

MOVIES

Wisconsin Film Festival: A perfect 10

After a silly start, the Wisconsin Film Festival has a brilliant first decade

[Kent Williams](#) on Thursday 04/03/2008

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Like the thawing of the lakes, the Wisconsin Film Festival has become an annual rite of spring around here. Having been cooped up all winter, we nevertheless consign ourselves to a few more hours of darkness in order to catch up with what's happening in the wide world of film beyond the multiplexes. And the festival, which will celebrate its 10th anniversary April 3-6, continues to fulfill its mission of making the city of Madison and the state of Wisconsin the kinds of places where independent, foreign, art and experimental — not to mention homegrown — movies can thrive.

Who could have imagined, back in 1999, that the "Great Wisconsin Filmfest" would become a veritable institution? Not me. I sat and watched, dumbfounded, as the Wisconsin Film Office, given the task of creating a festival that would put our little state on the film-industry map, made one boneheaded decision after another. There were grandiose visions, drenched in Wisconsin flava. Most notoriously, Robert Redford was to receive something called the Cheesehead Award, the mere mention of which was enough to send the Sundance Kid scurrying for cover.

Premieres of major releases by Hollywood studios were promised, but nobody had checked with the Hollywood studios, which had better ideas for the premieres of their major releases. And like a house of cards built entirely of jokers, the Great Wisconsin Filmfest came tumbling down. But then something interesting happened. As the state backed out, the university stepped in — university students, that is. Having been involved in the planning of the ill-fated state-run operation, the UW Cinematheque and the Wisconsin Union Film Directorate decided to create a festival of their own.

It wasn't "great," by any means — a couple dozen films, a couple of venues, both of them on campus. But you had to admire what co-programmers James Kreul and Wendy Weger had put together, from the relatively high-profile Woody Allen film *Celebrity* to the emphatically low-profile but much more enjoyable Sadie Benning film *Flat Is Beautiful*. For those stuck in the '60s, *The War at Home* was brought out of mothballs. But there was also *The Cruise*, a delightful documentary about one of the most eccentric tour guides of all time, and *Dancemaker*, a biography of choreographer Paul Taylor that had received an Oscar nomination.

With few resources, the organizers were forced to be resourceful, and it paid off: Three thousand people showed up, enough to justify doing the whole thing all over again the next year. This time, there were four venues, including the Orpheum Theatre and the Madison Art Center; 70 films, including David Lynch's *The Straight Story*; and a brand-new festival director, Mary Carbine, who had experience as both a film curator and a fund-raiser. The festival was clearly in good hands, housed within the UW Arts Institute, which paid Carbine's salary. And this was reflected in the programming, which ventured far and wide, but also near and wide.

So we got *Genghis Blues*, an Oscar-nominated doc about a throat-singing competition in the tiny Republic of Tuva, but we also got Wisconsin *Death Trip*, a film version of Michael Lesy's cult classic. Even more locally, there was Erik Gunnerson's *Milk Punch*, which was shot almost entirely in Madison. To its eternal credit, the Wisconsin Film Festival has always taken the "Wisconsin" part of its name very seriously, providing the state's filmmakers with a rare chance to have their work seen. And starting in year two, with an Iranian series, it has also made a strong commitment to foreign films. As the saying goes, "Think global, act local."

By that second year, the festival was already starting to define itself. There would be no major-studio premieres. Instead, there would be the kind of films that, in Carbine's words, "you can't find in your local theaters and video store." And it's been impressive how closely the organizers have adhered to that vision over the years. Also impressive is how avidly Madison has responded. Attendance shot up to 8,000 in year two and 14,000 in year three, despite the institution of an admission charge. And the number of screenings itself continued to grow, from 70 in year two to 108 in year three and 138 in year four.

Today, the festival has settled into a groove that would be the envy of any city our size. A whopping 220 feature films and shorts will be shown this weekend in 10 venues all over the downtown area. And the tickets have been disappearing so fast that, if you don't act soon, you may have to resort to the rush line. (It works, by the way. Just show up early enough and cross your fingers.) Not even Carbine's departure, before the 2006 festival, seems to have caused much commotion. Meg Hamel, her replacement, may not have Carbine's film-world experience, but you don't have to talk to her very long to realize that she's on top of things.

