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900 Women

Directed by Laleh Khadivi

7 p.m. June 11 at Bush Auditorium and 2 p.m. June 14 at Annie Russell Theater

A much different kind of "women behind bars" flick, the documentary "900 Women" chronicles several women serving time at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel, La. Originally built in 1977 to house the growing female population of neighboring Angola, the LCIW appears at first glance to be a peaceful retreat, but director Laleh Khadivi focuses her lens on three very different inmates to deliver a disturbing yet moving portrait of incarcerated women.

Serving a life sentence for second-degree murder and behind bars for 23 years already, Mary Riley has become a strong positive force in the prison. Resigned to the fact that she will probably die at the prison, Riley meets with the warden to petition for a cemetery to be built on the prison grounds so she and other inmates without family can be buried with those they think of as family.

Khadivi's film views Mary and the other women chronicled with a sympathetic yet realistic eye. In fact, Khadivi's lens appears to see things that the women involved don't readily see themselves. Such is the case with Keana, a heroin addict with three children being taken care of by her mother. Although she has sworn to herself that she will give up drugs upon her release in order to finally become a mother, a filmed reunion with her mother and children reveals more about Keana's problems than anyone involved can truly understand.

Narrated by Susan Sarandon, "900 Women" paints a slightly biased yet ultimately heartbreaking, picture of female inmates and the Louisiana correctional system. -- *Brad Haynes*



For more, check the official [Florida Film Festival](#) site.



What do you hope to see at [this year's festival](#)?

All Over The Guy

Directed by Julie Davis

[10 p.m. June 15 at Enzian Theatre](#) and [7 p.m. June 17 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

Dan Bucatinsky wrote and stars as Eli in the romantic comedy "All Over the Guy," directed by Julie Davis. The film shows the on-again, off-again relationship between Eli and Tom (Richard Ruccolo), who were first set up by friends Brett (Adam Goldberg) and Jackie (Sasha Alexander). Both men are products of dysfunctional families - abusive alcoholic parents on the one hand, smothering dual psychotherapists on the other. The arc of "boy meets boy, boy loses boy, will boy get boy back again?" is nicely handled by the script, which often uses a narrative style: Eli confides to Esther (drolly played by Doris Roberts), a receptionist at the Feed-back Clinic; meanwhile Tom confides in Gary, a fellow Alcoholics Anonymous member.

Bucatinsky is a witty writer, and the materials are carefully crafted. Esther and Gary are not mere foils but play intricate roles in the film's heartfelt conclusion. Unfortunately, the story lags during the final third, and well-acted cameos by Lisa Kudrow and Christina Ricci seem inserted mainly to add name recognition and will be missed if you blink.

Like the best actors, Alexander is a careful listener who never gets caught "acting" on screen. The result is a standout performance as Jackie.

At one point Tom tells Jackie that she owes him an evening watching "Lifetime, the cable channel for women and gay men." "All Over the Guy's" plot seems lifted from such a made-for-television film; however, the dialogue and performances keep it from sagging into the disposable art form. For the conclusion, Bucatinsky weaves Tom's career as a special-education teacher and Eli's obsession with language as a newspaper writer into a subtle denouement. -- *R.A. Bell*

The American Astronaut

Directed by Cory McAbee

[5:30 p.m. June 10 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [10 p.m. June 14 at Enzian Theater](#)

To clear a path for fearlessly inventive triumphs like these is the reason we have independent film in the first place. Working under the auspices of the Sundance Feature Film Lab, writer/director/star Cory McAbee has come up with an unforgettable, irresistible stylistic hybrid that's part space opera, part western, part noir thriller

and all hyperintelligent comedy. Did I mention that it's a musical as well? And not just any musical: The songs by McAbee's own band, The Billy Nayer Show, make up the best alterna-credible soundtrack since Six-String Samurai.

Synopsizing "The American Astronaut" is almost beside the point; its unapologetically slim storyline exists solely to spur the copious non sequiturs that roll off the characters' tongues and into our brains, where they swirl around in defiance of easy digestion. Let's just say that the action begins on an asteroid between Jupiter and Mars, and that our hero is a shipping contractor who has to transport a variety of odd cargo through the solar system while being pursued by an insanely childish murderer. What happens after that is a feast of wordplay and costumed melodrama that's without equal (although precedents can be discerned in the late Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's "Guide to the Galaxy" novels, and perhaps even on the TV series "Space Ghost Coast to Coast.") Sealing the deal, it's all shot in gorgeous black-and-white and sublimely lit, the end product a true work of twin-tone pop art.

Watch for the Merchant-Ivory crowd to walk out of this one in bewildered, disgusted packs ... while the rest of us hoot and holler for McAbee to play it again -- *Steve Schneider*

American Saint

Directed by Joseph Castelo

[2:45 p.m. June 9 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9 p.m. June 12 at Enzian Theater](#)

Joe Louis Light has a few teeth between his gaps. A Memphis folk artist, he's just made his debut in a movie, at age 66. For his part in "American Saint," Light needed no training and no actors' union card. He played himself. So too did many other engaging real-life characters whom director Joseph Castelo persuaded to appear in his debut feature, a road movie starring Kevin Corrigan, Vincent Schiavelli and the vintage Checker cab they drive from New York to Los Angeles.

The film's a tribute to the spirit of *On the Road*. Indie mainstay Corrigan plays Miles, a waiter obsessed with auditioning for the part of Jack Kerouac in a new Milos Forman movie. Woody Harrelson, in a brief and particularly offbeat appearance as himself, convinces Miles that the ideal preparation for the audition in LA is a road trip of his own.

The hitch: Miles has neither car nor driver's license. To the rescue comes cab driver Charley Grebbini (Schiavelli). With meter running, Charley's "endless fare," as he calls it, takes him on an eventful cross-country journey.

To the credit of director and cast alike, there's never a hint of collision between the two worlds of fact and fiction in "American Saint." The professional actors blend effortlessly with their real-life surroundings, while the real people appear remarkably unfazed by the fictional road trip unfolding in their midst.

"American Saint" is a low-budget movie that's high on appeal, a convincing, alternately touching and hilarious portrayal of two unlikely travelling companions. Schiavelli conveys a heartfelt mixture of exuberance and pathos. With no scripted dialogue, he and Corrigan riff off each other like a couple of virtuoso jazz musicians, their improvised humor leaving many expensively staged Hollywood gags in the dust. -- *Janey Heller*

The Anniversary Party

Directed by Alan Cumming and Jennifer Jason Leigh

[7 p.m. June 8 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [7 p.m. June 13 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

"The Anniversary Party" is a movie that tackles the important issues - or at least the issues that are important to people who make movies.

In their first foray as a writing/directing team, Cumming and Leigh cast themselves as a West Coast power couple who end their yearlong separation in time for their sixth wedding anniversary. To celebrate, they invite their friends -- about half of whom work in or around the film industry - to an at-home celebration that turns into a group portrait of L.A. malaise.

The root causes of the festering angst? Script deals. Casting woes. Creative impotence. Interior-decorating decisions. Oh, and some bothersome extras like infidelity, family planning, addiction and death.

Cumming and Leigh wrote the film specifically for their conscripted ensemble - which includes Kevin Kline, Parker Posey, Gwyneth Paltrow and Phoebe Cates - and shot it in 19 days at a house in the Hollywood Hills. The result plays like an improvisation exercise in which the only directive was "riff on whatever's less than 5 feet from your nose."

"The Anniversary Party's" tone wanders from overly affectionate softball to overripe gravitas, and its dialogue is often painfully amateurish. Though most of the supporting performances are actually glorified cameos, they're still the main reason to keep watching. Jane Adams, who was such a treat in Todd Solondz's "Happiness," has a standout turn a neurotic actress and mother whose hilarious mood swings are tied to her ingestion of heaping doses of Xanax.

Director of photography John Bailey ("Ordinary People") does an admirable job of making this digital-video quickie look competitive with the celluloid standard. (The flaws of the tape medium are mostly detectable when the camera is in motion.) Yes, you can shoot a professional feature on DV in just under three weeks. Finding a deserving story to shoot is a bit trickier. -- *Steve Schneider*

Big Eden

Directed by Thomas Bezucha

[5:15 p.m. June 9 at Enzian Theater](#) and [7:15 p.m. June 13 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Imagine a rural town seemingly bereft of prejudice - or, specifically in this case, homophobia. The kind of place where good ol' boys sit around the general store encouraging love of any orientation to bloom. Such is the town of Big Eden, Mont., former home of gay artist and New York City transplant Henry Hart (Arye Gross), who returns to care for his ailing grandfather Sam (George Coe).

