THE SEVENTH ART

SEVEN FILMS NOT TO MISS

by Rebecca M. Alvin

Early Italian film theorist Ricciotto Canudo was the first to label film as the "seventh art," giving it artistic significance alongside the long acknowledged art forms, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, and dance, way back in 1911. Film has come a long way in the 105 intervening years, diversifying in ways Canudo could never have expected.

Elsewhere in this issue, we've covered some fascinating films. *Check It, Tickled, Author: The JT Leroy Story,* and *Off the Rails* are all must-see films in this year's festival. That being said, with over 30 narrative features, over 20 documentary features, and another 32 short films, there is a world of cinema to explore at this year's Provincetown International Film Festival. Here are seven very different films that you don't want to miss.

CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

Although each takes a very different approach, a number of films in this year's festival focus on family. Standing out for featuring one of the most unusual families to appear on screen is the film *Captain Fantastic,* starring Viggo Mortensen.

Mortensen plays Ben Cash, what you might call a modern-day hippie, who, along with his wife (whom we do not meet), has made a very conscious decision to raise his family of six children in the wilderness. They are home-schooled not only in academic subjects but also in survival skills, and their upbringing is about as unconventional as you can imagine. The film begins with Ben caring for his kids alone as his wife is in a hospital somewhere. When tragedy strikes, the story is propelled in a new direction, with Ben and family having to leave the shelter of the woods for the world of other people. It becomes clear that a whole different set of survival skills are needed in the conventional world of mainstream society. Frank Langella also stars as Ben's wealthy, rigid father-in-law.

Captain Fantastic is funny, moving, and insightful in unexpected ways. Through the lens of these children, we see the absurdities of societal norms, and while Ben makes mistakes, we start to wonder who knows more about child-rearing, the typical parents (represented here by Kathryn Hahn and Steve Zahn) or a man who allows his children to climb mountains even when they are injured, to steal food in celebration of "Noam Chomsky Day," and to hear the plain, honest truth, no matter what the subject matter?

Photo: Erik Simkins / Bleecker Street

(l to r) Annalise Basso stars as Vespyr, Viggo Mortensen as Ben and Shree Crooks as Zaja in *Captain Fantastic,* a Bleecker Street release.

THE GUYS NEXT DOOR

In a completely different, yet still complex look at parenting, the documentary *The Guys Next Door* follows Erik and Sandro, a married couple who have two children from a surrogate mother, their close friend Rachel. Unlike many surrogacy arrangements, in this case the surrogate continues to have a relationship with the children she bore, albeit from an appropriate distance. What's so fascinating about this film is the depth with which co-director/producers Allie Humenuk and Amy Geller explore this complicated parenting arrangement. While Erik and Sandro are indeed the main focus, the documentarians are not afraid to let the subject broaden. The result is a layered film that examines the choices parents have to make, the ways in which parenthood changes a marriage, and the particular issues that come up around surrogacy for the parents and the surrogate mother, but also for her family, as well.

UNCLE HOWARD

As much as family drama often revolves around the parent/child relationship, it is sometimes the extended family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. — who leave a strong impression. In the documentary *Uncle Howard*, the subject is the filmmaker's uncle, Howard Brookner, a filmmaker who died of AIDS in 1989. He is best known for his feature film *Bloodhounds of Broadway* (starring Madonna, Jennifer Grey, and Matt Dillon, among others), and also his documentary about William S. Burroughs, *Burroughs: The Movie*. It is filmmaker Aaron Brookner's desire to locate the outtakes from the Burroughs film that inspires this documentary. Along the way, he effectively interweaves his own personal recollections of his uncle, the homophobia and general hysteria of the time, and interviews with Howard's notable friends and colleagues, including indie film giant Jim Jarmusch and a number of underground filmmakers.

It's often difficult to make a documentary like this, with both personal and larger themes, but Brookner does an amazing job of putting his film first, making it more than just another personal documentary about one's family. *Uncle Howard* tells us a lot about the impact of Howard on his nephew, but also a lot about the AIDS era in New York City, the heyday of American independent cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and William S. Burroughs, as well.

(l to r) Burghart Klaussner in *The People vs. Fritz Bauer;* Sandro, Rachel, her husband, and Erik in *The Guys Next Door;* a still from Brendan Cordeiro's *Ribbons;* and Aaron Brookner with Jim Jarmusch in *Uncle Howard.*

RIBBONS

Uncle Howard is preceded by a lovely short film called *Ribbons,* by Cape Cod native Brendan Cordeiro, who grew up in North Truro and Provincetown. The film is a short impressionistic piece with little dialogue that also looks back at the AIDS epidemic, this time through the memories conjured up by a ribbon that washes up on the beach. It's a quiet snapshot of a time that deeply affected us all, and it goes well with *Uncle Howard*.

