

## More film reviews: Shorts & features

### INSIDE OUT FEST / Crazy, sparkly, steamy stuff at Inside Out

Mike Vokins, Gordon Bowness / Toronto / Thursday, May 07, 2009

#### Canadian diamonds

Inside Out's Hogtown Homos program is always a rich showcase of shorts, but there are small gems by Canadians littering the entire festival. Keep an eye open for these sparklers.

Toronto-based writer RM Vaughan has a great big jiggly brain brimming with pop culture arcana and incisive observations so pretty much anything that comes out of his mouth or his pen is going to be interesting. But strength can be a weakness; Vaughan sometimes makes videos that would work better as live spoken-word pieces or written essays. Why worry about production values when your ideas are so good? That's not the case with his latest offering, the beautiful **I'm Sorry, Sterling**, made with frequent collaborator Jared Mitchell.



*I'M SORRY, STERLING.* By RM Vaughan.

Film noir and westerns tough guy Sterling Hayden (The Asphalt Jungle, Johnny Guitar, Dr Strangelove) is the launching point for Vaughan's musings on heartache and melancholy. Vaughan deconstructs the "stupid chick" roles in Hayden's films, inserting himself romantically and visually into a barrage of film stills that dissolve into each other. Vaughan stands in for that girl who "can't fall in love unless she's banged on the head by a dirty brick." A witty, surprisingly moving piece.

*I'm Sorry, Sterling* screens in the Hogtown Homos program at 7:15 on Wed, May 20 at Isabel Bader (93 Charles St W).

For all my talk about the desirability of good production values, sometimes you just need to get drunk with a bunch of half-naked lesbians in the bush and turn on a camera.

**Witchrave** by Helen Reed is a roughly hewed piece of mayhem shot at Mieux Meadow's Women's Festival in Clifford, Ontario featuring locals like Lex Vaughn, Cecilia Berkovic and Samara Lui communing with the dark arts of mask-wearing, leaping at the camera and peeing standing up. A joy.

*Witchrave* screens on Fri, May 22 at Cinecycle (129 Spadina Ave) in a program augmented by a live virgin sacrifice with Vaughn and Yolanda Bobbitt and a performance by the dyke punk band Heavy Filth.

Speaking of dark arts, Jesi the Elder is an enigmatic presence Toronto. The visual artist draws touchstones like meat, menorahs and dismembered limbs in bright candy-colours and childlike crudeness. These are often animated in the service of Toronto's indie music scene; it's a perfect fit in the case of music video **The Butcher** by Final Fantasy (aka Owen Pallett), a joyful song about a messianic songwriter's frustration with religious doomsayers.

*The Butcher* screens in the Hogtown Homos program.

Employing the same freakish abandon Jesi the Elder also did the music video for Katie Stelmanis's infectious lesbian recruitment anthem "Join Us." Stelmanis is joined by musical wunderkinds Gentleman Reg and Kids on TV, plus DJ Backcat, performing at the free, revamped **Local Heroes** party (following the Hogtown Homos program) on May 20 at 10pm at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (12 Alexander St).

I worked with a production designer who once had a job with a big US porn studio. All he did was add rippling abdominal muscles to still images of naked men; he quit after one day. Local filmmaker Wrik Mead makes a long overdue return to Inside Out with a cheeky bit of live-action animation **Bare**, a playful yet unsettling spin on our cultural obsession with digitally enhanced bodies.

*Bare* also screens in Hogtown Homos.

Maxime Desmons returns to Inside Out with the assured short drama **Somebody Is Watching Us**. The vertiginous freedom of emigration comes to a head (pun intended) when two sexy ESL students new to Canada indulge in some washroom sex. Steamy and poignant? No wonder Desmons



is making waves at the Canadian Film Centre.

Somebody Is Watching Us screens in the sex-filled One Track Mind program at 7:45pm on Wed, May 20 at the ROM (100 Queen's Park).



