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Toronto Film Fest Day 9, 10 and 11: The Irish, The Scots and Werner Herzog

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DAY 9: JUVENILE DELINQUENTS, VIDEO GAMES AND HORROR FILMS

NEDS **

The first half of *Neds* (short for Non-educated Delinquents) had me very excited. Director Peter Mullan's earlier drama *The Magdalene Sisters* was a well-acted if heavy-handed look at the abuses of young women by the system. Now he is telling the story of a smart young kid with a vicious dad, a criminal older brother and a world that wants to lower his expectations at almost every turn. The casting of the two young actors who play John McGill (Gregg Forrest and Conor McCarron) is spot-on. They're both excellent and look strikingly similar, making his growth from little kid to bulky teenager very believable. John is very bright and some teachers do encourage him. But the spectre of his older brother, his nasty father and his poor circumstances frustrate the boy at every turn. He snaps finally when a nice kid he befriends from a wealthy family is cut off from him simply because he's lower class. John takes refuge in a gang and they drink and thug around in increasingly violent ways. John is both victim and persecutor here. But I simply didn't buy the ham-handed way he descended into Taxi Driver territory, no matter how inexorably brutal his world may be. A compelling case study became a whacked out tale with multiple hard-to-swallow twists (especially from his dad) and not one but two crazily metaphoric moments, one with Christ stepping down from the Cross and the other with John walking through a field of lions that is spoiled by what appear to be obvious digital effects. Mullan has great skill and brought together an excellent cast. But like so many directors he pushes his stories into the extreme when small and quiet was proving far more effective.

COLIN GEDDES

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After *Neds*, I had a chance to sit and chat with Midnight Madness impresario Colin Geddes. He's a genuine enthusiast for all genres of movies, especially the under-appreciated horror, sci-fi, action, Hong Kong, martial arts and other movie types that fall under the broad midnight movie banner. I'll link to my feature when it appears in the Los Angeles Times. You can [follow Colin on Twitter](#) or check out the [Action Fest](#), which he just helped launch this year. At the end of the interview, he mentioned he was intro-ing *The Butcher, The Chef and the Swordsman*, a movie I'd missed earlier and was glad to sneak into. I should have checked to see if the Rush line for movie fans was full and whether I was taking someone's place. Happily, the screening was full but not sold out so everyone got in and I wasn't a jerk. Or at least, not in this case.

THE BUTCHER, THE CHEF AND THE SWORDSMAN ** 1/2

This entry from mainland China feels a lot more contemporary and smart and just plain cheeky than you would expect from the People's Republic. Inspired by Peking Opera conventions, it's a broadly funny, over-the-top melange of entertainment, containing stories within stories that nod and wink at the audience at every turn. The Butcher is a fat, vulgar but decent fellow who falls hard for a beautiful courtesan. Every time he tries to approach her the Butcher is frustrated by the evil Swordsman or laughed off by the tea house mistress, who even breaks into a rap at one delirious moment. But that's just the framework for all sorts of tales that revolve around a potent weapon: a butcher's cleaver crafted from the metal of five legendary swords. The best story within a story revolves around a handsome mute who works as a servant in the restaurant of a master chef. The mute is really the son of a slaughtered family who is planning revenge on the cruel court eunuch who is sure to come calling at this famous restaurant sooner or later. It's a funny, but moving tale with genuine drama and emotion amidst the silliness. Director Wuershan delivers it with aplomb. The problem is that this should be the heart of the film. Instead it's a diversion while the main focus is on the Butcher. The Butcher is like one of Shakespeare's fools, perfect for comic relief but not potent enough to be the center of the tale. That fatal mistake is what keeps this caper from being more than a one-time pleasure. (Tossing in yet another fight scene staged as a video game showdown doesn't help. This idea has been done to death, people.) Still, it's silly fun while it lasts.

CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS *** 1/2

I'm writing this sentence in the year 2010. Now imagine that someone came along in the year 7010 (some five thousand years later) and added this second sentence. Then the two sentences sit there side by side until the year 32, 010 when we come along and see those sentences for the first time. That's the span of time we have to grasp when watching this bewitching film. I would have been ashamed to come to the fest and miss this new work Werner Herzog. It's a documentary -- shot in 3-D no less -- that explores a recently discovered cave in France filled with drawings some 25,000 to 32,000 years old that rank as one of the great cultural and archeological finds of all time. The cave is off limits to everyone except rare visits by scientists. But Herzog being Herzog he is rightly given some brief hours to document the find. The result is not as eccentric as his recent documentary *Encounters At The End Of The World* but it's a marvel nonetheless. And the usage of 3-D is spectacular; you want to reach out and stroke the walls again and again. A hush fell over the crowd watching this film as we absorbed the images: a herd of horses