Speaking of which, the festival has a pretty good track record when it comes to making the trains run on time. There are glitches, as there are at all festivals, but it's amazing what you can accomplish with an army of volunteers. The festival also has a nice vibe — relaxed, yet enthusiastic. Filmmakers reportedly love us since we tend to give even the most impenetrable piece of sin-ee-mah a big Badger State welcome. Only the wrong weather, by which I mean sunny and warm, can keep us away, but that's largely been taken care of with the shift to early April.

Has the festival been a success? Unqualifiedly so. It may not "glitter with Hollywood stars," as the Film Office originally promised. But its effect on the city's film culture is incalculable, both because these things are difficult to calculate and because, even if they weren't, you'd need a pretty high-speed calculator. Without the Wisconsin Film Festival, it's hard to imagine Sundance Cinemas coming to town, for example. Sundance didn't hope or assume there was an audience in Madison for challenging films, it knew there was one. And a lot of the credit for that goes to — why not put it back in? — the Great Wisconsin Film Festival.

The festival has always shown an appreciation for the wild and wacky, the off-the-wall and the slightly out-of-the-ordinary. In honor of its 10th anniversary, I decided to focus on 10 documentaries from this year's lineup that embrace life's utter eccentricity.

Circus Rosaire

Sunday, Monona Terrace, 6:30 pm

"There are a lot of animal trainers working at Wal-Mart, I'm not the only one," says a member of the renowned Rosaire family in Robin Bliley's valedictory-tinged documentary about the circus leaving town and not coming back. For nine generations, the Florida-based Rosaire family has been working with lions, tigers and bears, not to mention horses, dogs and chimps, but there isn't a big call for that anymore. And PETA protesters are always nipping at their heels. Still, what are you supposed to do if you've got sawdust running through your veins? You hang on, "like the last of the Mohicans," and you take an outside job when necessary.

It's a truly sad story, no matter what your position on animal rights, and Bliley gives us a lot of quality time with the extended Rosaire clan, almost all of whom have seen better days. Where they once played the White House, they now can barely afford to feed their animals, whom they treat like members of the family. When a beloved chimp dies, there isn't a dry eye in the house.

Be Like Others

Friday, Chazen Museum of Art, 5 pm

It's one of those things that make the Islamic Republic of Iran such an intriguing place. Homosexuality is, of course, against the law, punishable by death. But sex-change operations, because they're not strictly forbidden by the Qur'an, are perfectly legal, even encouraged. And the result is like a bad episode of Nip/Tuck — all sorts of drastic plastic surgeries that might have been avoided if society would just let people be. Instead, they're forced to "be like others," a line that Iranian American filmmaker Tunas Shavian borrowed for the title of his documentary.

Shavian doesn't do much more than hang around a Tehran clinic where men and women go to get their genders reassigned, but the stories these people have to tell — of ostracism and abuse by their families, their neighbors, even strangers — suggest that the sex-change policy may not be as enlightened as it seems. The government doesn't care which category you fall in, male or female, as long as you fall into one.

Nerdcare for Life

Saturday, Bartell Theatre, 11:15 pm

In the grand tradition of Air Guitar Nation and Heart of an Empire, Nerdcare for Life introduces us to a subculture that's ready to let its geek colors fly. Nerdcare is rap music as written and performed by...well, by nerds — science nerds, comic-book nerds, videogame nerds, Star Wars nerds, even Lord of the Rings nerds. And if you think it's all an Al Yankovic parody, think again, because some of these guys are actually capable of busting a rhyme. And like Jay-Z and 50 Cent, they're keeping it real, singing about their own nerdy lives. Whether the next big thing or a flash in the pan, nerdcare is a fascinating near-contradiction in terms, like "Christian rock." And Dan Lamoureux's documentary, which provides lots of concert footage, is a nice introduction to a surprisingly diverse field.

