

# *The LDS Film Festival* A REVIEW

by Davey Morrison

I was able to see ten of the twenty short films in competition at this year's LDS Film Festival. Having been a regular of the short film programs at both Sundance and the LDS Film Festival the past several years, I can say without hesitation that I think the level of production values and the substance of the majority of the shorts at Christian Vuissa's festival have been superior to that of the Park City competition. The shorts this year were a wonderfully eclectic group of very fine films from genuine LDS artists.

Some of the standouts of the festival were the pieces that broke from the conventional narrative structure of the average student short film mold. "Do or Die-08" was a South American import (the only international work that was screened among the shorts), and a visual and aural collage along the lines of "Baracka" or the "Qatsi" films (though with an even more experimental and modern aesthetic, blending narrative with documentary). Some of the audience laughed at the very serious twelve minutes of layered images, music, and sounds, some of the audience was baffled, and some riveted. It was hard for me to find any real thematic thread in director Ragnar Go'hjerta's film (listed in the program as a trailer for a feature-length work, which might explain that), but it was made with the confidence of a filmmaker with something to say, and many of the individual moments were electrifying—ultimately, a film like this succeeds when it allows its audience to slip into a state of hypnotic, meditative celluloid transcendence, and in this Go'hjerta was very successful. It was a work to be experienced, and, for me, perhaps the most spiritually moving of the shorts.

The first-place winner was the very, very deserving sixteen-minute "Mind the Gap" from director Kristal Williams-Rowley and writer Marcy Holland. It followed the emotional turmoil of a teenager (Sara, played by Teagan Rose) dealing with the death of a high school peer who threw herself in the way of the train Sara's father drives. The film follows Sara's emotional journey and makes great use of voice-over narration; as the very powerful premise was developed, the film never felt contrived or unfairly manipulative, and the journey towards hope, forgiveness, and redemption rang gloriously

true (it's rare for a contemporary independent filmmaker to take a chance on optimism, and rarer still to see it pulled off so well). The low-budget cinematography and sound actually added rather than detracted from the film, giving it an honesty that might well have been lost in a glossier production. "Mind the Gap" is, quite simply, one of the best "Mormon movies" I've seen.

As in past festivals, there were a number of BYU student films showcased this year—"The Teller's Tale," "dirt," "Best Wishes! Love, Adele," and "Unhinged" were all final directing projects for a number of my film student colleagues. Of these, "Unhinged" was definitely the standout—a lovely story about the importance of authenticity and humanity in art, and about finding a healthy balance between personal creation and personal relationships. The acting was strong, the photography of the beautifully-designed sets was luminous, and director Nick Stentzel fused all these elements naturally and effectively. It was an exceptional little movie. Tim Hall's "dirt" was often beautifully photographed and well-acted, but some slow and rhythmless editing hurt the film and its story, and both "The Teller's Tale" and "Best Wishes! Love, Adele" suffered from a combination of poor performances and heart-on-sleeve moralizing, however sincere (and having seen "Teller's Tale" in an earlier cut, I can say that the score did nothing but hurt it). More than anything, however, all four of these pieces represented a technical polish lacking in most of the other shorts—BYU is producing some very fine craftsmen and women.

"Face to Face," written and directed by Spanky Ward, featured an admirable performance (or two) from David H. Stevens, and some very nice lighting in its very limited location and camerawork. Unfortunately, the concept was a bit clichéd—a man comes home and finds himself (or, more accurately, his black-leather-jacketed self) sitting at the kitchen table, and what follows is a sort of good-angel/bad-angel conversation with two parts of his damaged psyche. There were a few moments in the dialogue that were powerful for their brutal honesty, as the villainous alter ego mocked Stevens' meek protagonist for being a loser, not getting any dates,

etc., but there were probably even more moments of unintentional humor. The film was well executed but could definitely have used some rewriting—and would really have benefited from playing up the dark comedy inherent in the situation (the film was taken a little too seriously by itself to be taken seriously by its audience).

