

VIFF Vancouver International Film Festival

2021 Reviews

Drive My Car



1. Here is an imperative from *Drive My Car*: “Yield yourself and respond to the text.” You’ll have to trust that the text of *Drive My Car* is here. I can’t look at the movie’s images or think too long of its plot since my father died, earlier this year. I’ve seen *Drive My Car* three times though, with Michael, Dominic, and Shayna, respectively. It is not an easily exhausted movie. I saw it at VIFF, in seats close to the screen, then in bed, on a fall afternoon, then again when it was released in theatres. It is a nice movie to share with beloveds.

2. Here’s another imperative, as simple and difficult as the last: “I wanted to know her language, so I learned it.” On getting to know someone.

3. As Yūsuke (Nishijima Hidetoshi) is driven to and from rehearsals, he listens to a tape of his late wife, Oto (Kirishima Reika), reading Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* aloud. She pauses for Uncle Vanya’s lines, which Yūsuke speaks, replying to her. This is how he learns the timing of the text. This is how Oto stays in his life and in the movie after her death. The only thing I’ll mention on form is this: once Yūsuke starts talking to his driver, Misaki (Miura Tōko), and starts getting to know his colleagues, his wife’s voice is heard less and less often until, suddenly, it slips away, out of the movie, altogether. The text is still there. There is Chekhov’s text, Murakami’s, and Hamaguchi’s. Let me move on from *Drive My Car*. There used to be a restaurant in Toronto on College Street called Windup Bird Cafe that I liked to go to for lunch. I have a Penguin Classics copy of some of Chekhov’s plays, including *Uncle Vanya*, beside my bed, that I found cleaning out my dad’s office. When I saw Hamaguchi’s *Asako I & II* at TIFF on a weekday afternoon, Hamaguchi introduced the movie and said something like Thank you for coming but don’t you have jobs? He laughed. Late in the movie, I went to the washroom, half-expecting to miss the end. But when I came back, the movie was still playing, going somewhere new. That’s one thing I like about Hamaguchi’s work. When you think it’s over, there’s still more. It keeps going.

Review By Harrison Wade

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Red Rocket



Sean Baker has made a name for himself by crafting observational, deeply empathetic films, and his latest, *Red Rocket*, is no exception. Simon Rex stars as Mikey, a middle-aged adult film actor seeking a career change after a string of bad luck. He returns to his Texas hometown to reunite with his estranged wife, Lexi (Bree Elrod), but while there, he meets a 17-year old cashier named Strawberry (Suzanna Son), whom he believes could make it big in pornography.

Strawberry's youthful naivete is at once sweet and disarming, and the scenes she shares with Mikey run the gamut from charmingly nostalgic, as Mikey reconnects with his past, more idealistic self, and disturbing, as he skillfully sells the world of porn to an initially hesitant Strawberry. His sales pitch involves attractive promises, but the viewer is reminded of the unlikelihood of their fulfilment every time Lexi appears on-screen, who initially joined the porn world with Mikey and then washed up when she tried to make it big.

As with his past works, Baker represents his characters without passing judgement on them, and this is how he succeeds where other, more sensationalist cinematic depictions of pornography have not: *Red Rocket* authentically depicts the realities of the contemporary digital porn market, where ease of access has made dreams of porn stardom as common as dreams of stardom in Hollywood used to be. As the debate over the ethics of pornography becomes increasingly polarized, *Red Rocket* offers a refreshingly balanced perspective that allows each viewer to draw their own conclusions about the morally ambivalent narrative playing out before them.

Review By Tamar Hanstke

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One Second



Though it was undoubtedly produced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing closures of most movie theatres, *One Second* offers a compelling reminder of the ways in which movies bring people together, without ever being as cliché as the sentiment may seem. Set during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the film follows an escaped fugitive (played by Zhang Yi in one of several recent collaborations with Zhang Yimou), who escapes from a labour camp to track down a newsreel in which his estranged daughter is purported to appear. The fugitive eventually makes it to a nearby town with a cinema, but only after a chaotic series of events which include the film reel being found, stolen, recovered, and then damaged. Just as the fugitive pursues the purported footage of his daughter—which is ultimately little more than a “blink and you’ll miss it” frame where she appears in the background—he is constantly pursued by the authorities. His time and freedom are limited. His goal is not to reunite with his daughter, but simply to see her image—to watch and re-watch this single moment over and over again, a virtual reunion being the only possibility.

The most memorable sequence in the film is, following the fugitive’s pleading, Mr. Movie (Fan Wei)—a theatre operator who acts as sort of community leader—organizes a huge operation to clean and restore the damaged footage. The townspeople believe in this work because they believe in the cinema. The packed theatre becomes like a community hub, made particularly powerful sitting in a fairly crowded theatre myself at a time in which a return to theatre-going still felt quite novel.

Review By Alec Christensen

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Night Raiders



Danis Goulet's first feature, *Night Raiders*, filters the history of Canadian colonialism through dystopian science fiction conventions, plugging into a growing trend of Indigenous filmmakers reworking historical issues with the trappings of genre filmmaking. Set in unspecified Cree Territory, *Night Raiders* dramatizes the territory's occupation by the fictional Emerson State. These occupiers kidnap anyone under the age of 18 to train them as soldiers in their Academy. The connections between this dystopian context and residential schools are clear enough, but the film makes them clearer with an opening trigger warning that directly names its historical referent, and it's this kind of direct engagement that holds a lot of it together. About halfway through, there's a poignant scene where our lead, Niska, reconnects with her daughter, Waseese, who has been sent to the Academy for reprogramming. A scene of healing, the emotional impact comes from the intimate attention to complex emotions between parents and children trapped in an oppressive system. But the film isn't just a family drama. It's also a science fiction fantasy, and it struggles to find its footing in this register. Establishing its world with impressive narrative economy and visual resourcefulness, the film doesn't quite maintain the scope of this futuristic setting. By the end, pacing problems undercut tension, and character development plateaus. Ultimately, *Night Raiders* isn't *Blade Runner* or *Children of Men*, and it's at its best when it knows this, even embraces it, but some genre trappings are too big to shake off.

Review By Michael Stringer