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New York Film Festival 2017 #1: Cowboys, Communists, Christians and Kaurismäki

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The New York Film Festival takes place September 28 through October 15. It's the 55th anniversary of one of the sanest, simplest celebrations of film in the world. NYFF cherry picks the most notable films that have debuted at Cannes and Telluride and so on around the world. They also of course host world premieres and some big fall hopefuls. It doesn't have the sprawl of Toronto or the manic frenzy of Cannes. It just has a lot of the best, buzziest films that have played the festival circuit all in one place. Shorts, virtual reality, talks featuring major directors, a retrospective of tough guy Robert Mitchum all pepper the schedule. I'm especially eager to see the restored prints of L'Atalanté, one of the most beautiful and romantic films of all time and Mizoguchi's masterpiece *Sansho The Bailiff*.

Richard Linklater opens the fest with the world premiere of *Last Flag Flying*, a riff of sorts on Hal Ashby's lovely sad sack drama *The Last Detail*. (I agree with Peter Biskind that Ashby was the most interesting, versatile and successful director of the 1970s.) Todd Haynes brings *Wonder Struck* as the centerpiece. And at the finale is Woody Allen with a world premiere of *Wonder Wheel* starring Kate Winslet and Jim Belushi.

Rudely, critics don't have to wait for the fest to check out the films. They start showing the movie to the ink-stained wretches right now. So here are my thoughts on the first four films I managed to catch.

THE RIDER ** 1/2 out of ****

ARTHUR MILLER: WRITER * out of ****

THE OTHER SIDE OF HOPE *** out of ****

THELMA * 1/2 out of ****

THE RIDER ** 1/2 out of ****

The Rider is the second film by director Chloé Zhao and clearly I'm late to the party when I saw she's definitely a talent to watch. Both her debut *Songs My Brother Taught Me* and this one played at the Director's Fortnight of Cannes. Because I've been to a few rodeos and interviewed some cowboys who ride bulls, I like to pretend

I know something about that world. Of course, I don't really, other than the fact that you have to be batshit crazy to get on a bucking bronco or a bull and I personally didn't feel that safe being anywhere near one of the bulls, even when I was on one side of a giant metal fence and they were on the other. Did I want to get behind the chutes (meaning right up close)? Hell, no.

Rodeo cowboys tend to be cocky and vulnerable, small and bone tough. They compete with dislocated shoulders and broken this and broken that (yes, broken) and when you ask if it hurts they say just when they get off. It's a fascinating, fast fading world and Zhao has crafted a quietly observant fictional film out of real life drama. In real life, Oglala Sioux cowboy Brady Jandreau suffered a near-fatal spill while riding a bronco and has the steel plate in his skull to show for it. He couldn't imagine NOT working with horses. (Jandreau breaks them, which sounds brutal but is gentle and lovely to watch as he communes with the animals till they trust his presence on their back).

But in *The Rider*, Brady faces the brutal fact that he simply can't compete or even work with horses ever again. He won't admit it, but getting back on a bronco might kill him. Trying to break a bronco wears him out. He can't even successfully coach another rider working on his form by mounting a dummy and getting some pointers. Brady's hand clenches up and he gets dizzy and even vomits after just a gentle canter across the land. Reduced at times to working at a local grocery store to make a few bucks, Brady is at loose ends. It's not just that rodeoing and horses are what he loves. It's that a rider is who he is; a rider and nothing else.

He could keep competing. No one is going to stop a cowboy who wants to compete at the level he's at though doctors must sign off on your safety at the major events. But the genuine danger of what he faces is driven home by his visits to Lane Scott, a once-great cowboy who was injured while competing and is now trapped in his body at a care center/hospital, taking pleasure in Brady's visits and reliving his glory days by watching videos, communicating via sign language and "riding" a chair while Brady coaches him to pull the reins this way and that. It's sweet and heart-breaking. (In real life, Scott was a competitor but was injured not in the ring but in a car accident.)

