



Archive for the 'Atlantic Film Festival' Category



[...in which McNutt recaps his 2007 Atlantic Film Festival experience](#)

Saturday, September 22nd, 2007



One of my favourite events of the year is the [Atlantic Film Festival](#), which graces Halifax with its presence every September. Over its ten days, thousands of Haligonians and over 700 industry delegates invade our city's cinemas to soak in international and local talent. I've been a festival-goer for years now, and a volunteer for the past three and it's always a bit of an exhausting experience, but the opportunity to see all sorts of interesting, unique films makes it worthwhile time and time again.

My original plan for covering the festival here at McNutt Against the Music was to post daily reviews of the movies I was seeing. I failed miserably: I completely underestimated how exhausted I would be after working all day and volunteering all night. The last thing I felt like doing when I got home each night was sitting at my computer trying to write semi-intelligent movie reviews. So what I'm going to do is condense all my thoughts into this one post (including the already-posted review of *Shake Hands With the Devil*) giving each film a rating (in descending order): **highly recommended**, **recommended**, **if it's your cup of tea**, or **avoid like the plague**.



[Shake Hands With the Devil](#)

There's no question that *Shake Hands With the Devil*, which retells the story of the tragic Canadian-led peacekeeping mission in Rwanda led by Roméo Dallaire, is a great story. After all, it's been told successfully twice before (in Dallaire's book and a documentary of the same name). This time, it's writer and producer Michael Donovan (*Bowling for Columbine*) and director Roger Spottiswoode (*Tomorrow Never Dies*) who try their hand at a dramatic version, selected for the Atlantic Film

Festival's opening gala screening last Thursday.

As riveting as its story is, I wouldn't go so far as to call *Shake Hands With the Devil* a great *film*. It does have a visual flair that distances it from most Canadian productions, helped immensely by stunning location shooting in Rwanda. And Roy Dupuis (*The Barbarian Invasions*, *The Rocket*) is remarkable in the title role, his festival win for 'Best Actor' well-deserved. But the film never really sells me on the sheer madness of what took place in Rwanda. I wasn't expecting another *Apocalypse Now*, but the film's direction and editing simply feels too clean, and the decision to keep most of the bloodshed and horror off-screen – ostensibly to broaden the film's audience – made me wish at times that the film gave us a darker window into what Dallaire was witness to.

The film's second half was strong enough to push this into **recommended** territory, especially if you've yet to experience Dallaire's harrowing story, but I couldn't help but want more out of *Shake Hands With the Devil*.

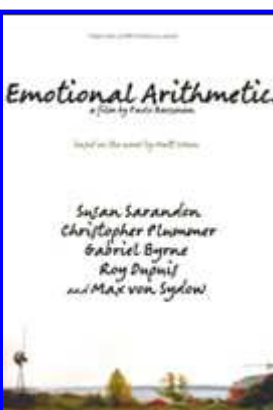


Wiener Takes All: A Documentary

For me, a big part of the film festival experience is going to see documentaries and smaller films that are unlikely to get a theatrical release here in Halifax. I thought that *Wiener Takes All* would fit the bill, but the fact that there was a sellout crowd for the movie's world premiere screening suggests that it might have life in Halifax at a later date, especially since director Shane MacDougall is originally from here.

Wiener Takes All is everything you'd expect: an adorable, funny, and even at times fascinating look at the niche sport of competitive wiener dog racing. The film's cast of characters is bizarre but they never feel like they're being exploited, and MacDougall gets the audience invested enough in the drama that you're actually on the edge of your seat as the final race is set to begin.

But when I left the theatre, I really couldn't remember much about the film and it certainly hasn't stuck with me since then. While clearly a labour of love for its crew, the film is a fun documentary that many will enjoy but that really isn't designed for any sort of long-term impact. Still, since I enjoyed myself, it gets a **recommended**.



Emotional Arithmetic

Emotional Arithmetic opens with Susan Sarandon reading the lines: "If you ask me if I believe in God, forgive me if I answer 'Does God believe in me?'" From that very moment, I knew that I was in for a rough, rough ride.