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galloping across one wall, the palm print of a visitor appearing over and over at the entrance and at various points throughout the caves, not to mention the sheer beauty of the space itself. Herzog asks his usual philosophical, probing questions that elicit unexpected remarks from the scientists. But his masterstroke was commissioning the perfect score by Ernst Reijseger, which is angular and haunting, celestial and ancient, religious and earthy all at once. The postscript wanders off to a nearby sanctuary where albino alligators are spawned in the warm waters tossed off by a nuclear reactor and I don't quite get the connection. But Herzog is always looking for those connections or just taking in the world in wide-eyed wonder and he is the perfect tour guide. An experience.

DAY 10: DRINKING AND GAMBLING AND FIRE

WHITE IRISH DRINKERS ***

TV talent John Gray (*The Ghost Whisperer*) takes a promising step into cinema with this solid coming of age tale. Relative unknown Nick Thurston is very appealing as Brian Leary, a sensitive young lad growing up in the rough and tumble of Brooklyn in the Seventies. His older brother is a petty thief. But Brian works at the local cinema, convincing the owner to book rock acts from time to time, obsessively draws in his basement hideaway and fancies the local travel agent with a sharp tongue but a friendly smile. When Brian's boss unexpectedly pulls in a favor and arranges to have the Rolling Stones do a one hour concert in Brooklyn, everyone's dreams collide, with Brian's brother pushing him to rob the place and his boss hoping to avoid a death sentence from the local hood he owes too much money to. Melodrama might intrude towards the end, but the acting is solid throughout and Thurston has a low-key charm -- he could be the kid brother to Kevin Connolly's Eric on *Entourage*. But unlike a player in Hollywood, Brian has to learn that he has a right to play the game in the first place. Sweet, unforced.

CASINO JACK **

Kevin Spacey stars in this broad, loopy look at Jack Abramoff, the disgraced lobbyist who was once the toast of K Street and had direct access to the White House. We start with Spacey in prison, so we know Abramoff is headed for a fall. But while Spacey has snap in the role, it's not that interesting to see him and his partner get ballsier and more crude in their influence peddling. I wish there were more sting, either in Abramoff's self-awareness of his crimes or our awareness of how much we might enjoy similar power. But they're basically jerks with no real talent for anything but bullying and coercion, so what's the fun in that? Jon Lovitz however steals away with another movie, thanks to his droll and very funny turn as a mattress king looking to get into casinos. A movie about him? Now that would be worth gambling on.

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FIRE OF CONSCIENCE ** 1/2

I caught the opening night movie at Midnight Madness. And after profiling Colin Geddes, I'm ready to check out the closing night film, even if it does mean getting home at 3 in the morning. Soup to nuts! My space in line was held by Peter Kuling, a college professor, [film critic](#), pitch spokesman and actor I bumped into last year at Midnight Madness. [He needs to update his Facebook](#) (which focuses on his alter ego Professor Kuling, the mind behind Recessionomics) but you can [follow him on Twitter](#) and -- if you're in Canada-- watch for him in a new Nikon camera campaign.

Anyway, Peter and his girlfriend held a seat for me and I dashed in at the last moment to see this Hong Kong police flick that reveled in every Hong Kong police flick cliché I'd seen to date: corrupt but appealing cops, the noble loner who just won't play by the rules, a hapless sidekick who gets injured or killed and an uber competent female cop (in this case May, played with dash by Michelle Ye, who deserves her own film). The story becomes crazier and sillier as the movie progresses but it's a terrific showcase for director Dante Lam, who's been turning films out for the past decade. He stages numerous gun battles with daring style that make this undercooked storyline worth the ride. Undoubtedly Midnight Madness programmer Colin Geddes has seen most of his work and could school me on Lam. Maybe he's already made a great film and I missed it. But he deserves to be seen in the US (though the English subtitles are terrible; I'd be glad to tweak them for you, guys). And here's hoping he gets a great script sometime soon.