Also returning to the sleepy mountain town is the recently divorced Dean Stewart (Tim DeKay), Henry's high-school pal and the unrequited love of Henry's life.

Writer/director Thomas Bezucha has molded a far-fetched gay fable, with a strong mixture of the folksy eccentricities found in any "Northern Exposure" episode. Not only does the obviously hetero Dean start making eyes at Henry, but Pike (Eric Schweig), the shy and retiring Native American owner of the town's general store, also begins to take a liking to Henry. All of this is a little hard to swallow considering that, as written by Bezucha, Henry displays very few qualities that would actually attract either of these men in the first place.

As the town schoolmarm Grace, Louise Fletcher turns in a nicely fleshed-out performance, which is undoubtedly one of her best in many years. Schweig is also extremely good, displaying the nervousness and unease of someone discovering love for the first time. But without any true motivation for this love to develop, it's hard to truly believe Bezucha's gay fairy tale, making "Big Eden" little more than a big disappointment. -- *Brad Haynes*

Blue Diner

Directed by Jan Egleson

[7:15 p.m. June 11](#) and [4:30 p.m. June 15 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Another film about the complicated reality confronted by

immigrants is the lush and well-produced "Blue Diner," by director Jan Egleson. Shot in the Latino section of Boston, this bilingual drama features a stunning performance by a beautiful and talented actress named Lisa Vidal, who plays Elena, a young woman caught between two men, two cultures and two versions of herself.

Felled by a minor stroke that causes her to lose the ability to understand or speak Spanish, her native tongue, Elena struggles to understand and overcome her aphasia. In doing so, she must also confront her immigrant status, her boss' unwelcome demands, her mother's secret past and the devotion of a rebellious, artist boyfriend who refuses to make a graceful exit from her life.

Egelson's camera is sure and slick, and his evocation of such subjects as memory, filial love, language and the struggle of the "arrivisté" are movingly captured. In addition, the film features great performances throughout by its Hispanic cast. "Blue Diner" is a grown-up film about believable characters caught in real-life struggles, yet it flows with the graceful rhythms of a lilting Spanish love song. -- *Al Krulick*

Bombay Eunuch

Directed by Alexandra Shiva, Sean MacDonald and Michelle Gucovsky

[1:30 p.m. June 9](#) and [9:15 p.m. June 12 at Bush Auditorium](#)

With the feel of an anthropological study, the documentary "Bombay Eunuch" takes a look at the modern-day "hidra," or eunuchs, of Indian society.

In searching for existing eunuchs, directors Alexandra Shiva, Sean MacDonald and Michelle Gucovsky uncover Meena and her family of self-imposed eunuchs living in Bombay. Combining "cinema verite," archival footage and interviews, the directors find the status of the eunuch markedly different than in years past.

Originally, the eunuch was thought to be a mystical figure, able to bring about blessings or curses. But the eunuchs of today find few options other than begging or prostitution in order to survive. Shiva, in a strangely amateurish voiceover, announces that her intent with the film was originally to explore gender issues but found that the film's true center was the eunuchs' fight for survival.

Most of the eunuchs have illegally received their castration in order to become asexual beings, but in the end they find that to survive they become nothing more than sexual objects, many contracting HIV. Typically wary of a camera, eunuch mother Meena and her girls allow the crew to follow them for the money promised them by the filmmakers. The most striking irony of the film is that, unlike

the eunuchs of the past who found a useful place in Hindu society, the modern-day eunuch exists only to survive and to befriend each other.

"Bombay Eunuch," while never quite achieving the answers the directors set out to find, is still an interesting, voyeuristic peek into the lives of members of a society threatened with extinction. -- *Brad Haynes*

Coffin Joe: The Strange World of José Mojica Marins

Directed by André Barcinski and Ivan Finotti

[Midnight June 16 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9:15 p.m. June 17 at Bush Auditorium](#)

Brazilian horror director José Mojica Marins deserves to be honored with his own documentary bio, if only because his four-decade oeuvre includes films with wonderful titles like "At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul" and "This Night I Will Possess Your Corpse." (It's all about setting goals, people.) But Marins is more than the William Castle of Sao Paulo. As this shocking memoir demonstrates, he's a cultural provocateur whose predilection for ghoulish scenarios has often made him a pariah - perhaps rightly so.

His family, Marins recalls, actually lived in movie theaters while he was growing up, and the connection between those formative experiences and his lifelong passion for film raises expectations that "Coffin Joe" is going to be some sort of real-life "Cinema Paradiso." Don't hold your breath. The story of Marins' career is fraught with alcoholism, poverty, religious heresy, censorship battles and the nasty little habit actors and crew members have of dying while working on his harrowing feature-film projects. (Only one died while on the set, he reminds.)

What's lacking is any substantive discussion of why Marins has chosen to make his creative mark via the scenes of intense torture, cannibalism, coprophilia and bestiality that are sickeningly recapped in "Coffin Joe." Maybe bad-boy exhibitionism of that degree is ultimately inexplicable, but Marins' biographers barely attempt to place it in any personal or psychological context. (Its political ramifications are restricted to the information that Marins ran afoul of Brazil's media watchdogs. Well, duh.) Nor is much time spent uncovering how the director convinced his casts to suffer all manner of punishments - including being buried alive and having their teeth pulled out without anesthesia - for the sake of a good shot. He must have been some kind of salesman. -- *Steve Schneider*

The Devil You Know: Inside The Mind of Todd McFarlane

Directed by Kenton Vaughan

[Midnight June 15 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [2:30 p.m. June 17 at Bush Auditorium](#)

No inner demons here ... just the innocuous story of an admittedly ordinary guy who struck it big. The Canadian Film Board's biography of comic-book and toy magnate Todd McFarlane is a cheaply made video puff piece that shrinks from asking the few tough questions its shallow subject warrants.

The creator of the popular but artistically unremarkable Spawn series, McFarlane doesn't have enough substance to justify a full profile in the first place. His personal background lacks the drama of Robert Crumb's, and his contribution to the art form pales in comparison to that of Marvel Comics maestro Stan Lee. The one potentially fascinating aspect of McFarlane's career - his break from Marvel to become the most successful independent publisher in the business - is strictly a boardroom drama. But *Devil* largely avoids the bottom-line details of that David-and-Goliath struggle, instead slaving over the "controversial" nature of the violent Spawn books (assuming in the process that reactionary pandering equals courageous free speech). And there's a lot of gee-whiz flummery about the entrepreneur's lifelong love of baseball. Phooey.

Some harder-hitting interviews could have fleshed things out a bit; we could use a few more sit-downs with folks who actually don't like Todd. As lionized by his apologists, he's not too different from a fellow we could find seated at any bar in North America: a sports nut with a limited intellect, a half-baked political philosophy and a big mouth. Oh, and a lot of ready cash. -- *Steve Schneider*

Dog Eat Dog

Directed by Moody Shoaibi

[9:30 p.m. June 12 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 15 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, sort of. In first-time director Moody Shoaibi's comical slant on London's underworld, the drug dealers and pornographers are less sinister than the gritty, hard-edged types we've come to expect on movie screens.

From Tiger Aspect, the upstart company that produced "Billy Elliot," "Dog Eat Dog" tells the tale of four "ordinary blokes," each with his own hard-luck story. Together they scheme and work to solve their immediate "cash flow problems," but ultimately they aspire to make it big as club DJs.

Rooster (Mark Tonderai), the unofficial group leader and eternal optimist, is caught between two gangsters when one of them steals porn videos he is supposed to deliver to the other. Chang (Crunski)

desperately wants to be a good father, but he is held to ransom by his daughter's wayward mother.

Then there's CJ (David Oyelowo), recently split from his girlfriend on discovering her "nonsexual" dalliance with an ex-flame. He needs money to give to his mother to keep her from acting in porn films. Last, and perhaps least, is naive and slightly nerdy Jess (Nathan Constance), who gets fired from his hamburger-flipping job when he attempts to steal food. Having won the affections of the girl of his dreams, he proceeds to blow it.