THE PEOPLE VS. FRITZ BAUER

History is often the basis for some of the best narrative films. Such is the case for *The People vs. Fritz Bauer*. Certainly, the Holocaust is one of the most filmed periods in the history of cinema, with nearly every angle of that horrific time documented, fictionalized, analyzed, and discussed—or so it seems. Here we have a German film that explores Fritz Bauer, (known best for his role in prosecuting the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials in the 1960s), and his role in apprehending Adolf Eichmann, the notorious Nazi officer responsible for deporting thousands of Jews during World War II. While Eichmann was caught and tried by Israeli authorities, it has recently come to light that back in 1957, it was Bauer who initiated the process of finding Eichmann in Argentina. In *The People vs. Fritz Bauer* it becomes clear that while Bauer was Jewish, likely either bisexual or gay, and lived in exile in Denmark and Sweden during the war, he is motivated not by revenge, but by a desire to force the German people to deal with their history. The resistance to addressing Nazi war crimes in this period is a powerful element and results in Bauer himself being the target of a smear campaign revolving around his past encounters with male prostitutes. So the film also brings to light the fact that Proposition 175, which banned male homosexuality in Germany during the Nazi era, was actually still in effect (albeit with reduced rigor) not only in Fritz Bauer's times as Attorney General of Hessen, but actually all the way until 1994. It's a wonderfully acted film, with an engaging plot that brings new material to light, breathing life into the Holocaust film subgenre.

CLASS DIVIDE

Closer to home, the documentary *Class Divide* is a powerful film about gentrification. Specifically, it looks at a particular block in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City where the eponymous class divide is about as clear as you can get. Symbolized by the beautification project that yielded the High Line park on a former elevated train line that ran between 10th and 11th avenues, West Chelsea has rapidly changed from a neighborhood people avoided to one where billionaires park their money in real estate. The thing is, this being New York, condo projects featuring private swimming pools and saunas in every unit have arisen right next to a low-income housing project where the average family household income is $21,000 a year and most kids are black or Latino. But *Class Divide* explores the situation from the particular vantage point of children—both kids living in the projects and those attending the $50,000 a year private school across the street, Avenues: The World School. Innocent heirs to their parents' lots in life, their perspectives are all the more compelling. Rich kids didn't do anything to be rich and poor kids didn't do anything to be poor, but nevertheless they are born into a world where economics divide them, and they are extremely conscious of it. There is something so tragic in witnessing children living at the bottom of the economic ladder forced to observe those at the top as they are afforded every wonderful opportunity to learn and grow right across the street at a school that promised to save room for local kids, but has clearly failed to do so in significant numbers.

Photo: Tom LeGoff/Courtesy of HBO

Juwan in *Class Divide*.

Peter Dunning in *Peter and the Farm.*

On a larger scale, *Class Divide* is about what's happened to the greatest city in the world, as it leaves less and less space for creativity, diversity, and dreams in favor of the world's one percent.

PETER AND THE FARM

And finally, the portrait of a cantankerous alcoholic organic-farmer, *Peter and the Farm* offers a bleak picture of one man's descent from the idealism of youth to a life of bitter loneliness amid animals and farm land with which he has a love/hate relationship. Shot by director Tony Stone and Nathan Corbin, there is a quiet beauty to the landscape that appears in stark contrast to the hostility of the subject, a man who has managed to alienate his entire family. The way he relates to the animals, many of whom he will eventually slaughter, reflects his cynicism, and it should be said that this is not a film for the squeamish. As the subject farms animals for organic meat products, the director pulls no punches, and early on there is a scene that explicitly depicts the brutal realities of how we get our meat. Likewise, later in the film a coyote is killed and left to dangle in a grotesque warning to other predators not to mess with Peter's sheep.This bitter blend of darkness and beauty is mirrored in the counterpoint between the lovely camerawork and the sometimes startling soundtrack.

Peter and the Farm is one of those films that isn't exactly enjoyable to watch, but which does mine interesting territory and will stay with you. It's a melancholy film about a melancholy guy, but at the same time, it warrants a look for the beauty that lurks beneath the pain and horror on exhibit.

The 18th Provincetown International Film Festival runs now through Sunday, June 19 at various venues in Provincetown and at Wellfleet Preservation Hall in Wellfleet. For more information, tickets, and a full schedule for these and other films, visit the box office located on the 1st floor (oceanside) of the Whaler's Wharf mall, 237 Commercial St., Provincetown, call 508.487.FILM, or visit ptownfilmfest.org.