

MIDDLEBURY NEW FILMMAKERS FESTIVAL 2019

The hills are alive with a round of new flicks at this carefully curated Vermont-based hub

"Marriage is an utter destruction."

Jesus, don't some of us know that. But when whispered by an impoverished 11 year old Pakistani girl whose dreams of becoming a physician are threatened by arranged marriage and death in childbirth, any first world context feels disconcertingly smug.

Rooted to my seat at the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival, some 6,800 miles from the travesty unfolding onscreen in Omar Nabulsi's *A Destruction*, three thoughts come to mind. One: This festival for new moviemakers, tucked into the verdant hills of the von Trapps, Jerry Garcia, and Bernie Sanders milieu, won't let you go quietly into the light. Two: Every film,

curated from hundreds of submissions down to just 110, is singular. And three: Each story, as written and distilled through the eyes of fresh talent, is worthy of being here.

Exiting *A Destruction*, I ease into the daylight. Next up: *The Dog Doc*, a tale of a maverick veterinarian's alternative medicine for animal healing that's nothing short of miraculous. *Carol Street*, by Middlebury College alumnus Demetrius Borge, deftly weaves together themes of race, responsibility, and what it means to "pass" as white at a tony university. *The Pollinators*, which explores the threatened roles of bees and insects to our food supply, proves itself to be mandatory viewing in high school science classes and beyond. *Turning 10*, *Soaring Soldiers*, and *When We Walk* are heart breaking paucans to the human spirit. After three days of films, I squeeze into the standing room-only world premiere of *The Return of Richard III on the 9:24am Train*. A comedy drama about a dying man who hires professional actors to impersonate his real-life family, the plot quickly devolves

▼ A RAINBOW FOOD TRUCK FEEDS HUNGRY FEST-GOERS AT MIDDLEBURY NEW FILMMAKERS FESTIVAL 2019

into neurotic chaos. Filmed in French by the director Eric Bu and produced by Alexis Bougon and Stephane Sansonetti, this film has the sense and sensibility of a Louis Malle/Woody Allen collaboration.

Given the background and connections of the local festival founders, Lloyd Komesar and Jay Craven, these selections are not surprising. Komesar, a former distribution executive with Disney, and Craven, an Emmy award-winning independent moviemaker,

combined forces to create a platform for new moviemakers. "We pride ourselves on the high number of submitted films we program," says Craven.

"I also curate films that were not submitted but that I've seen at other festivals. For these selections, we keep to our mission of programming first and second films." Komesar notes that "First and second-time filmmakers don't get adequate, cutting-edge support, so we set out to change that," adding, "We aim to level the playing field and provide a true home and showcase for new filmmakers."

And, quite literally, homes are offered up to each attending moviemaker during the





▲ FESTIVAL DIRECTOR MIGUEL RODRIGUEZ (R) EMBRACES AN ATTENDEE ON DAY ONE OF HORRIBLE IMAGININGS FILM FESTIVAL 2019

four-day festival. Local residents open their guest rooms and futons, making access to the venue affordable. The entire vibe of the festival is laid-back and intimate, with rainbow-painted food trucks, “non-chain” local shops and cafés, and scenic streets free of the usual fuss and vendor labyrinths that plague the larger festivals. Moviemakers, distributors, and audiences mingle, strike up conversations and friendships, then linger and catch up at the many parties throughout the evenings.

Speaking of catching up, director Paul Schrader (*Affliction*, *First Reformed*) stopped in to share highlights of his career and future plans. Working actors Bruce Greenwood, Polly Draper, and Jeremy Holm (a rising talent and *House of Cards* alum) discussed their craft over coffee. Distribution was a hot topic for many panels. The “Navigating the PBS Programming World—Producers and Acquirers Tell All” event was packed. Marc Mauceri of First Run Features, one of the largest independent distributors in North America, comments during his panel that “first-time filmmakers often want to plaster festival laurels on their films, when

they should really focus more on smaller-target marketing.”

Not to mention funding. In addition to MNFF’s numerous prizes and their annual “Vermont Symphony Orchestra—Best Integration of Music into Film,” which awards full scoring for the winner’s next film, MNFF will premiere two new substantial scholarships for narratives in 2020.

— Katherine Sullivan

HORRIBLE IMAGININGS FILM FESTIVAL 2019

Engaged audiences, unique themed shorts blocks, and a zombie ballet fuel this Santa Ana scare cinema spot on its 10th anniversary

In this world of boundless creative imagination, finding a common language to understand it all can be scary. So scary, in fact, that fear—the stuff of the horror genre

and its many eccentric offerings—can be a language of understanding unto itself.

Miguel Rodriguez understands the gift of horror as the language of our darkest imaginations well. Within the delicately designed framework of his 10-year-old genre film festival, Horrible Imaginings, he’s embarked on a mission to create a space for moviemakers to use macabre cinema as a means of “using imagination to understand the world,” as he puts it—to “escape the oppression of reason.”

For its 10th anniversary, Horrible Imaginings returned to Santa Ana’s arthouse The Frida Cinema. Spirits were high throughout the three-day weekend, as the HIFF team welcomed genre shorts and features alike. Personally curated by Rodriguez, shorts blocks ranged from such classic fare as “Monsters, Science Fiction, and The Beyond” to unique concepts such as “This Mortal Coil,” a screening series centered around humans’ innate fear of aging.

“We can express fear by poking fun at things, or we can express fear by showing something horrifying on-screen,” Rodriguez asserts. And although the general qualifier for Horrible Imaginings is “cinema of the macabre,” there’s plenty of horror-comedy to go around as well. My personal favorite: a very short, epic war of Gingerbread people titled “Gingerfall: Reckoning”... not to be confused with Bill Moseley’s turn as Abraham Lincoln in the thoughtful, beautifully shot short “Gingerbread.”

Between these themed short blocks and daily features (one to two originals per day, as well as a 60th anniversary screening of William Castle’s *The Tingler*), Horrible Imaginings kept its schedule spooky with panels, parties, a zombie ballet, and a lovable photographer-friendly Satan impersonator.

HIFF’s closing ceremony honored *Antrum: The Deadliest Film Ever Made* with the award for Best Film; the film, one of my favorites of the fest, follows a brother and sister who dig a hole to hell in order to save their late pet dog. While it may not have truly harmed anyone (despite a formal Indemnity Agreement provided to the audience), it did deliver great visuals and scares, a tightly crafted and nuanced story, and a bookended mockumentary both clever and essential to the film’s lore. A worthwhile entry to HIFF and horror canon in general, *Antrum: The Deadliest Film Ever Made*