

SOUTH COAST CELLULOID

by Matt Kettmann *Presenting the Best in Santa Barbara-Based Filmmaking*

Though we're showered with cinematic excellence from around the world during SBIFF, it's also the best chance every year to see what our neighbors have been up to. This year, there are more than 25 films from Santa Barbara filmmakers, and they're all worth a look.

"We have hit the limit in the last few years in terms of the number of films we can accept," explained homegrown flick programmer **Russ Spencer**, who believes SBIFF is "more generous than any [fest] in the country in accepting local films." In years past, some films of lower production value have managed to sneak in, but now there are so many entries that the fest is really raising the bar. "We have decided to set a high standard for what we will accept," Spencer said. "The competition is just too fierce now. And it's better for our audiences."

Here's a rundown. For a more in-depth interview with Spencer, see *independent.com/sbfilmmakers*.

FEATURES

The most professionally executed and exciting batch of Santa Barbara features in recent memory, this category includes films about everything from dog parades and the search for love to Cyprian architecture, the benches of Cabrillo Boulevard, and the Iraq War. Keeping it close to home is *In Plain Sight: Public Art in Santa Barbara* by **Christy Zwicke** and **Tony Ruggieri**, who interviews countless artists and civic bigwigs to tell the intriguing tale of how our town became blessed with so many murals, fountains, and creative displays. *Unleashed: A Documentary* also puts Santa Barbara on center stage, as viewers are treated to a behind-the-scenes look at the annual Big Dog Parade on State Street, complete with the wackily costumed dogs and their crazy, pet-loving owners. On a more serious topic, *We Played Marbles: Remembering a Stolen Childhood* features 11 Holocaust survivors who live in Santa Barbara and who recount their childhood memories in Europe.

Paul Mathieu's MatchMakers bridges the gap between Santa Barbara and the rest of the world, giving a thorough investigation of the world's matchmaking services. Jumping from India to Chicago to Colorado to Moscow to California, it's certainly the deepest probing of the global phenomenon to date. Equally global in scope, but not as light-hearted, is **Don McCorkell's Shall We Gather at the River**, which takes a look at the eco-dangers of the meat and poultry industry and how it impacts Americans. The remaining two films go abroad. **Mark Manning's The Road to Fallujah** heads to the Iraqi city amid its destruction in 2004,



Looking Up Dresses

giving an intimate look at the personal toll of the American war there. And then there is *Stones of Famagusta*, a portrait of the Cyprian city as revealed through its should-be-famous architecture, by **Allan Langdale** and **Dan Frodsham**.

Show times vary. Visit sbiff.org.

SHORTS

Of the six shorts in this category, *Looking Up Dresses* by **Jared Ingram**, which is in the festival's shorts competition, stands out as a hilarious breakup narrative taking place in church. Watch for Ingram's name on bigger films in the years to come.

Another name to watch is **Rand Holdren**, who, with **John Brotherton**, directed and costarred in *Smith & Mike on a Tuesday*, a comedic look at the underworld. The short flashes with potential, and stars a mysterious fish. Abstract sci-fi fans will dig *Singularity*, a look at what might happen when a future astronaut enters a black hole. Also on the list is the office-space spoof *Beg, Borrow, or Steal: Miss Terious*, a funny psychological thriller with a twist; and *Lost Hope & More*.

Santa Barbara Shorts screen on Wednesday, January 30, at 4 p.m., and Friday, February 1, at 7 p.m., at the Marjorie Luke Theatre.

SHORT DOCS

Leading the pack here is *The Fixer*, a behind-the-scenes look at how news gets reported in foreign lands, specifically Afghanistan, with the help of locals. Directed by former *Indy* writer and employee **Aaron Rockett**, it's an entertaining and enlightening look at what it's like to be reliant on a fixer for your information and safety.

Also in this category is **Ethan Turpin's Her Duty: A Military Wife Speaks Out**, about exactly what you'd think; **Craig Harris's** exposé of

Indonesian and American cover-ups in *West Papua: Free to Choose*; and the saga of José Luis Bonilla's quest to build a Mexican Disneyland near Cuyama, as told by **Kevin Bender** in *Thinking Grande*. Rounding out the list are *Riven Rock* and *Ticket Out of Poverty*.

Santa Barbara Short Docs will screen on Friday, January 25, at 6:30 p.m., at Victoria Hall Theater and Sunday, January 27, at 1 p.m., at Center Stage Theater.