As with *Lane*, the film is filled with non-actors. Brady's dad and sister play themselves, as do his friends on the Pine Ridge Reservation, located near South Dakota and Nebraska. The cinematography by Joshua James Richardson is lovingly observed and discreet, while the subtle score by Nathan Halpern is a real bonus. (And kudos to Cat Clifford for the very fine original song he breaks out in one scene.) The non-professional cast adds to the authenticity but keeps the film from reaching the heights. Mind you, the film made with and about them is exactly what it should be. You wouldn't want to make it any other way. So the limitations on camera for most of the people involved only allow for so much to happen dramatically. But Zhao's deft work makes the most of her chosen subject and I can't wait to see what she does next.

ARTHUR MILLER: WRITER * out of ****

In Rebecca Miller's documentary about her father, we see the great playwright Arthur Miller reading a negative review of one of his late works. It's the New York Times and at that time (and almost as much today), a

negative review for a drama on Broadway from the New York Times was a death knell. And that's what he is reading. Any critics surely feel a little sheepish watching that; it's always good to keep in mind that those are real people you're talking about. And no one makes a documentary for the money or the glory! It is by definition a labor of love.

Still, it does no one any good to tip toe around. Perhaps this decades-long project (she interviewed her dad over many years) allowed them to communicate and be close in a new way. Certainly her affection and interest is clear. Miller is one of the giants of the American theater, on anyone's short list of our greatest dramatists, alongside Eugene O'Neil and August Wilson. Few people have one classic to their name and he has three or four: *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A View From A Bridge* and *All My Sons* among them.

Miller felt she was the only one who could get her dad and the family around him to sit down for a documentary and maybe she's right. But this labor of love has many problems. Miller is not a very good interviewer. Her father is not very good at being interviewed. He slips too often into vague generalities and grand pronouncements. (Hey, it's not easy being treated like the Oracle of Delphi by all and sundry for decades.) The film begins with a shot of Miller doing some carpentry and your heart sinks at the sight because of course Miller asks him if he would compare constructing a play to carpentry itself. Oy. Mind you, there's no harm in asking but why include it when his response is banal and without interest. The early warning this signals about the film in general is all too prescient. While Miller wrote one of the great theatrical biographies (*Timebends*), it turns out he's also not a particularly good reader of his own material either. So even though his writing is good, he doesn't make the most of it.

Miller has multiple landmarks of the stage, three complex marriages (including one to Marilyn Monroe), a prominent role in the McCarthy Era witchhunt (people who came to his house for dinner parties were sometimes tailed home by federal agents) and a haunting family secret, to name just some of the raw material available.

It seems almost impossible to imagine a dull documentary to come out of such a life but that's what we have here. To ask the tough questions, to shape the material, to not indulge in footage that goes nowhere even if it might amuse those who know and love him, well that's not always something a person close to their subject can do. And it's clearly not something Miller was ready to do here, despite her access to literally years of interviews, home movie footage and a mountain of archival material from a life spent in the public eye.

We take Miller's looming presence in the theater for granted today. So it's fascinating to learn he (and Rebecca) believe Dustin Hoffman's acclaimed revival of *Death Of A Salesman* in 1984 rescued Miller after many years of obscurity for his old plays and general indifference to his new ones (except in Europe!). Surely it would have happened at some point but Hoffman gets the credit in their house. Now it seems every season or two brings a jolt of excitement with one or another of his landmark shows being tackled and lesser ones given another shot. So Arthur Miller's legacy is safe and this flawed if heartfelt valentine from his daughter is happily just one more addition to the attention that must and will be paid to his work for generations to come.

THE OTHER SIDE OF HOPE *** out of ****

Aki Kaurismäki. If you're smiling, you're already familiar with the sweet cinematic universe of the Finnish director, who has stamped his signature style on some 18 films and a handful of documentaries. The words "deadpan" and "droll" are almost inevitable in any review of a Kaurismäki film, given his gently humorous style. Life can be brutal and tough and the world can be a cold, cold place. But however critical he may be (characters often bemoan life in Finland), the essential decency of most people remains a constant.