Director Shoabi's multiracial cast turns in fine ensemble performances. Refreshingly, however, the movie's focus is neither racial nor dark and cynical a la Tarantino. Moreover, the ending is an acceptably corny "happy ever after," making for good entertainment with good quality.

-- *Michael Hoover*

Endurance

Directed by George Butler

[2 p.m. June 10 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [7 p.m. June 14 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Narrated by Liam Neeson, the documentary "Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition" chronicles the ill-fated 1914 attempt by explorer Ernest Shackleton and his intrepid crew to reach Antarctica. After being stranded in the floes of the icy Weddell Sea, Shackleton and his 27-member crew fight an amazing two-year battle for survival.

Combining interviews with family members of the crew, original photographs from the expedition taken by photographer Frank Hurley, and video of the region as it appears today, director George Butler has crafted a fascinating look into a band of original Survivors.

The expedition took an unexpected turn for the worse as the HMS Endurance became stuck in the massive layers of ice, forcing the crew to abandon the ship, which would sink shortly thereafter.

The key to making this work is to keep the suspense building, which Butler does admirably. Contemporary reminiscences of those who made the journey by family members and historians also helps to paint a full picture of those seen here only in still photographs. The original music by Michael Small also lends a haunting backdrop. -- *Brad Haynes*

Everybody's Famous!

Directed by Dominique Deruddere

[7:45 p.m. June 9 at Enzian Theater](#) and [4:30 p.m. June 17 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Every few years, the international market coughs up a hit comedy that has all the savvy and sentiment Hollywood has all but forgotten how to deliver. The British did it with "The Full Monty," the Australians did it with "The Castle," and now Belgium gets in on the act with "Everybody's Famous!," a sweet and pithy confection that was one of last year's Academy Award nominees for Best Foreign-Language Film.

With manufactured pop acts all over the American airwaves, the time is right for this story of the chart-climbing Vereecken family. Dad Jean (Josse de Pauw) is a factory worker and incessant dreamer whose musical ability begins and ends with humming self-written melodies into a tape recorder. Daughter Marva is a plump aspiring vocalist who's pushed by her mom and dad to enter amateur singing contests, tests she always fails miserably. (Her dud routines include impersonations of Madonna and Vanessa Paradis.)

When Jean loses his job, his misplaced ambition races into overdrive: He kidnaps a popular young singer (Thekla Reuten), threatening her manager with the loss of his cash cow if Marva isn't given her own shot at the spotlight. A good deal of the fun that follows lies in watching Jean the amateur outlaw be utterly outclassed by a more accomplished fraternity of crooks: the music industry.

De Pauw has one of those soulful, comedically inclined faces that invites instant empathy, and the rest of the cast is likewise well chosen. As befits a story of criminal karaoke, there's nothing particularly innovative about "Everybody's Famous!;" it's essentially "The King of Comedy" with a musical soundtrack and a lighter touch. But who cares? It all works. And there's something delightful about the film's underlying philosophy that show-biz godhead ultimately depends on talent. How quaint the notion. And how much more fun to watch than reality. -- *Steve Schneider*

Falling Like This

Directed by Dani Minnick

[9:30 p.m. June 11](#) and [2:15 p.m. June 15 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

A nice coming-of-age film carried impressively well by its two teen-age leads, "Falling Like This" never overstates its case for what it's like to be 17 and at loose ends. Pretty Katie (Megan Wilson) is the kind of B-student, soccer-playing, middle-class girl who would likely go through the mild rebellion of drinking and class-cutting before ending up at some state university. But she

meets Boyd (Brian Vaughan), who resembles Brad Pitt in his "Thelma and Louise" days and who gets his directionless kicks from stealing cars for joyrides and snatching purses for beer money. Although the police know Boyd by name, he persists in his petty crime, which regularly lands him in juvenile detention, then worse.

Writer/director Dani Minnick thankfully avoids the good-girl-gone-wrong cliché and opts instead for an infinitely more interesting portrait of a girl exhilarated by the experience of love who can't avoid eventually noticing the pointlessness of the rebellion that once excited her. Nobody here is unforgivably mean or precociously wise a la "My So-Called Life." Still, not everything quite rings true - Katie's attitude toward sex seems remarkably easy-going, and Boyd's escalating crime isn't presented convincingly. Furthermore, the several Ani DiFranco songs on the soundtrack are good mood-setters musically but lyrically way off the mark. Minnick excels, though, with dead-on depictions of group scenes involving Katie and Boyd's friends and Boyd's going-nowhere family. Wilson and Vaughan are in almost every scene, and they almost never falter, bringing to life the film's restrained poignancy. -- *Theresa Everline*

Gibtown

Directed by Melissa Shachat

[5 p.m. June 10 at Enzian Theater](#) and [7 p.m. June 12 at Bush Auditorium](#)

How much interest is there in a documentary about another sleepy Florida community? Plenty, as long as the burg in question is Gibsonton, whose "residential show-business zoning" makes it the safe haven for a dying breed of carnival and circus workers. When the outdoor-attraction season comes to a close in December, the still-working road hogs retreat to Gibtown to hobnob with their retired counterparts and work out new routines for the coming year. Thrill rides dot the lawns, trained monkeys frolic al fresco and veteran carnies sit for interviews with director Shachat's crew, remembering a time when their town had a walking giant for a fire chief and "a little midget" heading its police force. That sound you hear is Errol Morris kicking himself in jealous frustration.

"Gibtown" may not be quite as visually stunning as Morris' "Fast, Cheap & Out of Control" or "Mr. Death," but give Shachat credit for coming close. Then add a second dose of admiration for rejecting the scientific detachment that afflicts even Morris' best work (or, more appropriately, the freak-show slumming that drives his Vernon, Florida). She's clearly an advocate for her chosen area of study, less interested in exposing its subglamorous reality than in positing a beautifully idealized vision of it as a greasepainted Brigadoon. In trading dispassionate mundanity for delicately constructed romance, she earns the highest plaudit her subjects

could bestow: She's show people. -- *Steve Schneider*

Haiku Tunnel

Directed by Josh Kornbluth

[9:15 p.m. June 9 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 13 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

Like a latter-day "Modern Times" for the technological age, Josh Kornbluth's brilliant satirical comedy "Haiku Tunnel" depicts the plight of clerical proletarians. Josh, a part-time novelist and full-time temporary worker, is hired by a corporate law firm headed by Bob Shelby, a Mephistophelian tax attorney. The head secretary Marlina D'Amore - played with icy glee by Helen Schumaker (her entrances are accompanied by comical wind-storm sound effect) - introduces Josh to his duties. When the firm decides to make Josh a "perm," the change throws him out of his Zenlike trance, and his productivity disintegrates.

Harry Shearer appears in a great cameo as a sadistic orientation leader. Warren Keith as Shelby will remind you of every corporate type you've ever met whose brain has been ossified by sniffing the thin air of high-rise offices. Brian Keith Russell's brief appearance as a toothpick-chomping security guard is also a funny take on every slave-to-authority rent-a-cop.

Developed for years as a stage monologue, "Haiku Tunnel" was later published in 1996 along with an account of Kornbluth's experience as the child of communist parents. That personal background is evident in this insightful, class-conscious satire, while the theatrical background is clear in the finely tuned storytelling. Kornbluth is a delight in his cross between Buddha, Kafka and Dilbert. Anyone who has ever worked in clerical jobs - indeed, anyone who has ever worked any sort of mind-numbing job so prevalent in our service-based economy - will identify with and thoroughly enjoy this splendid comedy. -- *R.A. Bell*

Hybrid

Directed by Monteith McCollum

[5:30 p.m. June 9 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [6 p.m. June 13 at Enzian Theater](#)

"Hybrid" is a surreal, black-and-white montage about corn and an eccentric Iowa farmer named Milford Beeghly, who virtually disappeared into his own "field of dreams" over the course of a long life spent developing and selling hybrid seed corn to Midwestern farmers. Director Monteith McCollum chronicles the inner landscape of this odd, taciturn, yet brilliant loner - who was always more at home among his stalks than his family - against a bleak and

oppressive landscape of decaying barns and washed-out, barren fields.

