Aesthetica Short Film Festival: Round-up of Day 1

James Tyas brings you the best of day 1 at York’s Aesthetica Short Film Festival

Saturday 10 November 2012

Friday saw the first full day of screenings at the second annual Aesthetica Short Film Festival. Taking place at thirteen different venues across York and screening hundreds of films from over 20 different countries, the ASFF has proved to be one of the most anticipated events for York’s film-lovers.

I began the day at the York Theatre Royal by attending the masterclass hosted by head of production at Warp Films (This Is England, Submarine), Barry Ryan. This year marks the tenth anniversary of Warp Films’ existence and Ryan gave an illuminating talk on the company’s illustrious history and gave insight into the intricacies of film production. Ryan’s talk highlighted just how much more mundane the British film industry would be without production outfits such as Warp Films who are willing to prioritise making films they are proud of ahead of box-office potential.

Deciding to ease myself into the day I headed to Thirteen Thirty One, which houses a luxury boutique cinema, to watch the second set of Comedies to be screened on the Friday. The fully reclining leather chairs in the cinema were on a first come first serve basis which meant that I was forced to sit on one of the bean bags directly in front of the screen. This proved to be far less irritating than I first imagined and with Radiohead’s ‘Codex’ playing on loop while I took in my plush surroundings, by the time the films started I was in a zen-like state of calm...

First up, and my pick of the bunch, was the off-beat Australian film Cockatoo. Taking its cues from the work of Wes Anderson, with exceptional performances from the two leads, this willfully eccentric film followed the story of a man unable to get over his girlfriend leaving him so hires an actor to play her. Next up was zany American nature mockumentary Tumbleweed! about a tumbleweed that didn’t tumble, closely followed by 7 Miles From Bradford. This british caper followed three hapless lads who were falsely accused of terrorism following a string of increasingly implausible events. Although coming off more Mr Bean than Four Lions, the film did have a uniquely British goofy charm.
So far I had learnt that if the ASFF was about anything, it was about broadening your horizons so I resolved to take a plunge into unknown waters and make my next stop Bar Lane Studios, where they were screening Art and Experimental films on loop all day. As I was walking down, I was pretty sure I knew what to expect: Men with beards sitting around looking pensive; Brechtian alienation; existential angst; Pinter-esque silences and the like. My preconceptions were all but confirmed when I sat down in the stylish, but near-empty, arts space. I’d arrived a few minutes into a film called Citizens: Teasel and Scabious. In the official festival programme the film’s description read “A conversation: silence and language, performance and rhythm, action and memory.” Well quite. I’m sure if I was more intelligent, watched it from the start and paid closer attention rather than idly flicking through my programme, I’d have found the key to the meaning of life in this film but as it was, I didn’t really get it. As I was getting up to go and seek some slightly less impenetrable fare, I found a kindred spirit: I looked round the room and saw an old guy who was also idly flicking through his programme and we exchanged a glance that said “this isn’t really our scene is it.” Despite my apathy, It did go to show that there really was something for everyone on offer at the festival. Unfortunately, in this case, that person wasn’t me.

I ended the day on more familiar territory, both in terms of film and location, by going to City Screen to watch films from the Thriller category. Collectively, the films, including Red, The Secret Number and Scarecrow (Directed by former University of York student James Arden) were the strongest I’d seen all day. Best of the lot was Red Letter, opening with idyllic super-8 footage of a family vacation soundtracked by Bon Iver’s ‘Skinny Love’ the film quickly went a bit Wicker Man. This beautifully shot, deeply unsettling horror-thriller’s greatest asset was a stunning central performance by Priscilla Gray, who’s portrayal of Mrs. Witcam bridges the gap between Kathy Bates in Misery and Sweeney Todd.

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