

Three Rivers Film Festival reviews

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Susan Dynner

Collin Abrahall of the punk band GBH.

Here is a sampling of movies showing during the first week of the Three Rivers Film Festival, which opens Friday:

'PUNK'S NOT DEAD'



Susan Dynner spends more than an hour and a half in this documentary poring over a polemic that Ian MacKaye clears up in the first minute.

Is punk dead?

"People who say punk's dead, it's such a selfish concept, because it's as if they own the definition of punk rock. That's just nonsense," says the frontman for Fugazi and Minor Threat. "Punk is undefinable so therefore it can never be dead. You can't kill something that doesn't truly have like a single definition."

So there. Does that mean that Good Charlotte is as punk as the Subhumans? I think we know the answer to that one.

The inevitable conclusion doesn't make "Punk's Not Dead" any less fun to watch. It's a colorful parade of mall punk posers vying for credibility, middle-aged punks hanging on for dear life and McKaye-Henry Rollins types who have graduated to grizzled scholars.

Dynner rolls through the history of punk, starting with the media hysteria in the mid-to-late '70s over an anti-authoritarian DIY culture spawned by pioneers like the Ramones and Sex Pistols. Along with the household names, "Punk's Not Dead" takes us in the trenches with DOA, Flipper, the Subhumans and other more raw punk specimens.

Although the stake was never driven through that first wave, we're reminded how the "second wave" -- with Bad Religion, Operation Ivy, Rancid, Green Day -- resulted in the malling of punk with the Warped Tour and Hot Topic.

First-wavers like Captain Sensible from the Damned and Dick Lucas from the Subhumans, still in action, slag on them while the likes of Billy Joe Armstrong and Dexter Holland try to justify a pop-punk sensibility. Somewhere in the middle of that is Pittsburgh's Anti-Flag, who get an extended look as the politically noble savages.

To prove the thesis, the film is smart enough to venture away from the Good Charlottes of the world and into basements and punk coops where bands like Narcoplectic Youth, Dek and The Voids rage like their forebears, and to far places like Iceland, Indonesia, Israel and New Zealand, where a punk subculture still festers.

After seeing teen punks in basements and old-timers like Adicts still going, you can rest assured that punk will be there with the cockroach after the apocalypse.

-- *Scott Mervis, Post-Gazette pop music critic*

'TERROR'S ADVOCATE'



Europhiles will be fascinated by the legal files of Jacques Verges, the enigmatic French attorney under Barbet Schroeder's documentary microscope in "Terror's Advocate." Verges' lurid list of clients includes Algerian terrorists, Congo secessionists, Holocaust deniers, Carlos "The Jackal" and Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie.

Fame and fortune derives from such appalling defendants. Verges is a man of ambiguous convictions -- but mostly acquittals. He got Algerian "freedom fighters" out of jail and married one of them. He successfully defended some of those charged in the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre.

Schroeder is the refined, nuanced, Parisian creative force behind "Reversal of Fortune," "Idi Amin Dada" and "Our Lady of the Assassins," among other fine fiction films and docs. Indeed, he subscribes to the theory that "every great film is a documentary."

This riveting character study, with its mix of talking heads and archival footage, lets Verges and his voyage from idealism to cynicism speak for themselves. It's hard to get past the smug smirk and glib dismissal of his clients' crimes but easy to like him on his own roguish level. Asked if he would have defended Hitler, Verges replies: "I'd even defend Bush -- but he would have to plead guilty."

He is, in the final analysis, loathsome but strangely charismatic, and "Terror's Advocate" is a disturbing, real-life international political thriller.

-- *Barry Paris, Post-Gazette film critic*

'STRANGE GIRLS'



"Don't yinz talk?" a neighbor taunts the weird twins who are renting an apartment in Pittsburgh's Polish Hill. As a matter of fact, they do not -- at least to outsiders.

And Virginia and Georgia Gruczechy are out, just released from the Mayfield Psychiatric Institute after decades of silence and observation. As with many movies about adult twins -- "Dead Ringer" (Bette Davis times two), "Dead Ringers" (Jeremy Irons, doing double duty) and "The Krays" (brothers Gary and Martin Kemp), these twins share a disturbing bond that's threatened by strangers and creeping jealousy.

Director-writer Rona Mark, who filmed in Western Pennsylvania, managed to stretch \$125,000 in an astonishing way; the picture looks like it cost far more. She has a way with horror -- "Strange Girls" is no "Saw IV" but there are a couple of grisly killings -- and very dark humor.

The twins, chillingly played by identical Angela and Jordana Berliner, lust after Viggo Mortensen but look nearby for a bedmate, enjoy do-it-yourself projects and fancy themselves writers. When a security guard raises some suspicions about them, a policeman says, "Just because you've got white hair doesn't make you Matlock."

No, but it could make him right.

-- *Barbara Vancheri, Post-Gazette movie editor*

'ELOQUENT NUDE'



Ian McCluskey should be applauded -- and chastised -- for the realistic re-enactments he uses in this portrait of photographer Edward Weston and his onetime wife, muse and model.

Although a corner of your brain is wondering if Weston regularly filmed their photo sessions (and how he pulled off that trick), another buys what McCluskey presents as he tells the story of the photographer who captured Charis Wilson clothed and, more famously, nude.

She curled nakedly into shapes that became as famous as Weston's peppers and sea shells, tumbled down the sand dunes in 1936 and chronicled his Guggenheim Fellowship travels on her manual typewriter. The couple met in 1934, married five years later and shared their last photo session in 1945, before divorcing. Weston, who developed Parkinson's disease, died on New Year's morning 1958.

"Eloquent Nude" tells their story using Wilson herself (now in her early 90s), along with scholars, photographs and re-enactments with lookalikes. McCluskey often lets the experts suggest what Wilson was feeling, rather than allowing her to speak for herself, and his focus is so tight that he never adequately explores what being Weston's model meant for all those years since.

He's a bit too worshipful at times, and I wish he had made the use of reenactments clearer.

-- *Vancheri*

'THE VIOLIN'



In 1970s Mexico, Plutarco Hidalgo (Angel Tavira) is an unlikely musician and guerrilla. Despite the loss of a hand, the peasant farmer plays the violin, quite beautifully.

He proves that music does have the power to soothe the savage breast or beast -- in this case, a military officer who has taken over his cornfields and is terrorizing his village. But music is more than Plutarco's hobby; it's a way to tell his people's history, to raise some money and to turn the tables on his oppressors. Or to endanger his life.

Shot in black and white and with English subtitles, "The Violin" doesn't dabble much in background and opens with such an ugly, violent (brief) scene that your inclination may be to turn away. Had I not been reviewing, I might have stopped watching but I'm glad I stuck with it.

-- *Vancheri*

'UNDERWORLD'



In a one-night-only screening 8 p.m. Sunday at the Regent Square, the silent gangster classic "Underworld" (1927) will be accompanied by Alloy Orchestra, a band from Boston specializing in matching live electronic synthesizer music to pre-sound films. Read a full review by Post-Gazette film critic Barry Paris in Sunday's On the Go/On the Arts.

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