The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins

Friday (9:45 pm) & Sunday (7:45 pm), Play Circle Theater in the UW Memorial Union

Maternal instinct or cultural imperialism? That's the question that hovers over Pietra Brettkelly's documentary about Vanessa Beecroft, the controversial performance/ installation artist who, while doing field work — i.e., looking for photographic subjects — in the Darfur region of Sudan, falls in love with a pair of orphans she decided to adopt. But does she really want to raise them? Or is she just riddled with Western guilt? Or has she forgotten where art leaves off and life begins? Or has adopting African babies become the chic thing to do? Perhaps only Angelina Jolie and Madonna know for sure, but Brettkelly, who was given all kinds of access, sticks to Beecroft like a wad of gum on her shoe, and the result is a dazzling portrait of an artist best known for her work with groups of barely clad women.

Exploitation or art about exploitation? You be the judge.

Na Kamalei: The Men of Hula

Friday (5 pm) & Saturday (11:15 am), Chazen Museum of Art

I know what you're thinking: Men doing hula? But they've always done hula. And when done by men, it's a surprisingly masculine dance, no matter how smoothly the hips are swayed. After the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown, in 1893, hula, along with the rest of traditional Hawaiian culture, went underground for a while. And when it resurfaced, women were the ones wearing most of the grass skirts. But there were a few good men who refused to say die, and director Lisette Marie Flanary salutes them in this strangely moving documentary. She focuses on Na Kamalei, the only all-male hula school left in Hawaii, which is run by a charismatic and loving dictator named Robert Cazimero. And while getting to know the individual dancers, we also watch them prepare for a competition that turns out to be a spirit quest of male bonding. Eat your heart out, Robert Bly.

Lagerfeld Confidential

Thursday, Wisconsin Union Theater, 9:15 pm

If anyone could ever be said to hide in the spotlight it would be...well, it would have been Andy Warhol. But Karl Lagerfeld, the German-born fashion designer who reinvented Chanel in Coco's own image, appears to have modeled himself on the silver-wigged enigma. And Lagerfeld Confidential, the very title of which promises some scuttlebutt, is yet another smokescreen — a veil draped over Lagerfeld's private life, through which we catch tantalizing glimpses. We follow him around as he conducts photo shoots, sketches designs, boards planes and answers all of director Rodolphe Marconi's questions without really revealing anything. And it's quite easy to spend an hour and a half with someone who's so deeply superficial. But it's also a bit like staring at the official portrait of a king — awe-inspiring and a little boring at the same time.

Urban Explorers: Into the Darkness

Saturday (6 pm) & Sunday (1:15 pm), Play Circle Theater in the UW Memorial Union

With the planet pretty well picked over by now, today's Vasco da Gamas have had to go underground — literally, in some cases. So-called urban explorers (most of them on the near side of 30, it appears) seek out the nooks and crannies of the built environment — the sewers, the subway tunnels, the aqueducts, the catacombs. And they love abandoned buildings: hospitals, insane asylums, castles, missile silos. They aren't into vandalism. They just want to have a look around, take some photographs, commune with history. And director Melody Gilbert's documentary allows us to tag along.

Most of the footage is semi-staged, in that Nanook of the North kind of way. But it's always interesting and sometimes gripping, as when a group of Twin Cities sewers explorers trudge through sludge — "poop and pee" — and get hit with a cloud of methane that could have left them down there. The Internet has turned these guys and gals into a community of sorts, trekkies boldly going where nobody's been in a very long time.

Twisted

Sunday, Monona Terrace, 1:30 pm

I had to pore over the end credits to make sure this one wasn't directed by Waiting for Guffman's Christopher Guest. Actually, it's directed by Sara Taksler and Naomi Greenfield, who knew a ripe subject when they saw one. "Twisting" is the manipulation of balloons so that they form anything from a Dachshund puppy (three easy steps) to a seemingly full-scale Trojan horse (countless hours). And we're not just talking about a guy in a clown suit at a kid's birthday party. In fact, some would argue — not entirely convincingly, in my opinion — that twisting is an art form. What's clear from this rather strung-together documentary is that it's a subculture, complete with its own sub-subcultures. We meet a number of twisters, from the teenager who dug herself out of poverty by starting her own business to the man who uses balloons to spread the word of God. (His "Jesus on the Cross" is to die for.) And what unites them all is the belief that a thin tube of tree-sap latex, if folded in the proper way, can change your life.

