Showcomotion 2004: children's and young people's film festival--Part 1

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16 August 2004

This is the first of a two-part review

The Cat Returns (*Neko No Ongaeshi*) 6+, Dir: Hiroyuki Morita, (Japanese with English subtitles) 75 mins, Japan; *The Dog Who Was A Cat Inside* 6+, Dir: Siri Melchior, 3 mins, UK; *Wondrous Oblivion* 8+, Dir: Paul Morrison, 106 mins, UK; *Teenage Britain* 15+, various; *Little Longnose (Karlik Nos)* 6+, Dir: Ilya Maximov, (Russian with English subtitles) 83 mins, Russia; *Short and Sweet* 4+; *Two Brothers* U 7+, Dir: Jean-Jacques Annaud, 109 mins, France/UK, (2004); *Gorilla Cinema Education Showcases One and Two*

The Showcomotion film festival, screened in Sheffield, England, is the largest event of its kind in Britain. The annual festival presents a diverse range of films and shorts produced for (and also by) young people, many of which would not otherwise be screened in the UK. Priority is given to films representing the lives of children from around the world and addressing issues considered pertinent to younger audiences. Conceived of as a response to the mediocre diet of big-budget animation and saccharine children's films, Showcomotion has helped promote a more diverse mix of material for younger audiences.

The sixth Showcomotion boasted a wide range of drama, comic adventure, animation and short stories. The festival opened with a preview of *Shrek 2* and closed with a screening of *Two Brothers* but sandwiched in between these two major releases was a wealth of films made for youngsters from across Europe, Russia, Canada and Japan. Although there were more repeats this year, there was also a greater concentration on important areas, particularly the lives and interests of teenagers.

In *The Cat Returns*, Haru, a schoolgirl growing up in a Japanese city, one day risks her life to save a small black cat from being run over by a truck. Soon she is surrounded by hordes of thankful cats. But what begins as a thrilling adventure swiftly turns into a nightmare as Haru learns that she has been chosen to be the bride of the Prince of Cats. Things turn from bad to worse after she is transported to the Kingdom Of Cats and she starts to turn into a cat herself.

But help is on hand! There is a super-hero, crime-fighting trio who come to Haru's aid. Led by an upright, smartly dressed cat in a suit, bow tie and top hat known as the Baron, his two friends Toto and Muta; a huge talking crow and a gargantuan, vulgar cat, battle the evil forces of the King of Cats to save Haru from her fate.

The Cat Returns is the product of the Japanese animation house; Studio Ghibli, which has also been responsible for *Only Yesterday*, *Princess Mononoke* and the recent commercially successful *Spirited Away*.

Watching a Studio Ghibli production is becoming an increasingly frustrating experience. Each film begins in a promising (even tantalising) manner, drawing in the viewer and creating a level of expectation that is usually sooner rather than later, cruelly dashed. *The Cat Returns* began well, showing us the eventual dangers of the purring, meowing gratitude of cats. This was all done in a creative and amusing fashion. But the film goes down hill as soon as we enter the Kingdom of Cats. Not even the clever antics of the Baron and his friends could ultimately save this dull and unimaginative animation. The filmmakers eventually succeed in creating a surely unintentional feeling in the viewer—a lack of any regard whatsoever for Haru's fate.

The Cat Returns is even weaker than the ludicrously over-hyped *Spirited Away*, which at least had a half decent, if predictable ending. It would also have been better if the film were half as long.

From an overly long film to a snappy little short called *The Dog who was a Cat inside*, which features a dog and cat that live together in the same body. This duel personality animal is in turmoil. During the day, when the dog wants to run around, the cat just wants to curl up and sleep and at night when the feline comes alive, the dog dozes off. When the dog/cat falls into a pond, the two sides have to learn to swim together. This cleverly animated little tale, with its childlike squares and scribbles, received a well-deserved nomination for Best Short Animation at the BAFTA awards 2003.

Wondrous Oblivion is the story of 11-year-old David Wiseman (Sam Smith), who is growing up in 1960s London and is mad about cricket but no good at it. When a Jamaican family moves in next door and build a cricket net in the back garden, David is thrilled. He soon becomes friendly with Dennis Samuels (Delroy Lindo) and his young daughter, Ruth (Leonie Elliot) as they practice batting and bowling.

The practice finally results in David gaining a place in the school cricket team, astounding his school mates and the cricket coach who has got used to mouthing the words "wondrously oblivious" at David's usually dreadful efforts.

David's parents (played by Emily Woof and Stanley Townsend), however, have become concerned at the unexpected coaching of their son by their new Jamaican neighbours.

Although they are both more friendly to the new family than the rest of the street, David's parents are themselves recent Jewish immigrants from Poland and know full well the poisonous contagion of racial hatred. But desperate to fit in herself, David's mother is encouraged by the more backward, gossiping street occupants to shun the Jamaican family. A right-wing thug throws a brick through the window, with a note reading, "Get rid of the Darkies." When the Wisemans make no attempt to distance themselves from their neighbours, a second brick is thrown, with the words "Time is running out Yids" attached to it. David's parents reluctantly instruct their son to break all ties with the family next door. David has to choose between fitting in or standing up for his new friends. An arson attack on the Samuels' house finally brings everything to a head and forces a serious reassessment on the street.

Wondrous Oblivion is an interesting look at life in 1960s London, with its newly settled Caribbean workers. Through the dilemma of the Wisemans, it sensitively considers the tensions between established and newly arrived immigrant populations to the UK, and between them and the wider community.

Although generally well acted, the film does slip into caricature at a number points which give it an unfortunately stilted feel; such as the

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behaviour of David's school mates, who are either all horrible to him, or universally singing his praises; and the unconvincing growth in political maturity of Mrs Wiseman.