Buster Keaton would have been right at home in these films, where people rarely crack a smile but the laughs and heartbreak come easily. They're silly and sincere and so many of the characters light up cigarettes that if I ever get cancer I might just sue Kaurismäki over the ill effects of second-hand smoke. I always feel like I haven't seen enough of his movies. But ever since Siskel & Ebert raved about his idiosyncratic style in 1990's *The Match Factory Girl*, I've been a faithful fan. You have to love a director who calls digital cinematography the work of the devil. He says *The Other Side Of Hope* will be his last film but since he's only 60 years old, I'll just ignore that for a while and call it his latest.

If this IS his last film, well it's a perfectly typical offering in the best sense of the word. A man leaves his wife, depositing his wedding ring on the table, which she immediately drops into a cigarette ashtray (brimming with cigarette stubs of course **cough cough**). Do they even say a word to each other? I can't quite remember. But the hostile yet somehow amusing atmosphere lingers in my mind. His act of removing the ring somehow drew a laugh from the audience. I was more amused by the weirdly fat cactus-like plant sitting on her dining

room table, an almost unworldly presence. Only at the end do we learn what tension has arisen between these two and his actions — inscrutable for most of the film — are revealed as acts of love. We never doubted it for a second.

The other main story involves a refugee from Syria. This blank-faced man (Sherwan Haji) has a quiet dignity even as he pops up out of a bin of coal after stowing away on a ship, dusts himself off and goes about the work of asking for refugee status. He is stalked by some ugly characters who push him in one seat, hit him in the next and get more and more brutal as the film goes on. But their cruelty is more than balanced by the repeated acts of decency from everyone else he comes in contact with, from the woman who interviews him about his journey to Finland to the woman who helps him escape deportation to our other hero, who gives him a job at a restaurant he's running and doesn't even blink at getting the guy fake papers so he can walk around safely.

All of Kaurismäki's traits are on display, from the showcasing of musical talent to an adorable dog to depth charges of humor that go off and you find yourself smiling at them a minute or two after they've occurred. This is not an idealized world by any stretch. The joy of Kaurismäki is how he acknowledges the bitterness of life without ever downplaying the ability of a man to dust himself off, light up a cigarette, take a precious puff and appreciate the morning sun. The day's work won't be easy, but it can wait.

THELMA * 1/2 out of ****

Norwegian director Joachim Trier made two notable films (especially *Oslo, August 31*). But after a foray into the independent American scene with *Louder Than Bombs*, he has returned home...and made his most confused, unsatisfying film yet. *Thelma* shows our young heroine heading off to university for the first time, her anxious and religious parents checking in every day and hyper-aware of Thelma's schedule and social life. ("I see you've made a new friend on Facebook," her father mentions casually during one conversation.)

The compelling actress Eili Harboe as the puzzle of a student Thelma holds out attention as the pieces slowly fall into place. Eili is clearly troubled because the tiny apartment she lives in alone while going to school is notably barren of anything resembling warmth or a personality. She's deft at defending her family's Christianity (treated as wildly exotic by the few classmates she talks to) but also has no patience for the fundamentalist, anti-science attitude of some family friends. (Ok, we think, forget a rigid fundamentalism as an explanation of what's going on with Thelma.)

A female classmate intrigues and we can see Thelma gingerly stepping out of her safety zone with a beer or two. Ok, collegiate unloosening, check. Possible sexual orientation issue or just hang-ups over sex in general, check. But what's this? The film has a creepy sense of unease as the natural world seems weirdly in tune with Thelma. Snakes — a biblical symbol of temptation of course — crawl through her dreams but also crawl on the ground towards her apartment. Birds fly into the windows near Thelma and then she's having epileptic seizures that doctors can't explain and things just get...mysterious. Is this a lesbian coming of age story or *Damien's Sister: Omen III*?

Sadly, the answer is closer to the latter than the former. The more we learn about Thelma's backstory, the less interesting the film becomes. Eventually, the third act devolves into nonsense that grows confounding moment to moment given everything we know about the characters. Dreadful secrets are revealed...and yet a character's natural reaction to it is forgotten just a minute or two later. I've literally no idea what Trier intended but as a leap of sorts into genre territory (albeit of a very high-minded sort), it's notably lacking in anything resembling sense or suspense.