“The Skeleton Dance” (named and modeled after the classic Disney short of the same name) came from East Hollywood High School (a private school in Salt Lake City) and was one of my absolute favorite films of the set. I’m a sucker for any kind of stop-motion animation—there is a texture and a reality and an energy to handmade films that you just can’t get with a computer—and “Skeleton Dance” was really just an excuse to make some cool clay creatures do some funky things (and I confess a delirious delight in seeing a crudely-rendered skeleton rip off a cat’s head at the LDS Film Festival—there is nothing like the sheer joy of kids and movies and violence to lift the spirits). Sometimes as filmmakers we can get so caught up in trying to say something meaningful and trying to make something look professional that we lose sight of the absolute magic that is at the heart of the cinematic contraption, an art form built on optical illusion. “The Skeleton Dance” was a wonderful breath of fresh air.

My own film, “Medicine Man,” also made for a BYU (documentary) class, was a profile of David Hamblin, a medicine man for the local Native American church, whose Mormon beliefs and background inform his practice as a spiritual healer. With the film, I tried to allow Hamblin to express his beliefs and experiences with as little a degree of overt commentary or censorship as possible—his understanding of certain aspects of The Book of Mormon and Mormon doctrine is certainly outside the world of mainstream Mormonism, but I feel there is a sincerity, a conviction, and a real beauty to his story that deserved to be seen by others. I hope I was successful in presenting it.

“The Edge of the World,” by E. R. Nelson, followed the journey of an animated Everyman to fill the emptiness in his life. It was clever, funny, very engaging, and the animation (Flash?) was creative; it’s very exciting to see the virtually one-man films that are being made. The view of God and theology, however, had a curiously a-Mormon flavor to it—neither a strength nor a weakness in the piece, but something that struck me as I watched it.

In fact, the breadth and variety of religious and

spiritual voices represented in the festival was both exhilarating and a little troubling—where were the specifically Mormon stories? Certainly not every Mormon film need include explicitly Mormon-related content, but there is an infinite number of fascinating and engaging and honest stories to be told within our culture and within our own set of beliefs, and they are not being told. Every artist exists within a specific cultural context—what would Martin Scorsese or Woody Allen be without New York City, and why should Dostoevsky set *Crime and Punishment* in Paris when he has a perfectly marvelous grasp and understanding of St. Petersburg? Latter-day Saint filmmakers would do well to follow the old-as-dirt screenwriting-class maxim, “Write what you know.” In between the proselytizing of the institutional Church films and the outsider perspectives of *Big Love* and *Latter Days*, we are missing an important and substantial body of honest and authentic stories not *about* Mormonism, but told from *within* Mormonism. The 2009 short films continued to demonstrate remarkable growth within the Mormon artistic community, even as it begged the question, “Why aren’t we growing even faster, and even larger?” In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told to “meet together often,” teaching one another, each member speaking and each member listening, that all may be instructed and edified together. In the lay ministry of Mormonism, the teacher becomes the pupil and the pupil becomes the teacher, and all voices are heard; our conversations may at times lack the presentational polish of a trained minister—but, as any Dylan fan knows, not every voice need be classically trained in order to be beautiful, to touch the heart, to engage the mind or move the soul or make history. In the age of YouTube democracy, anyone with access to a camera, a computer, and the Internet has the tools to make a masterpiece and broadcast it to the world. This is exciting! We should all be instructing and edifying one another, engaging in global cinematic conversation with those who share our beliefs and with those who don’t—speaking to them and listening to them—building the kingdom of God by developing and sharing the pure love of Christ within ourselves even as we receive it from others. The power of the Spirit is gentleness, meekness, quiet persuasion, and love unfeigned—not propaganda, but the personal anecdote, the autobiography, the individual testimony. Let us bear our testimonies. Let us instruct and be instructed. Let us tell our stories. ■