Sure enough, *Emotional Arithmetic* spends the next 100 minutes living up to that level of unbearable pretentiousness. Don't be fooled by the movie's impressive cast – Sarandon, Christopher Plummer, Gabriel Byrne, Roy Dupuis – because even they can't salvage a movie that so desperately wants to be *important* that the whole film comes across as unbelievably forced. Director Paolo Barzman – who spoke at the screening – clearly has talent as a filmmaker, but he's thrown so much into this film that it collapses under its own weight.

The subject matter – three people who formed a lifelong bond in a French detention facility during the Second World War – is serious enough without over-dramatic camera angles, clichéd visual metaphors and having the film's characters explain and explain again its obvious theme of remembrance. The whole movie ends up subtle as a sledgehammer. I'm afraid I'm going to have to go **avoid like the plague** on this one.



Kurt Cobain: About a Son

Directors and producers often run unscheduled Q&A sessions after their films at the festival, and they're almost always worthwhile, even if the festival staff usually lets them go on a bit too long. So how come when one of these Q&As is actually promoted in advance – like with AJ Schnack and his documentary *About a Son* – that 3/4 of the theatre doesn't stick around?

Was it that they didn't like the movie? Could be. Schnack told the audience that the film was almost certainly not going to be what they expected, and I'm sure that audience members anticipating a traditional music documentary were sorely disappointed when they got something altogether different. *About a Son* is based on over 25 hours of previously unheard audio interviews with Cobain by music journalist Michael Azerrad. Schnack lets Cobain tell his own life story while he provides cityscapes, faces and an assortment of other visuals to accompany it (images that rarely

contain the film's subject).

About a Son is a film that won me over the more I watched. At first I was ambivalent about its technique, and even found it a bit gimmicky. But not only are these audio interviews an amazingly personal insight into Cobain's life, but Schnack produces some beautiful and powerful images to match. Afterward the screening, Schnack explained that his reason to keep Cobain's face out of the film until the very end was to avoid the obvious, distracting grunge iconography, so that when you finally did come face-to-face with it at the end you'd have a whole new appreciation to bring to them. Mission accomplished. I'm calling this one **if it's your cup of tea** because it's clearly an acquired taste, but if it sounds like a film you'd be interested in, it's definitely **recommended**.



Reservation Road

College professor Ethan (Joaquin Phoenix) and his wife Grace (Jennifer Connelly) are driving their son and daughter home from a music recital. Dwight (Mark Ruffalo), a lawyer, is driving his son Lucas home from a baseball game with his demanding ex-wife (Mira Sorvino) on the phone demanding to know Lucas isn't home from his visitation yet. Losing track of the road, Dwight's SUV hits Ethan's son outside a gas station, killing him instantly. In fear and panic, Dwight keeps on driving.

All of this happens in the five riveting minutes that open *Reservation Road*. The problem is that from that description, you've likely already mapped out the rest of the movie in your head, and you're probably 95 per cent correct. *Reservation Road* is a disappointing follow-up to *Hotel Rwanda* for writer/director Terry George because it never surprises the viewer. While its opening and ending are admirably intense, everything the film puts in between them feels like a game of connect-the-dots. Even when the film does try a plot twist, it's obvious enough that most of the audience will see it coming.

The performances are good enough, but the film spends a disproportionate amount of time with Phoenix and Connelly's characters (who basically just grieve and argue for most of the film) instead of Ruffalo, who in my opinion is the far more interesting character and the more subtle, realistic performance. It might actually be some of the best work of his career. It's just a shame that it never takes us anywhere interesting or surprising. Ruffalo's performance is **recommended** but this feels like a mass-audience drama that's only **if it's your cup of tea**.



Control

I always try and go out of my way to see one or two music films each festival, but I often struggle in trying to recommend them to others. If I'm a fan of the featured band or artist, I usually worry that the actual quality of the film is being clouded by my appreciation for the music. Take *Control* as an example. I absolutely loved the film, certainly one of the best movies I think I've seen all year, and yet I have no idea how someone who isn't a fan of Joy Division would react to it.

