

Aesthetica Short Film Festival: Day Five

As York's ASFF wraps up, the MUSE team take you through more of the best things on offer

By [Andrew Young](#) and [Emily Taylor](#)
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Still from *Icarus*, 2017. Directed by Nicolas Boucart, Belgium. Image: Agence Belge du Court M trage

As the Aesthetica Short Film Festival 2018 draws to a close, audiences should be left in no doubt as to the laughter, fear and sheer variety that the event has to offer. The day five programme offered many of the screenings that had been shown already throughout the event, giving festival-goers a chance to catch up on things they had missed over the last four days.

Amongst the packed final day programme was **Drama 4: Journeys and Adventures**. If you went into this screening not knowing its title, you might be tempted to guess at it being 'Dreams and Obsessions'. Throughout most of the six shorts on offer are characters who are so desperately chasing a goal, or trying so ardently to pursue their own way of life, that they put themselves and those around them at risk. Case in point: Chakib Taleb-Bendiab's *Black Spirit*. Following an ageing academic as he searches for the rumoured 'African Samurai' in the Tunisian desert, it is a slightly overlong but sufficiently gripping study of stubborn persistence and confused reality. On a similar theme is the excellent *Icarus*. The heartbreaking story focuses on a man who's ambitions of making humans fly is now impinging on two young boys in his care. It is a memorable, well-acted film and one of the screening's standouts. Top spot is taken, however, by Edward Watts' *Oksijan*. A haunting tale of a child refugee, it is quietly devastating. Watts' key move is to draw his audience in using a 'fictional' story, then hit them with startling, upsetting facts about the amount of child refugees across Europe - an emotional sucker punch of a film.

The **Drama 4** screening was then filled out with some odder inclusions. There is a large dose of ambiguity in Melissa Farman's *Ready* but its tender portrayal of a mother-son relationship make it well worth watching. *Beasts*, meanwhile, is a short but intensely disturbing monologue from a wrestling enthusiast/vigilante. Things were finished off with the decidedly lighter *Just for Today*, which plays like a whistle-stop, wordless *Before Sunrise*. A charming, if slight, way to finish the screening.

Showing elsewhere on Sunday was **Drama 5: Realisations and Transformation**. A personal favourite from the category was *Little Bill's Peep Show*, a film that felt out of place in the drama category but would have felt out of place in any category really. It's a strange little horror-comedy about homophobia. Though it's moral message may not be loaded with nuance, if you're looking for nuance in films aping schlocky 80's b-movies then you may be looking in the wrong place. It's also a great example of mixed media, mixing found-footage with animation and traditional filmmaking. It's energetic and incredibly fun, if a bit silly and also pretty violent. This wasn't the only film on homosexuality in this grouping, *Concern for Welfare* directed by Fadia Abboud is a touching drama centred around a gay probationary cop and her relationship with her family and her reaction to finding a dead body as part of her job. In contrast to the title of this grouping what is perhaps remarkable about this film is the lack of any realisations that the audience may have expected. It keeps the drama realistic where change and transformation happens little by little and in not grandiose moments of revelation. In it's limited time it also introduced a group of likeable yet flawed characters – if this short was a pilot for a tv show then I certainly would like to spend more time with these characters.

Another drama that prioritised realism was *Les Heures-Encre*, an often tough watch about inhumane working conditions in a factory. It follows two people in the aftermath of an employee's violent suicide: the man's wife who attempts to understand what happened and the man who finds the body and has to make a difficult choice of whether to reveal the truth. Fantastic performances from the two leads help anchor the film in a sense of humanity rather than let it become overly bleak. Director Wendy Pillonel did a fantastic job of balancing the complex subject matter and narrative in such a limited time, this is one short that could definitely be turned into a feature.



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