

DVD REVIEW

FINDING ITS LEGS

BEST OF LDS FILM FESTIVAL 2007

Compiled by Christian Vuissa

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90 Minutes, \$12.00

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SHORT FILMS ARE the poetry of cinema: compact, often lyrical, and meant more to evoke than to elaborate. Like a good poem, a quality short film can make a viewer feel, in Emily Dickinson's words, "as if the top of (your) head were taken off" with a sense of wonder, curiosity, sadness, or passion. On the other hand, a poorly executed short can make ten minutes feel like ten miles of bad road in a snowstorm, uphill both ways, with the twin wolves of frustration and boredom snapping at your heels. The range between the sublime and the sub-par is inherent to the form because, of all cinematic undertakings, shorts are the most democratic. They're comparatively cheap, narrow in scope, and anyone with a half-decent video camera and basic editing software can make one.

Though Mormon films of one form or another have been around since the advent of moviemaking, our contemporary incarnation is still developing and finding its legs. The shorts featured on the Best of LDS Film Festival 2007 DVD encapsulate some of the primary impulses in 21st century Mormon filmmaking. Some are theological, serious,

even ponderous while others verge on the utterly inconsequential. Many are visually beautiful with burnished lighting and strong shot composition, but at the same time, several feature stilted dialogue and hambone, didactic, Mormon-after-school-special narratives. As much as the Mormon film world is a mixed bag, the LDS Film Festival offerings are as well.

COMPETITION SHORT FILMS

INTERESTINGLY, the two strongest pieces on the DVD are both animated and both without discernable dialogue. Brent Leavitt's *Peach Baby* represents the best of what LDS cinema can and should be. It doesn't look or sound like any other cartoon you've seen, but it isn't odd for the sake of oddness. The animation is simple and basic but, rather than seeming crude, it fits the fable/parable-like tone exactly right.

The narrative, even compared to other shorts, is thin. All four minutes are dedicated to a young child trying to eat one of his (her?) father's peaches. The child struggles as the father looks on, and eventually, thanks to

the dad, he succeeds in getting something to eat. It's not *War and Peace*, but that is its strength. Instead of trying to be a large film squeezed into a small space, it embraces its simplicity and allows the images, the sound design, and the spare narrative to be significant on a variety of levels. A child can thoroughly enjoy the physical comedy and the very funny sound design while an adult can find pleasure in picking out various potential interpretations of the story. Originality that can entertain and enlighten without treacherous didacticism is rare and certainly what LDS artists ought to be shooting for.

Theory Toward the Evolution of the Turkey by Brandon Arnold is the other (partially) animated offering on the DVD and also the other strongest short in the competition. Narratively, it offers a very straightforward "be yourself, don't-let-The-Man-get-you-down" sort of story, and in that sense, it's no great shakes. But the charm of Jason Fredericks' animation, the jazzy score, and the easy, natural performances (particularly by the young actress Eva Stilson) more than carry the day and make it worth repeat viewing.

Going from one extreme to another, we leave the comfortable, charming accessibility of the animated offerings and move to Randy Astle's obscure, somewhat challenging *By Water, and Blood, and the Spirit*.

Three minutes from beginning to end and shot on what appears to be Super 8 film, it depicts a traditional, LDS baptism. However, rather than the glowing light and enraptured faces that usually accompany institutional portrayals of the ordinance, the visuals of the film are quite unattractive. The film stock and the flat, pallid lighting make the short look dated and worn, like a badly misguided proselyting film from 1973. But the film's continuity and sound editing suggest there is something more going on than just a straightforward depiction.

With two key exceptions, the off-center shot compositions keep the actors' faces obscured and, instead, focus on hands—a hand held to the square, the convert's hands holding the arm of the man baptizing her, her hand grasping the glossy, white banister leading out of the font. These choices make the action universal rather than specific. Instead of one person's entrance into the water, it is possibly meant to stand for the act of baptism itself.

The sound design also enhances the symbolic quality of the action. Even when neither the convert nor the priesthood holder are moving, there are occasionally the sounds of splashing and movement—as though



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there is a second, invisible world co-existing with the one the viewer sees. Also, once both actors leave the font, the sound of splashing water echoes and intensifies until it becomes a roar, as if to suggest the power and far-reaching nature of what has just taken place. It's not an entertaining film per se, but it certainly stayed with me and provoked thought long after I watched it.

Speaking Through Glass by Lauren Moss and Eric Anderson does a workman-like job of showcasing the stained glass art of Tom Holdman. The film addresses the idea of finding language through art. Holdman, a successful artist who produces stained glass for LDS temples and other patrons, has a speech impediment, and the film shows how his verbal eloquence waxes and wanes but how his creative expression says things he cannot.

X-Mas Change, while nicely filmed, seems much more like a poor *Saturday Night Live* skit that never made it to air. It's a one-joke film, and, unfortunately, the joke isn't funny.