Pageant

Friday (8:45pm) & Sunday (2:30 pm), Chazen Museum of Art

Drag had its moment back in the '90s, when Hollywood couldn't seem to get enough of it and RuPaul was prancing around like Big Bird in a wig. But where has RuPaul been lately? Has drag been put back in the closet, like yesterday's evening gowns? Not if Miss Gay America has anything to say about it. This is an annual beauty pageant held not in conjunction with the Miss America pageant, but with a long, rich tradition of its own. And if Ron Davis and Stewart Halpern's rollicking documentary is any indication, it's still going strong after years and years.

We get up close and personal with several of the contestants, some of them wonderfully outrageous, some surprisingly not. And we're shown a lot of footage of the competition itself, where nothing exceeds like excess. A veritable explosion of sequins, Pageant shows us just how much time and money go into making a man look like a woman. "He's never chosen a gown over the telephone bill," someone says about a contestant who, perhaps because he didn't, fails to make the Top Five.

Hats Off!

Saturday, Bartell Theatre, 6:30 pm

It is, of course, an achievement to reach a ripe old age, but to still be ripening, that's something. And Mimi Weddell, the subject of Jyll Johnstone's loving tribute of a documentary, shows no signs of going to seed. An actress and model who didn't start seriously going on auditions until her late-'60s, the frisky ninetysomething now has a long list of theater, film and advertising credits on her résumé. And when she isn't working, she's perfecting her craft with singing lessons, dancing lessons, even gymnastics. (We see her hanging upside-down on the parallel bars.) And did I mention that she's beautiful and elegant, a Jessica Tandy look-alike, with the same theatah accent?

Johnstone takes us through Weddell's whole life — genteel poverty, never quite sure where the next rent payment was coming from. But it's her third act, as a little old lady who refuses to act like a little old lady, for which she'll be remembered. May the curtain never come down.

Madison avenues

There's nothing quite like the pleasure of watching your hometown go by on the big screen. Here are three feature-length movies from this year's festival that were shot on the streets where you live.

Mad City Chickens

Thursday, Monona Terrace, 9 pm

A city ordinance now allows each and every Madison household to raise up to four chickens in the backyard, and this lightly seasoned documentary, which is regularly interrupted with jolts of humor, is about the folks who've taken the city up on its offer. It's also a crash course in poultry science, from egg to chicken or, if you prefer, from chicken to egg.

Madison

Saturday, Chazen Museum of Art, 8:30 pm

Brent Notbohn's pungent drama stars American Players Theatre stalwart James DeVita as a big-city newspaper correspondent who just completed a four-year hitch in Iraq. Searching for his lost ideals and reeling from a bout of post-traumatic stress, he returns to Madison, where he went to college, and the city starts to work its charms — the Plaza, Mickey's, a buddy (Brian Mani) who never left. Madison is a little on the didactic side, not unlike Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs*, but it definitely brings the war home.

Loose Cannons: Campus Security

Friday, Monona Terrace, 9:30 pm

Someone's been spending a lot of time watching John Woo and Jackie Chan movies, and that someone is Andy Schlachtenhaufen, the phenom who wrote, directed, edited and helped choreograph this delightful spoof of Hong Kong action cinema. The premise isn't all that promising: an ROTC-like student group whose mission is to serve and protect the campus population, whether it wants to be served and protected or not. But Schlachtenhaufen fans out from there, cooking up a gang of ninja warriors led by a too-cool-for-school style maven and setting them free all over the UW campus.

There are gunfights, car chases — okay, bicycle chases — and kung-fu showdowns, all of them entirely credible within the comic universe Schlachtenhaufen has created. Speaking of which, he gets totally committed performances from everybody in his large cast. And he's given them

some great lines: "You're out a little late for a study group." You may have to get out a pen and paper to do it, but remember this name: Schlachtenhaufen.

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