

Jason Watches Movies

The cinematic equivalent of trepanning a mermaid.

Monday, October 1, 2007

This is what the movies see when they watch me back

Jason goes to Docfest--Day 3

Another 5 movies last Sunday. Here we go:

Most festivals (especially in SF when I take BART) include at least one show where I sprint like a madman to make it there. Sometimes it's my fault, but this time it was BART's fault, as the train leaving Fremont was late, I missed the transfer, and got to 16th and Mission at 12:29 instead of 12:09. So I sprinted to the Roxie just as the first movie was starting. As I walked in, I saw the meditating image of Abbot Phra Khru Bah Neua Chai Kositto (aka Khru Bah), the amazing subject of "Buddha's Lost Children". Khru Bah was a Thai boxer, but he gave up the sport to become a Buddhist monk, traveling to the remote northern province of Thailand most famous for impoverished hillside villages and brutal druglords. There he founded a temple and orphanage. He travels to all the local villages, adopting the most impoverished and/or sick children, battling drug smugglers, and spreading his message of peace and love. The filmmakers had amazing access, and captured some beautifully moving images. And just when I'm in awe of Khru Bah, my attention shifted to the children. 3 stories in particular touched me. Nehn Sukh has unknown parents, and although he starts out having trouble keeping up, he becomes sort of a leader of the novices (apprentice monks), and wants to be a monk his entire life. Yee starts out barely able to speak, but slowly comes out of his world and becomes a novice himself, changing his name to Pan Saen. And finally, Boontam is only 4 years old, the youngest of 5 children in a family too poor to take care of himself, much less his disease that has made his legs so weak. But he has a smile that could light the world. Khru Bah even believes he could be a Buddha,



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and the miracle these people need. As a follow-up, his legs are healthy now, and he travels back and forth from the village to the temple. When he becomes 7, he plans to formally become a novice, too.

Next up was "Call of the Wild", the documentary about Chris McCandless, the 20-something who went out into the Alaskan wilderness and died on an abandoned bus after about 3 months. It was made into a book called "Into the Wild", and Sean Penn directed a movie version of it that's out now. In fact, this documentary runs into Sean Penn twice, as they're both filming on location. I never read the book, but I knew something of McCandless. I had recently moved out of Alaska at the time, and still kept track of the news up there. I'm eager to see Sean Penn's take on the story (which I've heard is pretty faithful to the book), but in the meantime Ron Lamothe has made an incredibly fascinating rediscovery of the events, including new discoveries that the book got wrong. One of my favorite points is when the local guide shows Lamothe the McCandless' backpack--found in the bus but completely overlooked by the Alaska State Troopers. In a secret pouch is McCandless' wallet, including about 8 forms of ID. So the weeks spent trying to identify the body, the dental records sent from the east coast--that was all unnecessary. I also like the reactions of the locals in the bar in Healey. They're the only ones who are blunt about how he was a dumbass and his death was Darwinism in action. That's actually more or less my opinion, although I can sympathize with the idealism and romanticism that has surrounded his myth. This was one of my favorite movies of the festival, and makes me all the more eager for Sean Penn's movie. By the way, I think I also recognized Lamothe's friend Tom Borden and his movie "American Rash" in there, but that's another story.

Next up was a short and a feature. First the short "The Independent", a brief look at the independent, mostly-volunteer, New York newspaper of the same name. I'm sure they do great work, and there are a lot of dedicated people, and

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has a Shocktoberf...

- Jason goes directly to your mailbox!
- Jason watches "Redacted"
- Jason goes to San Jose Jewfest-- Sunday Nov. 4
- Jason watches "American Gangster"
- Jason watches "30 Days of Night" and "Saw IV"
- Jason watches a couple of weird Czech movies with ...
- Jason slips into the Vortex and watches "Psychoman...

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they've won many independent press awards, but the movie really plays as an extended commercial for the paper.