*SOMEBODY IS WATCHING US. By Maxime Desmons.*

Designer Lucinda Wallace makes her documentary debut with **A Reason to Ride**, a half-hour doc on the Friends for Life Bike Rally, the annual fundraiser for the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation (Wallace cochaired the event for a number of years). Though the instructional video-sounding narration is a bit jarring, the doc does a fantastic job of illustrating why fundraising events like this are so important, why just giving money for a good cause isn't enough. Peppered with many familiar faces the doc presents participants speaking of the challenge, the camaraderie, the fun, the exercise. This might all seem peripheral to AIDS — but not if you're a rider living with the disease. Participants also speak movingly of how they take the fight against AIDS out into other communities and how the ride is both a memorial to lost loved ones and a way to find solace. The ride becomes a utopian vision of the world in miniature, with unexpected effects that spiral out in all directions.

I should mention that Vaughan, Mead, Desmons and Wallace are all friends and colleagues of mine — after more than 12 years at this job, you know people. That's why I love the Hogtown Homos program specifically and Inside Out as a whole — they really bring together a community — a dazzling, demented, incestuous, fractious, sometimes annoying community.

All the Canadian work at Inside Out, all that ego and creativity, doesn't happen in a vacuum. The artists, young and old, rely on each other. They have to: Indie queer film and video ain't no ticket to riches. Cultural riches, yes; moola, no. But let's be frank: Many indie film- and videomakers have social as well as monetary deficits. So, please, crash their party. Don't let them just talk to themselves. Attend screenings, go to events and mix it up. Sparkly worlds of whack and wonder await.

*Gordon Bowness*

## Sex Positive

Young director Daryl Wein brings a stirring and intimate rendering of the life of Richard Berkowitz, one of the first proponents of safe sex in the gay community.



Berkowitz's personal saga is compelling in and of itself. Born to a working-class Jewish family, he began as a writer and soon moonlighted as an SM sex worker at the height of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s. When a lot of his friends began to die of the disease, Berkowitz mobilized his journalism into action. "I wanted to save my friends and prolong lives," he says.

Along with activist/singer Michael Callen and Joseph Sonnabend, he was one of the lone voices advocating a connection between gay promiscuity and AIDS. Berkowitz and Callen wrote articles, made TV appearances and published the first-ever safe sex guidelines. This did not endear them to other heavyweight activists such as Larry Kramer who at the time were concerned with the negative stereotyping of gay men. Berkowitz was labelled as sex-negative and his voice got little airtime.

The film posits Berkowitz as an overlooked hero. While his cohort Callen is emblazoned with an eponymous Men's Clinic in Manhattan, Berkowitz is on welfare, his recently published book has flopped and he is virtually unknown to leaders in the HIV/AIDS communities today.

The doc suggests that it was his involvement in sex trade and drugs that marred his reputation. The film mainly interviews his close friends and colleagues (not to mention his super cute mother) and, apart from Kramer, questionably glosses over the views of other activists of the day.

Still, *Sex Positive* touches on a lot of compelling notes. It gives much food for thought on where HIV/AIDS has brought us and — with one in four gay men in New York and Toronto today HIV-positive — how Berkowitz's clarion call is once again startlingly relevant.

*Sex Positive* screens at 2:15pm on Mon, May 18 at Isabel Bader.



*SEX POSITIVE. Profiles Richard Berkowitz.*

Dawson's Creek.

The film starts off fresh and likeable: A tight group of friends enjoy their days hanging and partying around their ringleader — the strident gay Kaz (Alex House). But when Kaz is suddenly killed in a car accident caused by the others, the group is split apart. Kaz comes back as an angel that only Tess (Anastasia Phillips) can see, and the two set about to make amends with the group before the weekend's up.

The beautifully shot film quickly unravels into an absurd mess of sex, drama and stupidity. Case in point: The only way others can see angel Kaz is when they cum. The film rightly takes a comic tone with such wacky subject matter but when unnecessary fits of melodrama start creeping in, the film's fine line between comedy and drama turns into a drunkard DUI test.

All this makes those fun-loving characters now annoying as all hell. Especially the angel. Kaz's obnoxious party boy persona makes you wish he would hightail it to the afterworld while buddy Curtis's (Gregory Penney) quest for teenboy sex is comically repellent. The saving grace is the performance by lead Phillips whose portrayal amid all the bed-hopping and sexuality-switching (not to mention horny, singing ancestor scenes) is somehow watchable.