"Hybrid" is often compelling and visually satisfying, even as its pictorial strangeness and mournful soundtrack combine to create a singularly depressing mood. But it can also be stupefyingly slow, as the camera sometimes lingers way too long on grainy, still backgrounds or subjects that never move. Judicious pruning might improve its robustness.

The film is particularly delightful when McCollum utilizes stop-action techniques to create dancing, twirling corn plants - sprouting, mating and growing ripe in the fields - or animated farm implements coming together in the tool shed to cavort in nightmarish, terpsichorean frenzy.

This dark, brooding fantasia on man and nature is a film that sometimes plods, but it often plows rich soil, in a manner as unique and mysterious as its subjects. -- *Al Krulick*

Innocence

Directed by Paul Cox

[7:15 p.m. June 15 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 17 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

Proving that great love stories aren't the sole property of the young, Australian director Paul Cox gives the geriatric generation a timeless tale of love and loss with "Innocence."

Nearly 50 years after an intense affair with Claire (Julia Blake), widowed musician Andreas Borg (Charles "Bud" Tingwell) finds that she still lives in the same town and looks her up. After Andreas professes that his love is still there after all these years, the unhappily married Claire sets out on a physical and emotional reunion with Andreas, and at the same time confronts her own unhappiness with her celibate marriage and selfish husband John (Terry Norris).

Cox weaves images of the young lovers with their older counterparts, nicely paralleling the youthful physical appearance of Andreas and Claire with their aged appearance today. Cox is courageous in his presentation of the older couple's sexual relationship, pushing the boundaries of what we may be accustomed to seeing with older actors, but always maintaining good taste.

It would have been easy to discard the character of John, the jilted husband, but Cox brings the story of his pain and his attempts to once again woo his wife as well to the forefront, carving out essentially two separate love stories.

"Innocence" takes a brave look at the need for emotional and physical love, no matter one's age, and proves a memorable glimpse into the lives of characters who are so often merely forgotten. -- *Brad Haynes*

Jump Tomorrow

Directed by Joel Hopkins

[7 p.m. June 9 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [4:30 p.m. June 14 at Enzian Theater](#)

"Smile! You're getting married." That's what George (Tunde Adebimpe) keeps being told in Joel Hopkins' debut feature, "Jump Tomorrow." But far from smiling, George is a timid, obedient Nigerian son who is unsure about his upcoming arranged marriage to a woman he barely knows. Looking like a cross between Buddy Holly and Sidney Poitier, George meets at the airport a voluptuous Latin girl named Alicia (Natalia Verbeke), who spontaneously invites him to a party. Along with Gerard (Hippolyte Girardot), a lovesick Frenchman who has just been dumped by his girlfriend, George attends the party and learns that Alicia and her narcissistic boyfriend Nathan (James Wilby) are heading in the same direction as George's wedding. Now smitten with Alicia, George decides to follow them.

This sets in motion the road-trip scenario that's the heart of "Jump Tomorrow." George tracks Alicia and gets some love lessons from Gerard, who's an amusing cocktail of helpless French romantic and washed-up loner. Hopkins' whimsical, breezy visual style and light touches carry much of the movie, which ends predictably with George and Alicia finally getting together. Most of the scenes are full of bright comic-book props, and the campy soundtrack gives the film a nice surreal gloss. And George's encounters with Alicia's family as well as his Mexican soap-opera fantasies are hysterical.

But Hopkins' script is ultimately too thin and predictable to be completely satisfying. Characters are brought together by a host of unlikely circumstances, and there is never any credible obstacles keeping Alicia and George apart. Nathan is roundly horrible, and George's looming wedding is derailed with just a few words. "Jump Tomorrow" takes the easy way out one too many times; it's a good, quirky comedy but it won't leave you smiling for long. -- *Todd Deery*

Lady in the Box

Directed by Christian J. Otjen

[9:30 p.m. June 10 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [2 p.m. June 14 at Enzian Theater](#)

Now that Christopher Nolan ("Memento," "Following") has all but rewritten the noir rule book, what options remain to anyone else who wishes to till the genre's soil? In the case of the unambitious "Lady in the Box," naught but reworking the worn-out clichés one memorizes on the way to a stable career producing original thrillers for the USA network.

It's the not-so-sad, not-so-suspenseful tale of Jerry Halway (Darren Burrows), a bartender who's being framed for the murder of his kinky paramour, Jill Sweeny (Paige Rowland). The extremely short list of suspects includes a mysterious bar patron named Doug (Mark Sheppard) and Jerry's best friend, Chris Stark (Robert Knepper), with whom he shares a nauseating male-bonding relationship that's earnest enough for immortalization in a light-beer commercial. Jerry is the archetypal cheez-noir hero, rock-stupid when he's being set up but a sudden genius when it comes time to uncover - and just as quickly gloss over - key plot points that wouldn't hold up to our careful scrutiny.

Complicated enough to be annoying but not complicated enough to be clever, "Lady in the Box" has all the customary window dressing. Dead bodies come back to life, dirty money changes hands and a siren struts around in a minidress that would have been laughed off the set of "heartBREAkeRs." (To the tune of some really bad female-fronted rock, no less.) A little more of everything - plot twists, profane threats, cleavage - and we'd have the sublimely self-mocking Wild Things. But all we have is this memento of the way things used to be ... and still are on first-tier cable. -- *Steve Schneider*

Long, Long, Long Night of Love

Directed by Luciano Emmer

[7 p.m. June 16](#) and [2 p.m. June 17 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Dec. 21 (winter equinox), the longest night of the year, is director Luciano Emmer's setting for "Long, Long, Long Night of Love." Emmer returns after 10 years with a film in the tradition of the classic post-World War II Italian cinema of which he was a part.

"Long Night" follows six stories over the course of the evening. Structuring his movie as a collage, Emmer depicts different facets of love in each of the relationships. While editing allows one story to dissolve into another, the tales themselves have only the general connections that people falling in, trying to sustain and on the way out of love have to one another.

In two instances, characters have chance encounters; a couple in a train station, another who finds each other through the bands of a

short-wave radio. In two others, partners are more familiar. A woman on the eve of her wedding sleeps with a friend with whom she works; a totally devoted mistress vacillates between agony, anger and hysteria waiting on her lover in what seems to be a typical pattern. The remaining situations involve a woman driving around in an apparent attempt to escape an untenable state of affairs at home and a shaggy dog pining away outside the home of the pedigree of his attentions.

Although no one actor appears in a dominant role, art-house audiences will recognize Giancarlo Giannini ("Swept Away" and "Seven Beauties"). The rest of the cast leaves their own indelible marks on viewers by virtue of their excellent performances. Visually, the film is rich and the story lines absorbing able to hold your attention without resorting to fast violent action or explicit sex.

A postcard from the past although never nostalgic, "Long, Long, Long Night of Love" nevertheless recalls the filmmaking of an earlier era. -- *Michael Hoover*

Marco Polo: Return to Xanadu

Directed by Ron Merk

[12:15 p.m. June 9 at Enzian Theater](#) and [12:30 p.m. June 16 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

The creators of "Marco Polo: Return to Xanadu" apparently believe, as do many animators, that a children's film must be patronizingly childish. Ironically, this childlike simplicity is the only positive quality of this rambling, laughable cartoon catastrophe.

Created by a diverse team of international artists and making its U.S. debut, this mythical musical tells a disturbingly distorted version of the Marco Polo story. After visiting the mythical Xanadu and befriending Kubla Khan, the famed traveler is given one-half of a golden medallion. The other half falls into the hands of the evil Foo-ling, whose quest to take over the kingdom is eventually thwarted by Polo's grandson, who inherits his grandfather's half of the powerful ornament. Assisting him in reuniting the medallion's two halves and saving Xanadu is the beautiful princess Ming-Yu, the rightful ruler. Also add to the mix a few talking animals, an assortment of bad accents from Cockney to Italian to Chinese and travels through time, and you have a real mess on your hands.