I hope that they'd appreciate the beautiful artistry that photographer and music video director Anton Corbijn has woven into his first feature film. Every frame is like a painting, iconic when it wants to be and tragic when it needs to be. I wish that they'd recognize how stunning Sam Riley's performance is as singer Ian Curtis. He perfectly captures Curtis' intensity while at the same time never overselling the depression and struggle with epilepsy that led him to kill himself at the age of 23. And I hope that they'd admire the way that the film uses its soundtrack to great effect, from the actors' faithful and impassioned versions of Joy Division classics to the two moments where the original recordings are used. Yes, "Love Will Tear Us Apart" is used, in a moment that could be cheesy no less, but the effect ends up heartbreaking.

I have no idea what the audience thought of the film – no one clapped afterwards, a rarity for the film festival. It might be that they simply didn't like the film. It could be that because no one involved with the film was present that there was no need to respond to it. I hope that they didn't clap for the same reason that I didn't – because what I saw was so gripping, beautiful and sad that to applaud would have just seemed trivial. **Highly recommended**, especially if you're a Joy Division fan.



The Tracey Fragments

In contrast, *The Tracey Fragments* was greeted with rapturous applause, mostly to show appreciation to its director (Bruce MacDonald) and its star (Ellen Page), both of whom were in attendance. Before the screening began, festival director Lia Rinaldo announced that the film had won both 'Best Canadian Feature' and 'Best Actress' at their awards reception earlier that evening. I

can't think of any other film I saw all festival that more deserved both recognitions.

To explain what *The Tracey Fragments* is about would be pointless: it's a film that deserves to be seen, not described. Its story involves a 15-year old girl, a missing younger brother who thinks he's a dog, a dysfunctional family and an adventure in Winnipeg, but to tell you how they all weave together wouldn't do justice to the film's ability to traverse the emotional spectrum from joy to sorrow and everything in between. The film took only a couple of weeks to shoot but over nine months to edit, using split screens, bends, folds and more to show Tracey's thoughts, hopes, dreams, and fears. And holding it all together is the brilliant Ellen Page – between this and the upcoming *Juno*, this is her year, and she's got the work to back it up. (Oh, and the film has a fantastic soundtrack from Broken Social Scene as well.)

It was a fitting end to my festival experience – after sitting through movies that I had reservations and problems with, I got to see two films that I can unequivocally recommend. *The Tracey Fragments* is one of the best Canadian films I've seen in a long time, and is **highly recommended** to anyone looking for a dose of innovation, creativity and complexity in their moviegoing.

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[...in which McNutt hypes the 2007 alFresco Film Festo](#)

Friday, July 27th, 2007



We children of the 1980s are the VHS generation, the first batch of youngsters to have grown up being able to watch Hollywood films, on demand, from the comfort of our own home. Hell, thinking back, most of my formative movie-watching experiences were on the family sofa. I recall wearing out tape after tape of Star Wars, making sure that the adventures of Indiana Jones were close by, and ensuring a steady supply of mandatory Disney viewing. In contrast, I have almost no recollection of going to the movie theatre

What was gained in convenience was lost in collective experience. There's a reason why people still spend \$10+ a person to go to the cinema when DVD-quality picture and sound are available in living rooms across North America. It's because there's nothing like seeing a movie with an audience, sharing in the laughs, scares and cheers with a hundred or so strangers in the dark. An animated, engaged audience can make even a mediocre film like *Transformers* infinitely more enjoyable.

There's no greater evidence of this than Halifax's fantastic [alFresco Film Festo](#), a production of the Atlantic Film Festival Association. Each summer, alFresco hosts screens an assortment of films outdoors down on the Halifax waterfront. The lineup is an eclectic mix of family favourites, cult classics, beloved blockbusters and a yearly people's choice night where online voting determines the selection (the first several years of which were all Hitchcock films). I've been a patron for several years now, with highlights including a Steven Spielberg double bill of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Jaws* - neither of which I had seen with an audience before, and wow what a difference it makes - and the night when almost 2,000 people turned up to watch *Feris Bueller's Day Off*.