When we peel back this one-skinned onion we are left with some trite and puzzling messages: Sexual exploration at a time of a friend's death is totally okay; everytime you cum, an angel goes to heaven; and, hey, isn't it better to be friends than fight?

Nonsense indeed.

Nonsense Revolution screens at 4:45pm on Tue, May 19 at Isabel Bader.

## Half-Life

Surreal and disturbing can hardly sum it up. There is something unexplainably captivating that propels you to keep watching the wonderfully strange at times clunky feature *Half-Life*.

Helmed by writer/director Jennifer Phang (whose short film *Love, Ltd* played numerous festivals some years back), the film, which premiered at Sundance, follows the lives of a dysfunctional family in the bleak American future — which looks eerily similar to contemporary times.



*HALF-LIFE. A surreal debut by Jennifer Phang.*

There's no floating cars, no robots, just family politics — and it ain't pretty. With a pilot father who walked out on them years ago, sister Pam (hottie Saoe Lake from *Blue Crush*) and her young brother Timm (Alexander Agate) are trying to pick up the pieces while their mom (Julia Nickson) is moving on with her new boyfriend (Ben Redgrave).

Observer to the troubled antics of the adults around him, Timm regularly escapes into a fantasy world, told through beautifully rendered animation sequences. Pam, on the other hand, is working through her crush on her gay best friend while grappling with depression after dropping out of school. When mom's boyfriend takes a disturbing attraction to her, young Timm calls on some mysterious powers to save them all.

TV and radio transmissions reporting environmental calamity parallel the family's own struggles to keep it together. Numerous references to flight keep reoccurring too — particularly a nod to Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

But while the future appears heavy, it is not without hope. *Half-Life* provides the viewer with a strange and powerful sense that things may just turn out all right.



*NONSENSE REVOLUTION. By Anna Verrall.*

Half-Life screens at 9:45pm on Tue, May 19 at the ROM.

## Private Lessons

We've all had teacher fantasies — but you might want to reconsider them once you take a look at young Jonas in *Private Lessons*.

Director Joachim Lafosse (*Private Property*) brings his knack for unfolding dramas and subtle characterizations to his latest Belgian delight.

Twinky Jonas (Jonas Bloquet) is a young tennis athlete who's in danger of failing his courses. Luckily he has an older group of friends who are willing to tutor him, namely Pierre (Jonathan Zaccai) who devotes large amounts of time to his new pupil.

They don't stop there, however. When Jonas is having girl problems, they openly counsel him in the arts of love and eventually offer him some very... thorough lessons. It is through Jonas that we learn about Pierre's particular thoughts on sexual openness: "Sex and feelings are two different things," Pierre tells him. And Jonas soon becomes wrapped up in their world of sexual fluidity and pleasure.

But when Jonas starts to see that their world is far from the perfect swingerdom he thought, tensions begin to rise. Pierre's earlier teachings of Camus' concept of "rebellion" become all too relevant and their master-pupil dynamic is in danger of going under.

The film develops slowly and exquisitely. Simple camerawork holds on characters a little longer — just to make you feel uncomfortable enough — and the actors give engrossing, naturalistic performances.

What is unsettling and wonderful about *Private Lessons* is the relationship between Pierre and Jonas and all the open-ended questions the film leaves. Was Jonas exploited or just merely educated? How should one learn about sexual desire? And just what are the boundaries between teacher and student?

*Private Lessons* screens at 10pm on Fri, May 22 at the ROM.



*PRIVATE LESSONS. Joachim Lafosse's Belgian feature asks how openly should we discuss sex.*

*Inside Out* runs Thu, May 14 to 24; the box office is now open. Screenings beginning after 6pm cost \$12 (\$10 for members); screenings before 6pm and at Cinecycle cost \$9 (\$7.50 members). Gala tix cost \$18 to \$25. Ask about seniors and youth discounts. Advance tickets can be bought online at [Insideout.ca](http://Insideout.ca), by phone at (416) 967-1528 or in person at 2 Carlton St, west mezzanine.

**Tags:** [half-life](#), [hogtown homos](#), [nonsense revolution](#), [private lessons](#), [sex positive](#)