The dialogue, musical numbers and second-rate animation are painful to watch, and adults will have a hard time sitting through them. But even today's sophisticated children, more accustomed to Disney and recent computer-generated films such as "Toy Story 2" and "Shrek," will find the characters shallow and the plot difficult to follow. The project is not lacking in imagination, though, with

everything from medieval dragons to spaceships thrown in to brighten up the boring backgrounds. But the project is so ill-conceived and amateurish, one should heed the words of Marco's seagull friend, Reginald, after one too many plot twists: "This is all very confusing and annoying." -- *Cameron Meier*

Mule Skinner Blues

Directed by Stephen Earnhart

[3:15 p.m. June 9 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [10:15 p.m. June 13 at Enzian Theater](#)

The fascination with trailer-park chic appears to have no expiration date. It's a source of perpetual diversion to the crew of "Mule Skinner Blues," who arrived in Mayport, Fla., to shoot a Jim White music video and were convinced to stay by Beanie Andrew, a local who enlisted their aid in making a movie of his own. His dream project, a horror short entitled "Turnabout Is Fair Play," was designed to employ the talents of all of Andrew's underclass cronies, from a hack heavy-metal guitarist to a former professional costumer who still happened to have more than 100 theatrical get-ups in her home. (She supplied the gorilla garb that, Andrew was somehow convinced, perfectly suited "Turnabout's" swamp-bred monster.)

Keeping director Earnhart and his team out of the story is an unnecessary task whose fulfillment leaves several gaping holes in "Mule Skinner's" narrative. Their hand, however, remains heavy enough to frequently insert impressionistic sequences that show Beanie and company floating across video-generated backgrounds while B-movie music wails away on the soundtrack. Those bits would be downright insulting were they not directly cribbed from Tim Burton's "Ed Wood," yet Earnhart's film owes the rest of its moves to Chris Smith's nearly identical "American Movie," which also submitted the idea of grass-roots filmmaking as an antidote to social inequity and self-abuse (alcoholism, in both cases).

Still, it's easy to forget the film's flaws when we're in the presence of Beanie, a colorful, likable character who comes off like Charles Durning performing a one-man show based on the life of David Allen Coe. Full of determination and team spirit, he's the best advertisement for "Mule Skinner Blues'" self-help philosophy that the only bad movie is the one that goes unmade. That'll be a valuable lesson to remember when the mass-media bandwagon eventually pulls out of the trailer park in search of new worlds to toy with. -- *Steve Schneider*

Mutant Aliens

Directed by Bill Plympton

[9:30 p.m. June 14 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#) and [midnight June 16 at Enzian Theater](#)

Animator Bill Plympton's work is a combination of a crude, sketchy Salvador Dali and a biting political cartoon. His exaggerated and expressive if somewhat simple and jerky drawings are well suited to magazines, short films and MTV clips, and that is precisely where he has had success. Unfortunately, this unique artistry doesn't always translate well into feature-length storytelling, as his new film, "Mutant Aliens," proves.

For a film with such a bold style, it focuses too heavily on its rambling plot. Earl Jensen is an astronaut whose mission is sabotaged by the evil Dr. Frubar, who is more intent on profits than scientific exploration. Jensen floats in space for 20 years plotting his revenge on his nemesis with the help of several cute but deadly alien animals. Apparently Plympton became fascinated with Laika, the real-life cosmonaut dog, and wondered what would happen if animals sent into space mutated and returned to earth for revenge.

Waiting on Earth for Jensen's return is his daughter Josie, who, in true Plympton fashion, divides her time between astronomy and graphic sex with her boyfriend. Most of these elements by themselves would make fascinating shorts, especially Jensen's visit with aliens shaped as human body parts, but when combined, they make a confusing muddle and detract from the political and religious satire.

Plympton's fourth independent feature is a bizarre glimpse into the mind of its creator. Although it is filled with surreal characters, satirical commentary and humorous - if rather gratuitous - sex and violence, it fails because we don't care about what Plympton is trying to say. We appreciate the artist's imagination, but because the story and its symbolism are too confusing, Aliens becomes the last thing you would expect from a film with this title or indeed from any Plympton film: boring. -- *Cameron Meier*

The Natural History of the Chicken

Directed by Mark Lewis

[4 p.m. June 10 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 14 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Director Mark Lewis offers a wildly impish paean to the common barnyard fowl in his hourlong film rhapsody "The Natural History of the Chicken." Part documentary, part fantasy, Lewis' movie celebrates the lives (and deaths) of our feathery farm friends with a mordant wit that is supported by his evocative imagery and crystal-clear cinematography. It will forever change the way you look at chickens. That is, if you looked at them much at all.

Lewis' storytelling is wonderfully entertaining, and his lore of chicken wisdom ranges from the factual to the absurd to the spiritual. Scenes of the commercial chicken industry - where billions of chickens are raised in cages so small they can't spread their wings - are interspersed with light, airy tales like those of Valerie, the frozen Maine hen who was resuscitated with CPR; Oxford, Ohio, the town that was driven crazy by imported roosters; and Mike, the literal "chicken without a head," who lived on to become an international celebrity, long after he was decapitated by his owner's machete.

Lewis' final vignette, concerning a hen named Lisa, is a tour de force of animal theatrics, with its bucolic cast rivaling the movie "Babe" in humanlike and sympathetic portrayals. As the flighty Florida woman who diapers and blow-dries her pet bantam might say, "May you all have the same joy I had in knowing a chicken!" --
Al Krulick

The Photographer

Directed by Jeremy Stein

[9:30 p.m. June 10 at Enzian Theater](#) and [4:30 p.m. June 13 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Hip, edgy photographer Max (Reg Rogers) and his newly acquired collection of oddball friends are on a quest in "The Photographer," Jeremy Stein's offbeat if rather obvious directorial debut. Call it a flawed cross between "The Wizard of Oz" and Martin Scorsese's "After Hours."

How do we know that this isn't just another wild night on the town in lower Manhattan? Because the fellow travelers keep telling us so, just in case it's not apparent. "We're on a journey," overeager Romeo (Rob Campbell), a self-described aspiring writer, says to Mira (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a would-be psychic.

Max, an art-world sensation since moving to New York from Pennsylvania a year earlier and landing a buzzed-about gallery showing of his Diane Arbus-influenced street portraits, comes down with a case of photographer's block, if you will, when he finds and then loses a package of 10 prize-worthy prints. His mission, as assigned by his social-climbing scenester girlfriend (Kristen Wilson), is to recover the treasure, present the work as his own and stage a return to glory.

The photographer is helped by Romeo, Mira, yuppie party guy Paul (Chris Bauer) and the mysterious homeless woman Violet (Mary Alice), over the course of a long, strange trip, occasionally interrupted by sudden, blinding flashes, observable only to our protagonist. By the time of the journey's conclusion, Max has

rediscovered his talent, along with his old girlfriend (Tina Holmes), Romeo has found a ribbon for his typewriter and Mira has gained confidence in her own abilities.

It's a cute if less-than-engrossing piece of work, livened by some impressively artful cinematography, including a variety of absorbing black-and-white passages. Several familiar faces, including John Heard, Anthony Michael Hall and Marisa Berenson, join the core group of lesser-known actors. -- *Philip Booth*

Prisoners in Paradise

Directed by Camilla Calamandrei

[6 p.m. June 10 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [3:30 p.m. June 13 at Enzian Theater](#)

Just when you thought that World War II was all bombing raids and Ben Affleck's toothy grin, along comes "Prisoners in Paradise." This low-fi, one-hour documentary by Camilla Calamandrei focuses on the 51,000 Italians taken as prisoners of war by America in 1942. Mixing interviews with a little vintage newsreel footage, Prisoners introduces us to a dozen or so living POWs whose broken-English anecdotes describe the more-than-humane treatment they had at American camps. The prisoners ate well, were given packs of cigarettes, painted, formed bands and even caroused with local Italian-American girls (many who would become wives after the war) at scheduled dances. About 90 percent of the prisoners even agreed to sign "collaboration" papers in which they switched to the American side and helped with building projects, in exchange for even greater freedom. "You love your country, but America gave me everything," says Antonio Mineno, one of the many charming interviewees who expresses his undying gratitude for his adopted country.

