, causing deep distress. A date-rape by this new boyfriend causes even more distress - for both parties - when the two find out that vagina dentata is more than just a myth. A creepy gynecologist and several other males also make the same discovery, as Dawn overcomes her distress and begins to understand and embrace her unique adaptation.

Teeth is graphic but also, to some, hilarious (and it wasn't only the women laughing either). While not to everyone's liking, the film blends some modern concerns over morality, sexuality, and education with a coming of age story and ancient mythology.

— MD

Slamdance Film Festival

Editors also had the opportunity to view and review films from the Slamdance Film Festival which was going on simultaneously with the Sundance Film Festival.

— WLB

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