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Report from Slamdance 2009

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Report from Slamdance 2009

Abstract

This is the report from Slamdance Film Festival 2009.

Fifteen years ago Slamdance came to Park City, Utah, as an alternative to the Sundance Film Festival. Today it is still going strong, but now it has grown into its own independent film festival. Although Slamdance shows all of its films in one location and the press view movies along with the public, Slamdance now offers a wide variety of excellent films, many of which are related to religion in one way or another. The four movies reviewed below are but a sample of films related to religion that were shown at this year's festival. A tight schedule and a small staff prevented us from reviewing another eight or ten movies that would be of interest to readers of *JR&F*. We are hoping to be able to catch more of the Slamdance fare at next year's festival.

— WLB

Heart of Stone

The heart in this movie is that of Ron Stone, who in 2001 took over as principal of Weequahic High School in Newark, New Jersey. Weequahic High School once had been know as one of the best high schools in America. By the year 2000, it had become one of the most violent high schools in the country. Gangs (Bloods and Crips) ruled the school uncontested. Crime and violence were daily occurrences.

Ron Stone was determined to turn Weequahic HS around. He began by working with the gangs to change the violent character of the school. The principal and the gangs established the school as a "non-violence" zone,



making it possible for students to study and learn again. Stone then collaborated with alumni of the high school to raise the money necessary to give the students the opportunities that students in other schools might have. . Hal Braff (1952) and Sheldon Bross (1955) founded the WHS Alumni Association. (Hall Braff is the father of actor Zach Braff) The primarily Jewish alumni followed the Jewish principle of giving something back--to both the school and the community. The Alumni Association brought together Jews and African Americans to help Ron Stone create a model for changing what appears hopeless to an opportunity for students and members of the community alike.

An idea central to Judaism, giving back, worked to give the students of Weequahic HS hope.

— WLB

Lost Sparrows



"Lost Sparrows" is the name given to children who are taken off the reservation and away from their parents and placed with White people. This movie is the story of four lost sparrows, two boys and two girls, all placed with the same family. In a bizarre accident, the two boys are run over by a train. Why they were on the tracks remains a mystery. The film is an effort by an older brother to find out why the boys died in this very strange accident. In the effort to find an answer to this question, the brother discovers that his father was molesting one of the girls. It is suggested that the boys were running away from home to try to find help for their sister. But, little more is said about the death of the boys as the movie turns its attention to the molestation of one of the sisters. The filmmaker wants to bring about some kind of reconciliation between the father and mother and the girls, both of whom have been devastated by the molestation of one of the girls. But the reconciliation does not seem to go well – it does not include professional therapists, just the family. In the end, the best that the filmmaker can do is to take the bodies of the boys back to the reservation for burial, thereby respecting their Native heritage. In this action the story comes full circle and the Native tradition is acknowledged.

— WLB

The Rapture of the Athlete Ascending to Heaven

In this stark short film, a tennis player is seen on his knees raising his raquette and hand to heaven. Next to the tennis player is a narrator who poetically describes the situation of the



tennis player. The tennis player has just won the biggest match of his life, even though he did not have the usual advantages of the wealthy white world. The tennis player, we are told, has overcome great odds, has lived in poverty, never had a blonde girlfriend with tawny legs. Yet he wins. But this is the last day of his life.

This short film is a puzzle. What does it mean? It will mean different things to different people. But it might mean that no matter how successful you are, no matter what odds you overcome, you are still going to die. Death is the end of life.

It might mean that the many things that are listed as not being had by the tennis player are often seen by others as heaven. Is this the heaven to which the tennis player will ascend? Or is this a false view of heaven? The tennis player is asked at the end what the great victory means to him. He does not give an answer. See what you think this film means.

— WLB

Second Sight

Special Jury Mention (Documentary Feature)



Second Sight is a film about the persistent presence of absence. Filmed over a number of years, McAlpine's documentary focuses on the last old generation of Gaelic story-tellers who grew up on the Isle of Skye before the days of television. These people are fascinating enough, but it is their tales of living amidst ghosts--and especially their mysterious encounters with a ghost car--that make for compelling viewing.

The people interviewed in this documentary cannot be dismissed as 'quacks.' They are, rather, salt of the earth folks whose experiences are common and recognized as valid in their culture. This enables the viewer to question his/her own view of ghosts, time and reality. "Time is the same as it was three thousand years ago," says one interviewee, "take time, don't rush it...the heart can see things."

To her credit, first-time director Alison McAlpine allows the film to unfold at a slower pace than one normally encounters. The people, landscape and stories grow and form in their time rather than ours. Through this, we get a sense of the thin and sometimes permeable boundary between the physical and spiritual on the Isle of Skye--something the Scots call "the thin places between." The cinematography is stunning; even the stones and hills sing. The setting itself begins

to persuade the viewer that there may indeed be a chance of ghosts, at least in this place.

In *Second Sight*, McAlpine's primary interviewee is 70-something Donald Angus MacLean. A former missionary and preacher in the Free Church of Scotland, MacLean says "I have a long memory of people and stories, and people telling their stories." A character in the best sense of the word, MacLean's reflections on ghosts, life and death provide the narrative that weaves all the stories and people together-like time itself.

The film ends with a dedication to the memory of Donald Angus MacLean. This is the moment when the viewer realizes that *Second Sight*, like MacLean, preserves the voices of the past and the presence of ghosts. It is an intelligent, luminous and moving film. Director McAlpine is to be congratulated for the sensitivity she brings to every aspect of the film.

— MMD