The feature was "WTF: an Okaymentary", about the online community okayplayer.com. Originally a site for Roots fans, ?uestlove put the url on an album and then called his web administrator and told her "you have to make this site!" I'd never heard of it before this movie, but it's grown into a fairly large online community that's not necessarily even all Roots fans anymore (though mostly it still is). The filmmakers are all on okayplayer, and made it as sort of a road trip with the intention of meeting all the people face to face who they already know online. In that way, it shares a lot in common with any online community, particularly the stories of how people are meaner online than in person. But overall, okayplayer seems like a friendlier site than most online communities I've seen. Pretty cool. Here's a pic of co-directors Leslye James and Tim Adkins:



Next up was the treat of the festival so far, the documentary "Wiener Takes All". They really rolled out the red carpet for the stars:

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About Me

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I watch movies.

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The premise is simple and hilarious--an in-depth look at the world of competitive wiener dogs (or dachshunds for you prudes). It delves into the cutthroat world of wiener dog racing, the waaay more cutthroat world of dog shows, and even into the history of wiener dogs--they actually go back to Egyptian hieroglyphics, which oddly show other dogs on leashes but wiener dogs unleashed. The racing, of course, is the best part, with the fierce rivalries of Noodles, Pretzel, Vinnie Barbarino, Baby Luv, Heidi Roo, etc. It also hits on some faux-scandalous elements, like allegations of doping or bribing dog show judges. And in a few moments, it touches on deadly serious elements. I don't want to give away spoilers, but I feel I should warn about three things, since they'd be likely to upset dog lovers who are otherwise the best audience for this film. First, there's a scandal in dog show world about double-dappled and piebald dachshunds. Both have a color that's unacceptable to the dog show world--white. Problem is, dappled or double-dappled is a genetic disorder that doesn't just affect pigment, but affects function--whatever is underneath the white spots doesn't work right. Piebald is a different kind of white coloration that is completely harmless. On the one hand, puppy mills will breed dapples to make double-dapples, because the ~10% of survivors are so cute. On the other hand, dog shows ban piebalds for no good reason (in fact, one doggie historian claims the original wiener dogs in Egypt were piebalds). The second disturbing

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episode--historical accounts of hate crimes against "German" dogs during WWI and WWII. Poor wiener dogs were killed just for being German, even if they were born in America (they were in fact temporarily renamed Liberty Pups). And the final disturbing bit--and the one that really got me--comes from the argument against wiener dog racing. Greyhound racing has become such a big industry that perfectly healthy losing dogs are often put to death. It's fine to note that as an abomination and a reason against letting the sport get that big, but this movie did show graphic footage. I understand why it's there and I don't want to say it shouldn't be seen. And normally I might not even say a word about it. But since the presumed audience is doggy enthusiasts, I think they oughta be forewarned. Especially since all the rest of the movie is silly and fun.

Here's a pic of director Shane MacDougall with Docfest programmer Fay Dearborn.



And here are stars Baby Luv and Bruno, with their humans. It was so cool to meet the athletes/movie stars in person. I even got a smooch on the nose from Baby Luv!



And then, the final movie of the weekend was the surrealist suburban joke,

"Radiant City". I will now visibly struggle with the issue of spoilers:

Errrgh, ungh....umm....

Okay, I've decided not to give any spoilers, other than that there is a major spoiler and if you know that you'll probably get it while watching it. This documentary is about the suburbs, the sprawling, uniform, featureless zombie wasteland that stretches across North America (it's a Canadian film, but that's not the spoiler). They interview experts, activists, and families who live in the suburb. My personal favorite was author James Howard Kunstler ("Geography of Nowhere") with some rather biting criticisms. The scene of his musings while sitting on a "recreational" bench facing a chain link fence and the freeway is priceless. But they also interview a family of suburbanites. As the children show them around their neighborhood, the mother defends suburban living while the dad passive-aggressively tolerates it while putting on a local theater production of "Suburban: The Musical!" All in all, it's a pretty funny look at a way of living that's best described as the "first attempt" to build community architecture.

And that was Sunday at docfest.



Posted by Jason Wiener at 5:22 PM

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