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Toronto Film Festival Days 7 and 8: Boston, Beliefs and Bang Bang Club

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DAY 7: THREE MOVIES AND A DANCE WITH DOLAN

Okay, Day 7 is where I start skipping the first screening in earnest to try and stay sane and sober throughout the day rather than nodding off during every other scene. I've got three movies on tap, an interview with the wildly talented young hyphenate Xavier Dolan and need to beg my way into *The Bang Bang Club*, which stars Ryan Phillippe and Taylor Kitsch (of *Friday Night Lights!*) as the sexiest photojournalists in history. (That may not be the actual plot, but it's close enough.)

THE TOWN **

If you see *The Town*, you will probably just think of it as a standard heist flick (with the lead criminal falling for the bank manager they take as a hostage), and because it's well-directed by Ben Affleck and well-acted, you may not be able to put your finger on exactly what doesn't work but you'll know you've seen it all before. I enjoyed Affleck's directorial debut, which also had very good acting. But it did a better job of capturing the nuances of Dennis Lehane's novel *Gone Baby Gone*. Here Affleck avoids everything that made Chuck Hogan's novel *Prince of Thieves* a solid read. I know we're in trouble from the very first scene. It's a daylight bank heist with Affleck and his gang bursting into a bank, seizing the money, grabbing a manager and then going outside to tear up the city in a car-crunching chase scene where bullets are flying and mayhem is absolutely everywhere. Contrast this cowboy recklessness with the novel, where the first heist involves the sober, cautious approach of breaking into the bank the night before, quietly waiting for the early staff to arrive and arranging every detail to avoid any unnecessary risk. When Affleck's best pal (Jeremy Renner) explodes into violence, it's shocking and unnecessary... and stupid. The entire focus of the book is the tug of war between Affleck's cautious, smart approach and Renner's need for danger and adrenaline. But in the movie, Affleck's character has lost our sympathy

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from the get-go since that initial heist endangered the lives of everyone in a 20-block radius. After just two scenes, the reasonable, well-raised bank manager (Rebecca Hall) has inexplicably fallen for Affleck, Jon Hamm as an FBI agent just runs around yelling at his staff (instead of falling for Hall himself, as in the book) and you just know it's going to end with a heist to end all heists that is sure to go terribly wrong. Affleck still shows assurance behind the camera. Here's hoping next time he trusts the source material more instead of just wanting to jazz it up.

XAVIER DOLAN

After *The Town*, I'm off to my interview with Xavier Dolan, the very talented young director behind *I Killed My Mother* and now *Heartbeats*. It's a crazy day for Dolan, who tries and fails to get a sandwich, anything, from the hotel bar where he's doing back-to-back interviews before heading off to the film's latest screening. Charming and friendly if invariably bleak is his modus operandi. So I wrap it up as quickly as possible with the hope of speaking with Dolan more in-depth when his movie debuts in the US, probably around February. I'll have a link to video of some of my interview in my festival wrapup on Tuesday, Sept. 21.

SUPER ** 1/2

This comedy is definitely one of the success stories of Toronto. A similar tale to *Kick-Ass* (which I really enjoyed), it shows a schmucky, average Joe (Rainn Wilson) who turns himself into a superhero when his wife (Liv Tyler) leaves him for a drug-dealing thug (Kevin Bacon) that uses her as a guinea pig for his heroin. Wilson dons a cape, chooses a weapon (a hefty wrench) and coins a catchphrase that is increasingly funny as the film goes on: "Shut up, crime!" Comic bookstore geek Ellen Page becomes his VERY enthusiastic sidekick, and the tone veers wildly as Wilson goes from meek to freak, beating up thugs but also mauling a guy for cutting in line at the cinema. (Actually, the guy was meeting a friend, I think, so it doesn't even count as really cutting in the first place.) The movie is a little unsure of itself tonally because it doesn't quite know what it thinks of its protagonist. More to the point, Wilson (quite funny on *The Office*) just isn't up to the dramatic demands. A scene where he curses God for making him such an unattractive loser should be piercing but just isn't. I'm sure this project was in the works long before *Kick-Ass* came to life and they must hate being compared unfavorably to it. But sometimes even superheroes can't catch a break.

Here are Rainn Wilson and the wonderful Nathan Fillion throwing down the gauntlet at ComicCon. (Fillion plays an imaginary super hero for Christ in the movie.)