Although Calamandrei's reliance on these Italians' animated recollections puts a needed human face on the war, it also severely limits the movie's scope. "Prisoners" provides little larger context for the Italian POWs condition. Scant footage or explication of the war is offered, and there is only glancing reference to how American GIs felt about the luxuries that the Italians were afforded. Interviews with non-Italians are sparse and make "Prisoners" seem less like an objective documentary and more like home movie that tells only one side of the story. How did Americans across the country feel about these POWs? Why were the Italians treated so well? How did we treat POWs from other nations? By answering these questions, Calamandrei could have transformed "Prisoners" from an entertaining historical story to a full documentary worthy of its subject matter. -- *Todd Deery*

Protection

Directed by Bruce Spangler

[7 p.m. June 11 at Enzian Theater](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 16 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

Pity poor Jane (Nancy Sivak), a Canadian social worker at the end of her sympathetic rope. After devoting a large chunk of her life to aiding at-risk children, she's undergoing a crisis of confidence. Jane's latest case provides ample opportunity for self-doubt: If she separates a heroin-addicted mother named Betty (Jillian Fargey) from her son and daughter, the children's safety will almost certainly be improved a thousandfold. Removal appears all the more crucial in light of the emerging possibility that Betty's live-in boyfriend, Joe (William MacDonald), has further poisoned the household with sexual abuse. But misgivings are swirling in Jane's mind, too - like the consequences such drastic action will have for the already fragile Betty, and the knowledge that "redress" still means breaking up a family, no matter how dysfunctional.

Director/writer Spangler spent more than five years as a child-protection social worker with the Ministry of Children and Families in British Columbia, and the relaying of that firsthand knowledge is the best thing about "Protection." From Jane's emotional exhaustion to Joe's born-loser indignation, every motivation feels accurate and true. But Spangler hasn't indulged himself far enough to bestow an adequate set of traits on any individual character - even Jane, his presumed doppelganger. And he's so determined to present domestic upheaval as morally ambiguous that he neglects to create a proper third act.

Neither is he done any favors by Brian Johnson's cinematography, which alternates between the jerky clichés of hand-held camerawork and placid shots of characters sitting behind the wheels of their cars a la "The Sweet Hereafter." The cumulative effect is one of Atom Egoyan directing an episode of "NYPD Blue." -- *Steve Schneider*

Rhythm and Bayous: A Road Map to Louisiana Music

Directed by Robert Mugge

[9:15 p.m. June 15](#) and [4:45 p.m. at Bush Auditorium](#)

Director Robert Mugge's offers up a helping of gumbo with his latest documentary "Rhythm and Bayous: A Road Map to Louisiana Music." Called "the king" of the music documentary by the *L.A. Weekly*, Mugge has previously aimed his camera at blues, bluegrass, jazz and reggae musicians, among others. His new film, originally intended as a documentary of a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame bus tour, became an exploration of the roots of Louisiana music from Cajun and Creole to "swamp pop" and zydeco.

Featured performers include Rosie Ledet, Claude King, La Famille Viator, Easter Rock Church, Hackberry Ramblers (with two members from the original 1933 outfit), Dale Hawkins, Jamabalaya Cajun Band, Ever Ready Gospel Singers and Henry Butler. At one hour and 47 minutes, "Rhythm and Bayous" is outstanding for those into the music but may be hard going anyone looking for a wider take on the state and Louisiana culture. -- *Michael Hoover*

The Road Home

Directed by Zhang Yimou

[5 p.m. June 9 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [7 p.m. June 15 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

There may be better films at this year's festival, but none as beautiful as "The Road Home." The beauty of this Chinese love story lies not so much in its landscapes or the beauty of Zhang Ziyi - the star of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," in her film debut - but in its poetic narrative and emotional maturity.

Businessman Yusheng returns to his village upon the death of his father to find his mother, Dj (Ziyi), distraught and insisting upon a traditional burial. She was fiercely devoted to her husband, the village teacher for 40 years, and wants his casket to be carried on foot for miles to the burial site. The mayor and the villagers at first believe this request to be both outlandish and impractical. But through a narrative flashback of his mother's early life, he convinces them of the deep, almost destructive love and devotion she has for her husband.

Dj makes more sacrifices for her husband and loves more deeply than one would think possible. Her time apart from her husband during her early years was spent standing by the road waiting for the school teacher's return. To her it was his road home, both physically and emotionally. So when her dream of a traditional burial procession for him is realized, her life journey is complete.

Director Zhang Yimou ("Raise the Red Lantern") and writer Bao Shi paint the screen with the colors of love, joy and suffering. And of course it doesn't hurt that they have the stunning Ziyi as part of their palette, too. The narrative showing Dj's young life is done in color and succeeds so well partially because of the contrast with the modern sequences, which are in somber black-and-white. The subtitles are unfortunately difficult to read at times, but Ziyi's face, the landscapes and the music speak more loudly than any language could. -- *Cameron Meier*

Roof to Roof

Directed by Ara Corbett

[9:30 p.m. June 9 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [7 p.m. June 12 at Enzian Theater](#)

"Roof to Roof," the directorial debut of filmmaker Ara Corbett, is the story of Zaven, a middle-age Armenian widower who, like many immigrants, is trapped inside a culture he neither understands nor can assimilate into. Stuck in a mechanic's job because of his inability to absorb English, he nonetheless struggles to give his 7-year-old daughter as much of the American dream as he can afford.

A lot of the film moves slowly and deliberately, with perhaps a little too much time devoted to the everyday life of Zaven's extended family and the Armenian émigré community. The film is strongest when showing the pain of a proud man who has lost his former world and knows he will only rise so far in the new one. Longing for the old country and times gone by, Zaven's story is a familiar and profound one, shared by generations of families struggling to improve their lives and fortunes.

Inexplicably, the film ends abruptly, before Corbett's plot has a chance to resolve itself. Maybe the director ran out of money or ideas, or both, or else has made an unaccountable decision to leave the audience hanging. Either way, the film's sudden ending cheats us of our chance to witness Zaven's ultimate victory or ignoble failure. -- *Al Krulick*

Satan Was a Lady

Directed by Doris Wishman

[Midnight June 15 at Enzian Theater](#) and [10 p.m. June 16 at Bush Auditorium](#)

John Waters is said to be a big fan of cult director Doris Wishman, the "queen of exploitation cinema." One look at "Satan Was a Lady" - her first cinematic outing in some 18 years - offers up a multitude of reasons why.

Start with a frequently naked heroine (Honey Lauren) who works as a dominatrix hooker. Add her perpetually snarling live-in boyfriend (New Orleans recording artist Glyn Styler), who shows his soft side by performing plaintive guitar ballads while decked out in a black wig Roy Orbison wouldn't have touched on a dare. Throw in a retinue of equally unbelievable underworld characters, then tie them all together with a meandering plot that has Lauren's Cleo blackmailing a well-to-do client - twice.

I never thought sex, murder and disfigurement could seem so unspectacular, but "Satan's" lugubrious pacing does the job. Some films are described as thrill rides; this one is a spin on a very slow set of bumper cars, in which our lateral progress from one

disconnected episode to the next is marked by mild and uniform jostling. Though the story adds up to a laundry list of lurid goings-on, almost nothing of consequence appears to be happening at any given moment.

The sound levels are abominable. Characters recite autobiographical monologues at the drop of a hat. The through line of Cleo's motivation is impossible to follow for more than a few minutes at a time. Some scenes appear to have been edited with a Salad Shooter. What more could a midnight audience want? -- *Steve Schneider*

Seeking Heat

Directed by Jim Larsen

[7:15 p.m. June 10 at Enzian Theater](#)

Director Jim Larsen's documentary "Seeking Heat" is an intimate look at David Byrne's Luaka Bop record label. Marking the 10th anniversary of the company, this 47-minute jaunt provides viewers with the former Talking Heads' personal motivation for promoting a mixture of Latin, avant-garde and "indie pop" music to as wide an audience as possible. Luaka Bop is clearly a labor of love for Byrne and his cohorts, who favor musical quality over commercial success.

Much of the film is comprised of enthusiastic commentary by charismatic and colorful labelmates, including Zap Mama, Los Amigos Invisibles, Susana Baca, Bloque and King Chango. All express admiration for Byrne's efforts in making their music available.

Quick-paced and lively, "Seeking Heat" is both optimistic and upbeat, making for enjoyable and entertaining viewing. -- *Michael Hoover*

A Skin Too Few: The Days of Nick Drake

Directed by Jeroen Berkvens

[7:15 p.m. June 10 at Enzian Theater](#)

English singer-songwriter Nick Drake led a melancholy, isolated existence, and his haunting ethereal ballads reflected that isolation. "A Skin Too Few: The Days of Nick Drake" successfully captures his melancholy in a dreamlike style by using floating landscapes, waves of music and the simple yet poignant words of those who knew him to create a tapestry of the once-forgotten musician.