STUDENT SHORTS

Chalk up this experimental mixed bag to the unbound creativity of youth. There's animation on display, such as *Some Like It Heavy*, about a seventy-something's love at first sight, and *Foup*, about a man getting sucked into a photo. There's some wildness, as in *All Bets Are Off*, about a sisters' shared

night on the town, and *Timon's Friendship Adventure*, a Shakespearean romp toward murder. And there's some learning, too, such as *Common App.*, which shows how college applications lead to conformity, and *How to Direct a Commercial*, about a newbie helmer making a commercial for Harley-Davidson. And then there's *Circus Minimus*, which we'll leave as a surprise.

Santa Barbara Student Shorts screen along with the Student Short Docs on Saturday, January 26, at 10 p.m., at the Marjorie Luke Theatre, and on Tuesday, January 29, at 9 p.m., at Victoria Hall Theater.

STUDENT SHORT DOCS

The film most likely to appeal to former UCSB students is *Scene & Heard: A Musical History of Isla Vista*. Using archival uni-

versity footage from the '60s all the way to handheld footage of punk rock and hip-hop parties on Del Playa in recent years — as well as interviews with Jack Johnson, The Tridents, and other I.V. success stories — the doc presents the town's social history against a solid soundtrack. It should be required viewing for all former, current, and future Isla Vistans. Also in this category is *Don Riders*, **Diane Stevens's** look at the tricked-out, chromed-up low-rider bicycles ridden by students at Santa Barbara High, and *Iron Boy*, **Jody Nelson's** portrait of nine-year-old Brynn Sargent, who's considered the youngest triathlete in the world.

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EXPERIMENTAL SHORTS

This category is new for 2008, and leans toward the abstract and artsy. First up is *Regret Is My Demon*, **Paul Abramson's** heroin-laced story that uses multiple cinematic techniques. There is also **Pablo Frasconi's The Longing**, about a Jewish woman during the Spanish Inquisition; *Of Time and the Spirit*, a dance piece by UCSB professor **Tonia Shimin**; a look at a threatened future in **Michael Weinreich's Best Leader**; and **James Kahn's Firebird**, about a professor looking for love on campus.

Experimental Shorts screen on Friday, January 25, at 4 p.m., and Sunday, January 27, at 9:30 p.m., at Center Stage Theater.



The Fixer

REEL NATURE

by Felicia M. Tomasko

IT IS NOT OFTEN THAT AUDIENCES HAVE THE opportunity to see natural history programming on the big screen," Reel Nature series curator and natural history filmmaker **Mike DeGruy** stated definitively. It's a rare occasion, particularly with a chance to question the filmmakers.

DeGruy says he has two primary criteria for selecting the films he adds to the roster. First, he must be able to convince the filmmakers to come to the festival and participate in question and answer sessions with the audience. Second, the films must be aesthetically beautiful, of high quality, and have a compelling story.

For filmgoers, the fun is in learning the secrets to a film's backstory — especially when it comes to how to film wild animals in their natural habitat who don't necessarily respond to scripts or cue cards. There's also potential for

lively debate when so many films deal with environmental topics. For example, DeGruy chose *Arctic Tale*, even though it was already released in theaters. While the beautiful film showcases **Adam Ravetch and Sarah Robertson's** 15 years of footage in the Arctic, the box office showing was disappointing. Its festival appearance offers a chance to question the two about their work shooting polar bears and walrus, and to discuss what did — or didn't — work in the film.

Also with an environmental message is *Crude*, a documentary examining the history of our dependence on petroleum. Australian filmmaker **Richard Smith** is coming to Santa Barbara, a coup for the festival. "Don't miss him," DeGruy warned. "He is a scientist who knows his facts, and knows how to engage the audience."

Also getting the Reel Nature roll call this year is *Saving*

Luna, which is about the plight of an orca living on Canada's Nootka Sound who wanted to be friends with the people, but the government wouldn't allow it. And then we head to Asia for *Losing the Elephants*, an exploration of why populations of the big-eared creature are dwindling.

DeGruy's one disappointment in this year's Reel Nature series — which seems rather diminished from years past — is related to the **Attenborough Award**, first given to the award's namesake, and last year presented to Al Gore and Davis Guggenheim. Plans fell through at the eleventh hour for the intended recipient. There's another opportunity to award nature at next year's festival, but in the meantime, check out the entire roster of Reel Nature, as there are opportunities to see the wild and woolly on the big screen and discuss today's most burning environmental issues.