The film would have been strengthened by a greater delving into the circumstances or reasons that drew the central character to settle in Britain. Elements of their past lives are only very thinly portrayed. Whenever something interesting is revealed, it is too quickly cut short, such as David's fathers' allusion to their escape from the Holocaust.

But the film tackles some serious subjects such as racism and friendship, generational responsibility and peer pressure with a degree of success, and will help open up an important period of history to a younger audience.

A selection of short films appeared at this year's festival under the heading *Teenage Britain*. Aimed at the over fifteens, these shorts look at life for young people in the UK. The films included some award winning contributions, some of which have appeared at previous festivals. The festival programme describes the series as a "wake-up call". Given the general subject matter tackled—teenage pregnancy, drugs, racism, drink-fuelled rape, street violence—they make for grim viewing but open a rare spotlight on how many teenagers get by in modern Britain.

Dog, Dir: Andrea Arnold, 10 mins, (2001).

Growing up on a run-down South London housing estate, 15-year-old Leah starts her day with a fight with her mother. As she leaves the flat, her mother shouts obscenities after her. Leah goes in search of her boyfriend—a junkie who goes from one fix to another—with some money she has stolen from her mother's purse in the hope that they might be able to go to the cinema.

Her boyfriend predictably spends the money on drugs. They go to some wasteland where he proposes to have sex on an old mattress. While he is writhing on top of her, Leah notices a small dog standing watching them. She laughs. Incensed by this, the disturbed young man kicks the dog to death. Horrified, Leah runs home only to be attacked by her angry mother who has discovered the theft.

Dog was screened during Critics Week at Cannes 2002 and won the Jameson Award, Brief Encounters 2001. Joanne Hill movingly plays Leah, a young woman desperately seeking some human warmth and finding none.

Gearhead, Dir: Joe Magee, 9 mins, (2003)

Using heavily manipulated video and strong colourisation, Gearhead conveys the surreal experience of a young drug user, from stealing something, selling it and buying a fix with the money. The protagonist's state of mind is manifested through extreme film loops and continually recurring sound motifs.

Gearhead won the UK Film Council First Light Best Film, 2004. Despite its original feel, and at least one clever touch (the youngster running past a billboard that flips to advertise the film *Catch Me If You Can*) it is difficult to watch.

Gone, Dir: Matthew Thompson, 10 mins, (2003)

A young man looks back on a party at which things go very wrong for a girl he met briefly before. Whilst lying half awake and hidden, he watches as a group of drunken boys rape the girl who is nearly unconscious from drinking.

The next morning he fails to tell her. She mistakenly believes she has lost her virginity to him and tells him she is pleased. The young man is racked by guilt.

Gone was the winner of the BBC New Talent Awards, Brief Encounters Short Film Festival Bristol last year. The short is intelligently handled, relying on surprisingly little dialogue. Danny Young is good as the young man.

Jump Boy, Dir: Menaj Hudu, 11 mins, (1996)

A gang of older Asian schoolboys walks home through the busy city streets. Baggy bores his mates with the catalogue of the hi-tech gadgets he supposedly possesses, the rap music he likes and the US street slang he spouts until the group encounters some real hoodlums. The men humiliate the boys and steal their valuables. Baggy is beaten. As the men walk away, one of Baggy's mates murmurs, "say goodbye to your gangster friends."

Although the message is forced, in an atmosphere in which gangster culture is glorified by rap singers it is a welcome one.

Skin Deep, Dir: Yousaf Ali Kahn, 13 mins, (2001)

Romo, a half Pakistani boy passes for white. He is filled with self-loathing. He makes his younger sister, who is obviously Asian, walk separately on the way to school, and makes sure he calls out in greeting to the local bully boys of the National Front.

Romo gets an apprenticeship as a car mechanic. The garage is staffed by fascists and racist workers, some of whom invite Romo on a night out to a club, where he openly aligns himself with their ideas. Afterwards the neo-nazis go on a street rampage. They grab a young Asian boy and ask Romo to initiate himself into their movement. Romo is finally forced to confront the consequences of his deceptions.

Skin Deep was the 7th Kodak Short Film Showcase winner and was a BAFTA-nominated best short film in 2002. It is a disturbing if flawed account of the young man's dilemma. The weakest parts are those depicting the neo-nazis rampage, which involved kicking over peoples' rubbish bins while bellowing at the top of their lungs.

Somersault, Dir: David MacKenzie, 15 mins, (1999)

Kelly, a young teenage athlete, is growing up with her mother (who is usually out getting drunk and picking up much younger men) in Glasgow, Scotland. One night Kelly has to choose whether to follow her mates on an underage trip to the disco, or to stay at home while her mother goes out on a date.

From the director of *Young Adam*, *Somersault* was placed second for Best Short Film at the Dresden Film Festival in 1999. It sensitively deals with a tense, but caring mother/daughter relationship. The film's effect is magnified by the superb performance by the young Nichola Given, who plays Kelly.

Kelly's schoolmates mock her and engage in some bullying. Kelly is obviously unhappy. The only place she can feel alive and in control is in the school gym, alone, practising her routine, free from both her embarrassing mother and her cruel peers.

You Make My Body Shake, Dir: Katrin Vorderwulbecke**,** 15 mins, (1998)

Here we see a group of young girls enthralled by the latest boy-band. The central character is a girl who gets an opportunity to meet the band in person and we witness the antagonisms that arise in the group as a result. *You Make...* was the winner of the Best National Student Production Award, Brief Encounters Festival in 1998.

To be continued

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