Instead of telling the story of Drake's life, this short documentary re-creates his moods by making us feel his spirit. Drake made only three albums, was never a big success and died unappreciated and alone from an overdose of antidepressants at the age of 26. Only

recently have audiences discovered his unearthly folk melodies and crisp classical guitar. "Five Leaves Left," his first album, established his reputation as a romantic songwriter of conscience by fusing contemplative lyrics of lost youth and alienation with a folklike Pink Floyd sound, a couple of years before Drake's own producer, Joe Boyd, brought fame to that British band.

Director Jeroen Berkvens leaves much of Drake's story untold, partially because the musician was such a mystery, confiding in few and spending most of his life, apart from his years at Cambridge, living quietly in his parents' house. His sister and a few of his fellow musicians try their best to shed light on his life, but in the end, it's his music and the serene scenes of the England he grew up in that do the storytelling. Despite being a bit flat at times and not taking us through all the highs and lows Drake experienced, the film succeeds by bringing us close to its subject, leaving us wanting more and not being afraid to be subtle. -- *Cameron Meier*

Southern Comfort

Directed by Kate Davis

[7:30 p.m. June 9 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [2 p.m. June 15 at Enzian Theater](#)

There are few movies that can truly alter one's understanding of a particular societal issue, and *Southern Comfort* is one of them. This documentary captures on tape and with a fluid camera the world of transsexuals, specifically the final year in the life of Robert, a female-to-male transsexual dying of cancer.

Writer/director Kate Davis and Q-Ball Productions focus on Robert and his small group of friends in rural Georgia as they interact not so much with the society that has shunned them but with each other.

We learn about their past from their friends and old photos but mostly through their everyday activities. Davis is content to simply let the tape roll, eavesdropping on the unique lifestyle of this group.

"We lose a lot of things," Lola, a male-to-female transsexual, says. "We lose jobs, we lose friends, we lose family." Yet they all felt compelled to change their gender to achieve sexual, emotional and even spiritual satisfaction at the risk of hurting those close to them.

"*Southern Comfort*" is the title of an annual convention that's "the cotillion of the trans community," as Robert describes it. "It's the coming-out party" for transsexuals, and much of the film is spent preparing for this event and the emotional speech Robert is to deliver. It's both the climax of the movie and of a man's life.

This slow-paced, slice-of-life picture works because it is just that - a quiet glimpse into a part of society that one rarely sees. Although some of the scenes are flat and uninspired at times, and Davis shies away from fully exposing the sexual and psychological trauma associated with this life change, the documentary is worth seeing simply for its educational and social value. -- *Cameron Meier*

The Sweetest Sound

Directed by Alan Berliner

[8:15 p.m. June 10 at Bush Auditorium](#) and [4:30 p.m. June 15 at Enzian Theater](#)

Director Berliner is not the Alain Berliner who helmed the 1997 cross-dressing childhood memoir "Ma Vie en Rose." Nor is he a Seattle social worker, nor a Los Angeles photographer. We know this because he tells us so at the outset of "The Sweetest Sound," an unabashedly egocentric documentary in which our introspective narrator attempts to locate everyone in the world who shares his name. In the process, he treats us to a clever reflection on the significance of personal nomenclature in general. We're taken into the inner circle of society of Lindas and to a baseball game in which every player is named John Smith. There are also discussions of gender issues, religious customs and the fluctuating popularity of baby names.

It doesn't sound like the most visually engaging subject for a doc, but Berliner finds some interesting ways to illustrate identity, as with repeated shots of computer icons and monikers scratched into asphalt. The film's alleged centerpiece - the dinner party attended by 13 Alan Berliners - is sadly anticlimactic; one gets the feeling that the resentment the director jokingly admits to harboring toward his namesakes runs a bit deeper than mere playfulness. "Are they better Alan Berliners than I am?" he frets, then denies them the screen time that would be needed to formulate an answer. But at least the entire project neatly circumvents the common allegation that documentary filmmakers use others as mere props by which to tell their own personal stories. Is this a picture about its creator? Well, sure. That's the name of the game. -- *Steve Schneider*

Things Behind the Sun

Directed by Allison Anders

[7 p.m. June 14 at Enzian Theater](#) and [7 p.m. June 16 at Loew's Universal Cineplex](#)

Its family history alone warrants the inclusion of "Things Behind the Sun" in the Florida Film Festival. Director Anders' confessional drama was shot last June in the Sunshine State, allowing co-star Rosanna Arquette to visit the 2000 festival as a special guest. The

movie's supporting players include "Blair Witch Project" alum Joshua Leonard, and if you don't blink, you might spot Orlando stage actress Marty Stonerock, who has a one-line cameo as a recovering alcoholic.

Thankfully, there's more to these "Things" than home-team trivia. Anders is our experienced guide into the interconnected worlds of a troubled singer/songwriter (Kim Dickens) and a sympathetic journalist (Gabriel Mann) - a pair linked not only by their mutual passion for music but by the writer's personal knowledge of the rocker's childhood rape. The story reportedly has an autobiographical component, and Anders' zeal to impart the true nature of sexual assault occasionally overtakes her narrative sense. Yet she addresses her subject honestly and evenhandedly (indiscriminate male-bashing is assiduously avoided), finding eager support from a capable cast.

Which is not to say that everyone is in the right movie. Mann's boyish Owen Richardson works for Vinyl Fetish, a zine that's staffed by the world's handsomest, most clean-cut assortment of riff addicts (and edited by Arquette's slightly more bohemian Pete, who instead comes off like a refugee from "The Rose"). The surface incongruities that pervade "Things" are in direct contrast to the unblinking eye with which it views rape and its emotional aftermath. Dickens' Sherry McGrate remains a rough and complex presence, believable in her boozy denial and relievedly plain when compared to the leading-lady standard. She's subjected to many on-screen indignities, but never that of being objectified by her own story. -- *Steve Schneider*

Thomas in Love

Directed by Pierre-Paul Renders

[9:15 p.m. June 11 at Enzian Theater](#) and [5 p.m. June 16 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

Sometime in the not-too-distant future, the personal-services industries will have progressed to the point that an acrophobic will be able to lead a fairly comfortable life without ever having to leave his home. Or so the Belgian/French co-production "Thomas in Love" would have us believe.

Director Renders gives us Thomas Thomas, a fearful shut-in who has transferred his life's savings to his insurance company in exchange for 'round-the-clock care. Thomas receives therapy over the "visiophone," contracts out for repairmen to fix his vacuum-cleaner robot and ventures into cyberspace for a series of fantastical sexual encounters. His therapist's idea that he should expand his social sphere a bit - by striking up a relationship with a real, live girl, perhaps - poses the greatest challenge to Thomas' hermetic

state of being.

Early in the film, the realization sets in that we're never going to see Thomas. The entire tale is told from his outward-looking perspective, in the form of a succession of incoming visiophone images and onscreen menus that put us squarely in the seat of the high-tech spectator. For all intents and purposes, we are him.

The equation of movie-watching with helpless voyeurism is hardly an original suggestion (though it's fresher than naming your protagonist Thomas Thomas, which apparently struck Renders as science-fictiony but instead smacks of an '80s Britpop outfit.) Given its confluence of fish-eye camera angles and get-outdoors message, it's perhaps unavoidable that "Thomas in Love" often looks like a Super Bowl Sunday commercial for the Sierra Club. What's surprising is how easy it is to sit still for. That we can watch a full 92 minutes of point-of-view shots without tearing our hair out is a sure sign that we're well on our way to the insular era Renders foresees. Point to him. -- *Steve Schneider*

Together

Directed by Lukas Moodysson

[3:15 p.m. June 10](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 17 at Enzian](#)

Every character in "Together" seems to be either coming apart, coming of age or coming out of the closet. Although the Swedish film's emotional scenes are starkly real and well acted, there's just a bit too much going on in the socialist commune the characters share to create a single coherent story.

Goran (Gustaf Hammarsten), the head of the commune, is struggling with the complications of an open relationship with his girlfriend while emotionally supporting his sister, Elisabeth (Lisa Lindgren), who has just moved in with her two kids to escape an abusive marriage. Others in the commune are also dealing with shattered relationships and sexual confusion. Surprisingly, the children in the group are more mature than the adults, as they come to grips with the breakdown of their families and their feelings for the opposite gender. It's quite an ironic predicament for a family with the surname Together.