DAY 11; WESTERNS, KINGS AND MADDIN -- A WONDERFUL FINAL DAY

Argh. I just HAD to sleep in and missed the Errol Morris documentary *Tabloid*. I'm gutted. If I'd had a ticket I would have gone. But I was going to have to get up three hours after falling asleep to get in line just for the hope of seeing the film at 9:30 am. And I knew I'd be exhausted for the rest of the day and decided to be smart. That meant sleeping in, sort of, and filing my profile of Colin Geddes in the afternoon. Just before heading off to what I thought was my final film, I found out *The King's Speech* (a movie I really wanted to catch) had won the Audience Award and was going to be screening for free at 6 p.m. Huzzah!

MEEK'S CUTOFF * 1/2**

What a great way to start off the final day. Director Kelly Reichardt gets better and better with every film and here she fulfills the promise of *Old Joy* and *Wendy & Lucy*. The latter starred Michelle Williams as a woman who lost her dog; her central riveting performance kept the slight story afloat. Here, Williams is

part of a marvelous ensemble and while the plot comes fast and furious, it's presented in a low-key, ambiguous manner that suits Reichardt to a t. In this Western set during the 1800s, three families are headed west with their guide Meek (Bruce Greenwood). Meek is either lost or being urged by residents of the Territory they're headed for to steer newcomers away to their deaths. (Too many Americans might turn the Territory over to the US in a vote.) Meeks may be clueless or cruel but they undoubtedly need water and the capturing of a "savage" gives them a chance to ignore Meeks and use this man to save them. There you go. That it's, all delivered in an open-ended manner sure to frustrate general audiences. But what a cast. Paul Dano is wonderful as a weak-willed man who only seems strong compared to his hysterical wife (Zoe Kazan) who sees Indians lurking behind every tree. The inestimable Shirley Henderson is wittily on target as a woman constantly keeping an eye on her wandering son and a husband who refuses water when it's scarce (to all of their detriment). Greenwood is wonderfully offbeat as the guide and Will Patton is a rock of common sense as the husband of Williams, though their relationship is a little tense. (She's his second wife and he seems uncertain about this woman with opinions.) Without a hint of modernism, Williams creates a strong, fascinating character who insists on seeing the captured savage (Rod Rondeaux) as a man and not just an object of scorn or even pity. Exceptionally well-acted, quiet and observant this is pure art house fare, which is meant as a warning for those who might want, you know, a little action and some answers, and as praise for a talented director coming into her own.

THE KING'S SPEECH ***

Middlebrow. That's the derogatory term for "prestige pictures," mainstream movies geared towards an adult audience that is intelligent but not necessarily wildly bold or cutting edge. The Hurt Locker is arty. The Blind Side is middlebrow. But I like middlebrow films, the sort of movies that studios are increasingly reluctant to make. A friend dismissed The King's Speech but then added that the two central performances by Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush were very good. Well, if a movie's two central performances are very good, it's got to be worth seeing. Is it a movie for my mom, I asked? "Exactly," he said. "All our moms will love it. In fact, it should have been dedicated "To Moms Everywhere."

Well, Mom, this one is for you. It tells the story of George VI, a reluctant king who was always in the shadow of his glamorous brother and beloved if tradition-bound father. George (Bertie to his family) also suffers from a terrible stutter, which makes it painful to fulfill his obligations as a member of the Royal Family in the 30s. Thanks to his wife (a spot-on Helena Bonham Carter), Bertie finally finds a speech therapist who can help him: the eccentric Aussie Lionel (Rush). In Lionel's home, under terms of equality and respect, Bertie slowly and with difficulty starts to master his stutter. This is pure Masterpiece Theater, with both actors relishing the many comic moments in the script (cursing helps one avoid the stutter, it should be said) and the drama in Bertie's situation. When his brother abdicates for the woman he loves, Bertie is thrust onto the throne just as England needs a king to rally around for World War II. Tom Hooper's film is a broadly appealing, very funny and quite moving film. It's unquestionably headed to the Oscars. I'd bet dollars to doughnuts that Firth and Rush will be nominated and Carter is a strong possibility as well, not to mention the film and the director. Many festival audiences are friendly (at Cannes, they give most everything a standing ovation and in Toronto solid applause is considered only polite). But the audience at this screening without the stars in attendance ate it up, laughing strongly and bursting into huge applause at the very end. This isn't just a prestige pic: it's a potential hit looking at \$50 million or more, handled properly. Me? I can't wait to take my mom.

GUY MADDIN ****

Finally, I ended the fest on the perfect note by checking out the brilliant installation at the Lightbox by Canadian director Guy Maddin, one of the best and most distinctive directors in the world today. If you're in Toronto, by all means, check it out and take the time to watch at least some of the shorts he displays in full. I'll talk about it more in my festival wrapup on Tuesday.

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](#).

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