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Report from Slamdance 2011

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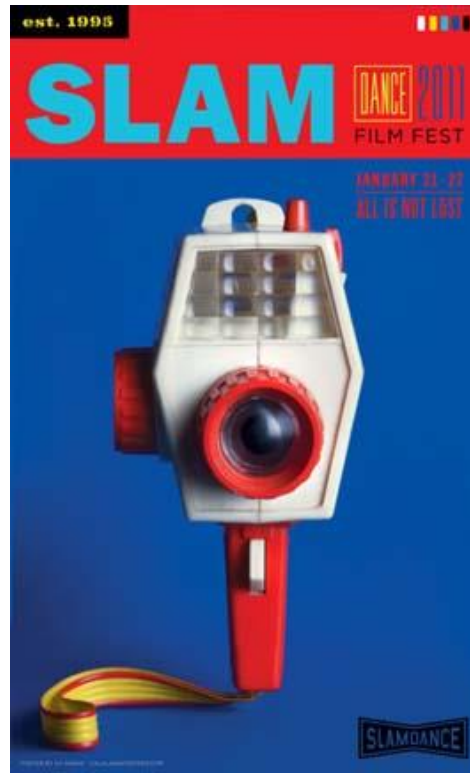
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Report from Slamdance 2011

Abstract

This is the report from Slamdance Film Festival 2011.



For many years Slamdance has been the alternative film festival in Park City during the days of the Sundance Film Festival. One of the founders of Slamdance was Dan Mirvish, from Omaha, Nebraska. Although Slamdance is a smaller film festival than the more famous Sundance Film Festival, it still receives about 5,000 submissions from which only a relatively few can be selected for showing in the theaters of the Treasure Mountain Inn on Main Street. Of those films selected, there are usually four to ten that are connected in some important way with religion. Reviews of this year's Slamdance follow.

I want to take this opportunity thank Megan MacLeod and Talia Alberts of the Slamdance Press Office for the help in getting us to see all of the movies on our list. Although Slamdance might be seen as more laid back than Sundance, it still takes an enormous amount of work to pull it off and even more work to help people like us get to see the movies we want to see. Thanks.

— WLB

Cargo

World Premiere - Slamdance

Cargo was one of the \$99 Special short films screened at Slamdance this year – with a film budget of \$99 dollars made in less than 99 days. In essence, it's a story about family connections. A young man must find a way to repay a six thousand dollar bond that his brother borrowed to get out of jail. He agrees to do the bondsman a favour – drive a package across the country for him.



Filled with fear and guilt, the brother heads off, not knowing where his brother is, and not knowing if his brother cares that he is undertaking this dangerous mission. With trepidation, he eventually opens the box because of the

fear that builds up in him: is it something illegal? It turns out to be silverware – the bondsman explains that it's the meaning of the item that is its worth. His grandmother carried that silverware with her, through war and death and the crossing of oceans. The determination his grandmother displayed is reflected in the meaningfulness the bondsman has for the silverware. Such determination is also displayed for one brother by another. It's a short film, but carries a deep message of the value of heritage and determination. Where we come from is as important as where we're going.

— RR

Checkpoint

Narrative Short



The checkpoint has become a symbol of control, oppression, and even humiliation, not only in the middle east, but around the world. *Checkpoint* is a movie about what has come to be a dangerous and threatening place. A young Palestinian boy helps his grandfather select stones that his grandfather will use to rebuild the house destroyed by the Israelis. Later the boy and the grandfather come to a checkpoint, which they will pass through without incident. But, ahead of them is a father and his daughter who will not be allowed to pass. "Orders," the soldier tells them. The daughter is dressed all in white and they are on the way to her

wedding. But, she cannot attend her own wedding because of the checkpoint. "Orders," the soldier tells them.

Later the young boy and his friends see an older Palestinian boy with a motorcycle and a pretty girl. Where did he get the money for the motorcycle, which he then uses to impress young girls? He stabbed an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint and was thrown in prison. But, it turns out that Palestinians pay those who confront the enemy. Wanting money of his own, the young boy takes a toy pistol and approaches a checkpoint.

He is disarmed and taken into custody. A dispute erupts over what to do with the boy – take him to prison or turn him over to the Palestinian police. When the soldiers discover that the gun was a toy, the soldier who wants to take him to Raja and turn him over to the police wins the argument. So he puts the young boy in the back of his jeep and heads for Raja. On the way, the soldier hears over his radio that rockets have been fired into Israel from Raja and that Raja will now come under attack. He turns the jeep around and heads back to the checkpoint. As they return, they hear the helicopter gunship flying toward Raja.

From the time the boy is put into the back of the jeep, I kept expecting the Israeli jeep to come under attack. I expected both the young Palestinian and the Israeli soldier who was trying to help him to be killed, thereby showing the tragedy

of war. But this doesn't happen. The movie ends with the jeep heading back to the checkpoint. We do not learn what happens to the boy. So it is a movie, not about tragedy, but about contradictions and ambiguity, about hope and disappointment, about the courage to take risks. All of this is more mundane than great tragedy, but also more realistic. There is no feeling of satisfaction at the end of the film, only the feeling that we have seen some good and some bad in the lives of ordinary people.

From the perspective of religion in film, all such movies pit Arab Muslims against Israeli Jews. Neither religion tells its followers to be unkind and harm others. So, in the end, religion seems almost irrelevant. But, not quite.