The inclusion of Nathan Jones' *Peter: Mormon Filmmaker* is curious to say the least. It's a distillation of the much longer *The Work and the Story*, which was released theatrically in 2003. Apparently, Jones heard and responded to the numerous critics who pointed out that the characters and humor were far outstripped by the film's 77-minute length. Pared down to 17 minutes, the short does away with the silly but entertaining plotline of the missing "Godfather of Mormon Cinema," Richard Dutcher, and instead focuses on the eminently untalented and unaware Peter's attempts to make and release his opus, *Celestial Match*.

The short version maintains the two funniest moments of the original feature: former Joseph Smith actor Richard Moll as a film critic who proclaims "Many independent film shorts suck, so it only follows logic that a Mormon independent film would painfully suck," and the final battle of The Book of Mormon depicted entirely with hardboiled eggs. While these moments are inspired and genuinely funny, they are brief and not much relief against the other 16 self-involved, in-joke ridden minutes of the film.

7-PAGE SCRIPT FILMS

THE LDS Film Festival sponsors a collaborative project in which writers submit 7-page scripts. Directors selected by Festival organizers choose from among the scripts and are given \$500 to make a film from it. The difficulty created by this noble-minded project is that the resul-

tant films, at least in this case, feel much more like the Cliff Notes version of longer movies, as though there is a decent ninety minute feature hidden within a 10-minute shell.

Dave Skousen and Cindy Newell's *Repressed Melodies* best balances length with content as it tells the speculative story of a future in which music is outlawed. The film owes a debt to works such as Orson Scott Card's *Unaccompanied Sonata* and Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, but its skillful handling of the black and white sequences as well as some inventive editing show real talent at work.

Murray Triplett and Cherie Julander's *Lightning Bugs* obviously yearns to be a much longer film. It wants to tell us about the cancer afflicting the younger brother, wants us to understand his inexplicable obsession with lightning bugs, wants to follow the two brothers on their misguided trip to Oklahoma. Unfortunately, it's only eleven minutes long, so none of the implied questions are answered.

It raises the question of whether the 7-page scripts are meant to be whole works unto themselves or if they are simply the first bit of something much longer. *Lightning Bugs* definitely suggests the latter as it leaves the viewer hanging without any sense of even temporary resolution. The short does feature some nice, washed-out cinematography that's appropriate for its bleak, melancholy tone.

Wrinkles by Christopher Clark, Patrick Parker, and Scott Taylor is unfortunately didactic. It feels much the same as the institutionally-produced *On the Way Home*, which was an expansion and elaboration on several Church commercials from the 1980s. *Wrinkles* also feels like a 60-second idea fleshed out to a 12-minute sermon. While the message of embracing age and living life instead of being obsessed with youth and beauty is certainly an admirable one, the delivery lacks subtlety and sophistication.

24-HOUR MARATHON FILMS

THE 24-Hour films are basically the filmic equivalent of party games. According to the official description, teams of no more than five people have "24 hours to write, shoot, and edit a 3-minute short film that implements a theme, a specific object, and a dialogue line. In 2007, the theme was 'Transformation,' the object a mirror, and the dialogue line "Look at my. . ." I doubt anyone expects great art to come from this exercise, but certainly viewers can

enjoy the shorts produced by teams that understand the limitations of the form.

Most successful among this group are *Juice* and *A Transformation*. *Juice* embraces the narrowness of its scope and makes the most of its three minutes by squeezing comedy out of confusion between the words "juice" and "Jews." *A Transformation* hinges on an absurd gag at the end but also features a light, funny performance by Mark Madsen and sly cuts from one moment to the next that are entertaining.

The other two 24-hour films are decidedly less successful. *Santa Vaca* strives for Jared Hess-like quirkiness but only really succeeds in showcasing the writer/director team's very cute toddler daughter. *Escape* features some nice wintertime Utah scenery, but that is the extent of its virtues.

THE TRAILERS

THE DVD also features a collection of trailers for feature length films. Some show promise such as *The Sasquatch Gang*, *Outlaw Trail*, and *Intellectual Property* while others such as *American Grace* and *Familiar Spirits* look as though they had been filmed on stock made from pure Velveeta. The encouraging thing is the number of films available. One would hope that after a certain number of films have been produced, a critical mass would come about and the overall consistency and quality levels would, by necessity, rise.

The LDS Film Festival DVD highlights the fact that many nascent Mormon filmmakers are still finding their way through the technical and thematic woods. The artistic cultural heritage of the Church still shows in directors' skill with creating beautiful, glowing images but lack of finesse with dialogue, character development, and thematic or subject complexity. As a filmmaking church, we have been very strong in iconic imagery but often weak in presenting much else.

However, the Festival offerings of 2007 also show there are bright, creative, and very talented individuals who are already generating entertaining, thought-provoking work and who will likely (hopefully) go on to make more. As the Festival and new filmmakers continue, hopefully we will see fewer ten-mile stretches of bad road and feel more often the pleasant sensation of the tops of our heads coming clean off.

The 2009 LDS Film Festival will be held 21-24 January at the Scera Center in Orem, Utah.