Director Lukas Moodysson creates a topsy-turvy, sexually charged environment but ultimately can't fuse together the separate characters' lives into a captivating tale. He tries too hard to create realism and moves from one event to the next with unseemly edits, thereby lessening the emotional impact that the film could have had with a stronger story and more mature direction. -- *Cameron Meier*

The Trouble With Lou

Directed by Gregor

[11:30 p.m. June 9 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9:30 p.m. at Bush Auditorium](#)

The idea that self-pleasure is a societal scourge "more seriouser than the jitterbug" is the satirical center of "The Trouble With Lou," a cautionary tale presented in the form of a 1950s classroom training film. Our hero, Lou Romano (played by an actor of the same name), is a backward teen-ager trying to make a belated splash in the dating pool. His mother and father are eager for their son to arrive at manhood by way of the malt shop, but Lou hides a terrible secret that may prevent him from ever fully integrating into polite company: He's a chronic masturbator.

Naturally, the 85-minute film is a protracted series of sophomoric beat-off gags, both scripted and visual. Fulfilling that limited ambition should be the impetus for a short subject, not a feature, but writers Teddy Newton and Gregor are so dedicated to exhuming every punch line ever heard in a locker room that we can't help but credit them for their thoroughness. They also stave off monotony with a few well-timed departures from the scatological - like endowing some characters with exaggerated and/or unlikely ethnicities that aren't apparent until they open their mouths.

Katheryn Cain gives a comedically rich performance as Margaret, the sweet, unsuspecting blonde who is the girl most likely to finally tear Lou away from ... well, from himself. Cain's presence is a major reason why the film is far funnier on the screen than it might sound on paper. Give her a hand. Or don't. -- *Steve Schneider*

The Uncles

Directed by Jim Allodi

[7:30 p.m. June 10 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [9:30 p.m. June 16 at Enzian Theater](#)

Two brothers plot to find a man to impregnate their mentally ill sister so she will have a baby of her own and stop kidnapping other women's children. Although it sounds like an episode from a daytime talk show, "The Uncles" is actually a touching and slightly askew, if disjointed, story of sibling relationships, marital infidelity and mental illness.

Creator Jim Allodi uses a documentary-style camera to create a unique comedy/drama of betrayal and alienation from society. John (Chris Owens) and Marco (Kelly Harms) are the two brothers constantly saving Celia (Tara Rosling) from the police following her kidnapping expeditions. Thirty years old, still living at home and shunned by the world, all Celia knows is that she wants a baby

of her own, and nothing will stop her in her quest. Meanwhile, John has complications of his own, as he is sleeping with the wife of his employer's son. So the impregnation plot is hatched.

Sagging in the middle and struggling to find its direction, the film is kept on its feet by the twists and turns in the story and the touching performance of Rosling. Allodi displays the deeply emotional moments in a quiet, contemplative manner, with enough humor to keep the mood light. Though not a must-see at this year's film festival, this independent Canadian project is a quirky, original film with a charm all its own. -- *Cameron Meier*

The Vertical Ray of the Sun

Directed by Tran Anh Hung

[9:30 p.m. June 16 at Annie Russell Theater](#) and [7 p.m. June 17 at Enzian Theater](#)

Thirty-eight-year-old, Vietnamese-born Tran Anh Hung hit the international film scene in 1993 with the much-praised, slow-paced "Scent of Green Papaya," a Cannes Film Festival award-winner that year. Tran's most recent film, "The Vertical Ray of the Sun," filmed in present-day Hanoi, is a lyrical enigma that peers into the lives of three sisters, and Tran delivers a visually stunning study of "what if" moments in their lives.

Suong (Nguyen Nhu Quynh), the eldest sister, runs a small cafe, while her photographer husband is often called away by his work. Khan (Le Khanh), who's just discovered she's pregnant, is married to a novelist suffering from writer's block. The youngest, Lien (Tran Nu Yen Khe, a Tran regular), shares more than an apartment with their brother (Ngo Quanq Hai), and the two are equivocally and complexly linked.

They gather at Suong's cafe to pay respects to their deceased mother on the anniversary of her death. They reminisce, cajole, talk about sex and love, and reveal their secrets. However, all is not as it appears. Talk of a mysterious man from their mother's past casts shadows upon the idealized memories they have of their parents' marriage. Over a month's time, ending with the anniversary of their father's death, aspects of their mother's secret reappear.

Tran's cinematographer, Mark Lee (Wong Kar-wai's "In the Mood for Love"), uses light wonderfully to shape color and form. A pan of a wall reveals character, a woman washing vegetables is erotically charged, and a precisely angled close-up of the three sisters becomes an allegory of life. If you're the kind of movie-watcher who likes to wallow in what German filmmaker Wim Wenders once referred to as the "disease of images," this movie is a giddily sensual experience. Ironically, while the title suggests directness,

Tran's method is not only indirect but builds languidly to tease out the last drop of quiet beauty and ambiguity. -- *Lisa Stokes*

Wendigo

Directed by Larry Fessenden

[10 p.m. June 9 at Enzian Theater](#) and [9:45 p.m. June 13 at Annie Russell Theater](#)

While on a weekend vacation to a house in the snowy, wooded country, a family of New Yorkers endure the attacks of a mysterious outside force. Is it merely one of the local deer hunters, of whom they've already run afoul? Or is their pursuer actually the Wendigo, a Native American spirit whose anger is carried aloft on the frosty winds?

"A lot of people make up stories to make sense of the world," daddy George (Jake Weber) reassures his son, Miles (Erik Per Sullivan). But it's hard to make sense of the bouillabaisse of signifiers writer/director Fessenden serves up. At various times, he appears to submit his latest film as a story of man vs. nature; femininity vs. masculinity; Darwinism vs. compassion; or metropolitan sophistication vs. rural wisdom. All are dallied with, yet none really takes hold as the film's overriding conflict.

The pop-cultural imagery Fessenden inserts into the action - specifically the archetypal, stoic Injun of kids' toys and product logos - hints at yet another theme: the deconstruction of childhood icons. If that's his game, he played it better in "Habit" (1997), in which the belief in vampires was posited as a potential escape from adult intellectual responsibilities. Open to interpretation but clearly focused, that film boasted a keen perception to which this one merely pretends.

Despite "Wendigo's" obvious surface similarities to "The Shining" and "Deliverance," the excellent cast keeps the character development feeling fresh. (Family matriarch Kim is played by Patricia Clarkson, also available to the Florida Film Festival's audience in "Falling Like This.") And Fessenden's visual intelligence hasn't failed him: His stuttering camera moves and time-lapse shots of wintry skies wring maximum creeps out of the sparse narrative. He's made a slick, skillful little horror film here. But he's capable of so much more. -- *Steve Schneider*

The Zeros

Directed by John Ryman

[9:15 p.m. June 11](#) and [7:15 p.m. June 17 at Bush Auditorium](#)

An adorably off-center comedy that's dark but not exactly black, "The Zeros" is set in the near future - a time when, as one of the

good, deadpan one-liners tells us, psychic healings are covered by HMOs. Joe (Mackenzie Astin) is dying from some unnamed disease. (Be warned: There's a good dose of unexplained premises early on in "The Zeros.") Joe decides to set off to find what amounts to a fleeting memory of innocent teen-age happiness in the form of a woman named Joyce.

Writer/director John Ryman counteracts the overwhelming sentimentality of this quest by giving Joe's every encounter a twist of either the absurd or the quirky. For example, Joe finds his gentle road buddy Seth (John Ales) at a doomsday-cult camp in the New Mexico desert, and at one point the two of them pick up a ventriloquist hitchhiker, which leads to a hilarious scene of, well, doll-icide.

Ryman nudges the weirdness but never overplays it, and some of the lighthanded background touches are the best; for instance, at a New Orleans rollerskate strip club, there's a guy singing karaoke to, of all things, the '70s self-esteem disco anthem "I Will Survive." Despite Ryman's skewed sensibility, he ties up everything neatly - really, too much so - thus revealing an underlying by-the-book, conservative quality about the whole enterprise. But it's all thoroughly fun - an eccentric road movie with the specter of death ever present. -- *Theresa Everline*