

## Aesthetica 2017: Day Two

The team report back from another day of the Aesthetica Short Film Festival

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So, Aesthetica 2017 is now well and truly under way and Day Two brought even more impressive shorts to York. It also saw the beginning of the Showcase Screenings, with contributions from institutions including London Film School. There was still plenty of surprises and wonderful moments in the genre “blocks” on show as well.

Kicking the day off was **Animation 6: Balancing Desires**, its enigmatic title leading to an interestingly varied screening. Where else would you see a harrowing tale of an ancient mariner paired up with a quaint but surprisingly dark adventure of a grey squirrel and an acorn? What really ties all these shorts together is their ability as animations to push the art form to the limit. *Shrink* by Mathew Lee was testament to the fact that shorts don't have to play by the rules and coming in at 2:06 mins it did so much with so little. The story of a man trapped in a room that is getting smaller and smaller, it was created using pixilation, a technique whereby real footage is edited to appear animated, reflects the panic and hopelessness of the character. Another highlight was Astrid Goldsmith's slightly longer *Squirrel Island*, which immediately immerses you into an original and richly designed world. Countless puppets and sets go into making this lavishly textured and deliciously light but dark story of a hunted grey squirrel on a mysterious island. It goes to some very dark places, yet still gets the most giggles and packs in some ingenious moments. Along with the commendable heart of *Squirrel Island*, a mention should also be given to Chenglin Xie's *Life Smartphone*. In a world where everyone is quite literally glued to their phones, a man accidentally pulls off a woman's clothes in the street, a doctor absently injects a cheeky backside and firefighters fail to catch people jumping out of buildings but everyone is too distracted to notice or care. This comically gruesome film explores what society would be like if our addictive internet culture was pushed to the extreme. For a film with no dialogue, it asks a lot of difficult questions. Sadly this film is not so far removed from reality that the laughs don't come with a bit of a sting.



Image: Super16

The shorts later took a female-led turn at **Drama 9: Female Fables**. With a range of explorative takes on womanhood, this screening showcased fantastic female acting talent. One of the more interesting pieces from this screening was *Aquamamas*, by Zara Zemy. The film was reminiscent in style to recent *Black Mirror* episode “Nosedive” with pristine cinematography, which contrasted well with the main character's haggard appearance and the wailing of her new-born baby. Admittedly, comparing the film to *Black Mirror* may imply it is a straight up horror or thriller, which isn't entirely accurate. The film never

fully ventures into the complete chaos that *Mirror* can be tempted to do, but it did have disturbing undercurrents. The Greco-Roman fantasy scene and the audio tape, "Repeat after me: I am a mum", giving not so subtle jabs at the "cult of motherhood" which the film successfully deconstructs. After such a strong start the other films in the screening couldn't quite live up to *Aquamamas'* mastery of the medium. Kate Dickie did make an appearance in *Natalie*, but despite her higher profile, the film, and her performance, did little to astound. Although, this could be attributed to the general high quality in acting and filmmaking across the screening.

The infinitely variable "drama" category continued with one of the highlights of the festival so far - Benjamin Cleary's *Wave*, screening in **Drama 11: Tales of Wonder**. Despite its genre pigeonholing, *Wave* could in fact be seen as drama, comedy, or even mockumentary. A young man wakes up from a coma and can speak a language only understood by himself, leaving him alone and isolated. In equal parts melancholic and inspiring, the dry humour that underpins the film never allows it to become saccharine. Cleary already has an Oscar for Best Live Action Short Film and his craftsmanship shines through here. It's the perfect example of a short film that could not be told through any other medium. Also Jarvis Cocker narrates it, and if that doesn't persuade you I don't know what will. From one of the best of the fest so far, to one of the weirdest - Swedish short *Spiritus Lepus*. An injured man is taken into the forest by a man with a bag shaped like a rabbit over his head - he also has magic. So far so good. It's when he walks into a cave and is joined by six other robot rabbits to try and operate on the injured man that the questions start. Enjoyable if only for its great costume design and its utter bizarreness, if you understand what is going on in this film then you are to be applauded, but should probably get yourself checked out too.

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A day at a festival wouldn't be complete without a good old laugh and what could be funnier than matricide? This was duly offered by **Comedy 6: Odd Couples**. Well, it wasn't actually that bad. Just attempted matricide. *Belle and Bamber* is about a young girl (Belle) and her imaginary friend (Bamber). Belle's mother is trying to encourage her daughter to try and make real friends - and Bamber doesn't like that at all. To say this comedy is horror inflicted is to put it mildly, but horror and comedy have always gone uncomfortably hand in hand. Half the audience was in tears of laughter and the other half in horrified silence, if you want the Muppets version of *Heavenly Creatures* then this may be for you. If you want a coming-of-age drama without the murderous elements, and frankly you're making the wrong decision if you do, then perhaps *Mrs McCutcheon* is the better choice. 10-year-old Tom is trying to settle into a new school but has trouble fitting in because he wants to wear a dress to school. Navigating issues of transgenderism and gender expression in children, the film is certainly timely. It can be a bit heavy-handed with the sentimentalism and the dialogue not exactly subtle but with stunning cinematography and great performances from its young cast, it would take one stony-hearted viewer to dislike a film with such warmth and charm.

Another day, another vast array of talent and surprises - and there's still more to come...



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