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13 ASSASSINS ** 1/2

Hmm, should I bump this up another half a star? Yes, I think I'll actually give it two and a half stars instead of the two stars I began with. Takashi Miike's samurai is very traditional and fun, in an obvious sort of way. I can't keep track of all their names, so bear with me. A young lord is about to rise to ultimate power over all the shoguns, which will be disastrous. He is unbelievably cruel and longs for war. The movie spends the first 25 minutes or so establishing just how evil this man is, and it's quite gruesome and effective. Clearly, he must die. But it would be dishonorable to betray a major figure in power. So a retired samurai is called in and he assembles a motley crew of assassins to do the job: a nephew (or brother?) who loves to gamble, a young idealistic samurai in training, a jolly fat fellow who wouldn't mind paying off his debts and needs his money in advance (but really just wants to establish an obligation to justify his actions) and on and on, including a non-samurai they pick up in the woods for comic relief -- I mean, as a guide to provide directions. Some have seen the film as subversive, a questioning of samurai loyalty and honor. But it's not. Every single piece who decides to "betray" the evil lord is willing to do so for the greater good, but also chooses the honorable path of committing hari-kari to save face after doing so. The rigors of tightly-controlled behavior and the system as a whole are upheld every step of the way, and anyone who betrays that code is ready and indeed eager to pay the appropriate price. In any case, it all builds to a huge battle scene at the finale between the 13 samurai and hundreds and hundreds of the lord's minions. It was fun, but a little chaotic. Traps are sprung, huge flaming walls crash down to cut off attackers from our heroes and it all got a bit chaotic. Some great individual moments arose, but the cleverness of their plan was lost a bit with all the gimmicks. Satisfying for fans of samurai films if quite traditional and familiar.

THE BANG BANG CLUB **

I was eager to check out this film because the subject intrigued -- young photojournalists in South Africa became world famous and snagged Pulitzers while documenting the last days of apartheid -- and I'm a fan of Phillippe (who is always underestimated and has good taste in projects) and am eager to see how Kitsch fares on the big screen after growing by leaps and bounds on the fine series *FNL*. Publicists got me into a public screening, which is both a blessing and a curse (the event takes a lot longer but you get to see the movies in much more glamorous venues). I wish I could reward them with a more enthusiastic review. The common complaint is that the story of four or five young white guys is not the best way to get insight into apartheid. But who cares about that? If the film were more effective, that wouldn't matter. But the guys behave like only journalists in movies can behave: they stride into the office like rock stars, have groupies and dodge bullets by day and down beers by night with wild abandon! What fun, and for all I know it's thoroughly authentic. It's also thoroughly earnest, my catchphrase for well-intentioned movies that have their heart on their sleeve and forget to tell a story. Oh sure, the guys take in newbie Phillippe and teach him their canny ways (which amount to sticking together), take lots of photos under dangerous situations and mostly have fun doing it. The movie is a bit problematic for Westerners. Though it's explained at the beginning that the Zulu tribes were wooed by the government to wage a proxy war on Nelson Mandela's ANC, it's still going to be confusing for people to see a movie about the end of apartheid where all we see are blacks brutally attacking each other. Plus, the backdoor dealings of the government with the Zulus is hinted at and discussed, but never truly exposed in a way

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that hits home with the audience. Doing their job in a war zone takes its toll, with broken relationships, danger and even suicide. It really must have been an adventure of a lifetime to be in the Bang Bang Club. But there's a reason journalists avoid making themselves the story -- the people they're covering are usually a lot more fascinating. The movie does its level best by them, but these lads are best revealed through their work, not their raucous war stories.

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DAY 8: FINALLY, 127 HOURS AND THOSE LOVELY VOLUNTEERS

Another day where I skip the first screening (this time the martial arts movie *Detective Dee and the Mystery Of the Phantom Flame*, which I really wanted to see and will miss). But this time it isn't laziness. The final screening of James Franco in *127 Hours* comes too close to that first screening and I just don't want to lose out after the last fiasco. Plus, it's pouring rain. So I head to festival in good time, only to arrive at the Lightbox (the TIFF headquarters) to realize my umbrella is jammed and broken AND I can't find my badge anywhere. Turns out I left it at home. Now I'm convinced that *127 Hours* is cursed and I'll never see it. As I go through my bag looking for my badge yet again, a volunteer comes up. I don't even ask about the movie, just wondering if she can point me in the direction of a drug store so I can buy a new umbrella without getting too soaked. Then I'll have to waste an hour and a half (today was my catch up day on writing) doing a round trip to get my badge. She asks what movie I was there to see, and I share my woes. She knew by my frantic nature what had happened. When I said, "Oh, so I'm not the only idiot. People forget their badge every day?" Uh, no, almost no one has forgotten their badge; she just figured it out. So I AM the only idiot.

Without my asking, she says let's get you into the movie, and we can worry about the umbrella later. She whisks me upstairs past all the guards and I get my seat, astonishingly enough. Ha! Take that, fate.