— WLB

FORDSON: Faith, Fasting, and Football

Documentary Feature

Fordson is a public high school in Dearborn, Michigan. It was built by Henry Ford and named after his son (Ford's son) and after the Fordson tractor



produced by the Ford Motor Company.

The football team of Fordson High is called The Tractors. And football is the element of the film that holds the story

together. The movie begins with scenes from the "big game," the annual football game against Dearborn High School, and it ends with that same game. Many of the people interviewed are members of the football team, former football players, coaches, and their families. Fordson High School is rabid about its football team, as is the East side community of Dearborn.

Ninety-five percent (95%) of Fordson's two thousand, four hundred (2400) students, however, are Arab Muslims and Dearborn, Michigan is the largest Arab community in the United States. So, the movie has more to do with what it means to be an Arab American than it does football, even though football is the thread that holds the story together. Since football is so important to the school and the community, it brings together several generations, some before 9/11 and the one after. We see the players praying to Allah before the game. We see players struggling to play during Ramadan when they are required to fast from dawn until dusk. We see families breaking the fast together at sunset. We also are reminded of the hatred toward Muslims generated by 9/11, a hatred of good neighbors generated by great fear, quite like neighbors turning on neighbors of a different religion or background in Poland or Bosnia or Rwanda. This movie shows the very ugly response of many Americans to Islam and toward Muslims following 9/11. When we meet the people who are being vilified, however, we recognize a great tragedy.

What this movie shows us is how ordinary the Arab Muslims of Dearborn are. They play football, attend football games, and cheer on their team. They practice their religion without interfering in the religious practices of others. They own businesses, participate in family life, fall in love, worry about their children, and so on. This ordinariness makes the hatred toward Arab Americans seem tragic. But, most of the people in this movie see themselves as Americans. They are seeking the same American dream as others seek. One individual says of America: "Where else in the world can you live your dream? Nowhere." For many of the people in this movie, coming to America was a chance to live the American dream and those who came first brought relatives to give them the same opportunity. Much of the movie is about the American dream and how that dream is the Arab American dream. This makes the hatred and discrimination even more tragic. The people of this movie are not only Americans, but extraordinary Americans, committed to exactly what others take to be the best of America.

At the high school graduation the principal tells the graduating seniors that they have an ability that many others do not have. "You have the ability to defend American Democracy, American ideals, and American values in two languages," he says. It is sad to say that so many of us are not defending our democracy, ideals, and values in even one voice. This may be the most tragic feature of the film. But,

so as not to end on a depressing note, the film ends with the Fordson High School Tractors beating their most important rival, Dearborn High.

— WLB

The Laying on of Hands

Documentary Short

From a very young age Nick Twemlow wanted to be a preacher/healer. But his father signed him up for martial arts classes instead, where he learned some pressure points that enabled him to render an opponent helpless. After some years in the martial arts, Nick goes back to a career in preaching/healing where he finds



great success – using some of the tricks he learned in the martial arts. Throughout much of his life, Nick has been searching for his lost mother. Finally, she appears in front of him during a healing session. Nick recognizes his mother, but when he asks his mother who he is, she says that he is her healer. Nick refuses to heal his mother.

The Laying on of Hands is Nick Twemlow's personal story and as such it is not clear what it tells us about religion or healing. It is also not clear what Nick's refusal to heal his mother tells us about him. Religion and healing are a part of the story, but they do not help us understand these practices nor do they help us

understand Nick. We will probably have to wait until the next episode to find out more.

— WLB

Summer Children

World Premiere - Slamdance

Summer Children was a lost black and white 1965 film that was found forty years later and fully restored from negatives and optical tracks. Premiering for its first time, *Summer Children* is a stylish tale about youth, sexuality, jealousy and love.



West (Stuart Anderson) is young man who has become infatuated with Diane, a young beauty that everyone fawns over. His jealousy is raised by Frankie, the suave yet crude motorcycle racer who seems to get any woman he wants. In dealing with his desires, West turns to religion as one of his options to try and navigate his sexuality and loneliness. But the movie does not tell the viewer that religion is the answer or not the answer – all we know is that jealousy and desire have dire consequences.

— RR

Ultra Violet for Sixteen Minutes

Documentary Short

Ultra Violet was an artist and actress and a part of Andy Warhol's Factory. Stunningly beautiful, she appeared in many Warhol films. Now at the age of 76, she is undertaking a "fifteen minute portrait" project where the subject sits before the camera without moving for fifteen minutes – or in the case of Ultra Violet



sixteen minutes. But, you cannot sit still for fifteen minutes, and Ultra Violet believes that you can come to understand someone by the changes in their facial features during those fifteen minutes of posing for the camera.

In this film, Ultra Violet is the subject and she interjects ideas throughout her portrait that have become important to her. As someone who was part of a very famous group, a group that sought fame, Ultra Violet now believes that fame is not something to seek – achieving fame leaves you empty. She also believes in a kind of spirituality over the hedonism and self-absorption of the Factory period. She questions the importance of mere happiness and believes that people must continually move forward. Change and forgiveness are themes that run throughout her monologue, as she poses for sixteen minutes.

All of this and more comprise what is for Ultra Violet a new spirituality and the movie asks the viewer to consider, not necessarily adopt, but consider, the elements of her new found spirituality. Since much of the film is a close up of her aging face, we are reminded that mortality is at hand and that we should begin as soon as possible to consider our own spiritual life.

— WLB



Ruby Ramji with Canadian film maker, Sarah Hudson (right). Hudson's short film, *Make Me Stronger*, was shown at Slamdance 2011 in Park City, Utah in January.