127 HOURS ** 1/2

James Franco stars in a movie many people can't imagine watching, but surely will: it's the true story of a young mountaineer who got stuck in a terrible accident, and once rescue was impossible he found the courage to cut off his own arm so he could get free. That's it. Director Danny Boyle jazzes up the riveting tale as much as possible: split screens, flashbacks, hallucinations, you name it. It's a shame he didn't trust the compelling nature of the tale and Franco himself more. The best moments of the movie -- by far -- occur when Franco is trapped in the ravine (or whatever it is), talking to himself, figuring out ways to try and escape and narrating his woes to a video camera he brought along. Those scenes with Franco -- who is magnetic and charming as the brash, fun-loving guy -- are exceptional. But then Boyle tosses in a childhood flashback or hokey shots of Franco's family grouped around a couch, silently urging him to persevere or some other contrivance. Don't think of the film as an endurance test: the big moment is approached in a straightforward manner and you can deal with his mighty struggle without grossing out. (Believe me, I'm squeamish at the sight of blood so if I can do it, you can too.) Franco's turn makes this a must-see and it's certainly worth one go-around. But I can't help feeling a shot at a truly great, mesmerizing movie has been lost.

Okay, the movie is over and it's back to brutal reality. But the rain has paused so I can buy a nice new one just a few blocks away without getting soaked. I head to the press office hoping to beg for a pass to my next movie so I can avoid the trek home. Instead they rush me downstairs and shoot a new badge for my use, all of which takes about 20 minutes. And I didn't have to cut my arm off, either.

THE WAY **

I like Emilio Estevez, both as an actor and a director. His first film *Bobby* benefited from a great cast that enlivened the Robert Altman-lite script about the night Bobby Kennedy was shot. Now he tackles a more unusual project. Martin Sheen stars as a dad who heads to France to pick up the body of his son (Estevez), who had grown apart from Sheen since the death of his mom and was on a pilgrimage, following a path used for centuries. Sheen naturally cremates his son's remains and decides to finish the journey for him, even though the kid had only just started out on the epic trek. Sheen is a caustic loner but that doesn't discourage a chatty Dutch man from befriending him. Before he knows it, Sheen is part of a group with a caustic Canadian woman and a loquacious Irish writer looking to do a book on the journey. They fight, make up, drink, avoid danger and thieving gypsies (who of course are redeemed and seen as decent folk) until the end of the journey is reached. Virtually none of the characters move beyond the types they represent, and certainly none of their adventures surprise us. And it would have been nice for at least ONE person on this ostensibly religious quest to be a person of faith (two of them show flashes of it, but by and large they're all resolutely secular in the group). Still, Estevez does a decent job with his so-so script and has a sensibility I like. The sooner he makes more movies, the sooner he can improve. And maybe working on someone else's script will free him up even more.

ATTENBERG * 1/2**

Finally, the last film of the day, and I get to see a fresh, new talent. This is the second film for Greek writer-director Athina Rachel Tsangari, and she clearly has a distinctive, fascinating vision. The sober story -- a young woman who watches her father dying of cancer while she tentatively overcomes her fear of sex thanks to a visiting engineer -- is shot through with absurdist humor. A huge fan of the nature documentaries of David Attenborough (aka Attenberg in fractured English), the young woman frequently takes to imitating animals of the wild in spontaneous improvisations with her dad or her best friend, a local barterder who is far less afraid of kissing guys than she. Yep, a heartfelt, if emotionally subtle scene between she and her dad will often end with them grimacing and growling like chimpanzees or wild penguins. It sounds silly -- and the two friends even practice Silly Walks a la *Monty Python* -- but the result is quite original. Tsangari is very, very precise, and with the collaboration of cinematographer Thimios Bakatakis (who only works with natural light), she creates one striking image after another. I can't wait to see her next film, and is there any higher compliment?

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available free on iTunes](#). Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#).

Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes.

NOTE: Journalists are given free access to all the movies at most film festivals with the understanding that they will be providing coverage of the fest for their media outlets. No expectation is given for positive coverage of the films or the fest in general. But journalists who don't provide sufficient coverage (a complicated judgment based on their outlet and its frequency of publication) may not be given a badge the following year.

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You are oh so right about "The Town" Affleck is a technically adept, inoffensive and boring director. He is his generations Kevin Costner. The movie is derivative and uninspiring, but every year there is one flick that is the critic's darling and it is usually trite and dull.

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I saw Hillary Swank at the fest last week!!!

Yes, I live in Toronto.

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Big Box Marketing all the way.
So sad.

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Don't be sad. They showcased 258 movies. If some of them look like hot Oscar prospects, that just means more people will attend and pay attention to the fest and hopefully find and appreciate the smaller movies. I saw a great Western from Kelly Reichardt, a sweet buddy comedy/road trip movie from Lapland and a terrific, odd little drama from Greece among others. Not to mention the Midnight Madness program with genre flicks from around the world and a clutch of short films. And those are just off the top of my head. Cinephiles have plenty to feast on at Toronto.

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Thanks ...Your a peach for being there and i'll take try to see your faves when the pain goes away:-)

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