

A Look At the The Second Annual Shadow Box Film Festival

Written by Chris Wheat

Monday, 16 December 2013 16:23



The trials of a global icon, the Irish civil war, healing from depression, healing from violence and, in the end, the guy gets the girl.

Those stories and more climbed into the ring on Dec. 6 and Dec. 7 at the Second Annual Shadow Box Film Festival, held at the School of Visual Arts Theater in Manhattan.

Now enjoying its second year as the only film festival dedicated to screening films and documentaries about the sweet science, the Shadow Box Film Festival presented an engrossing program of films. The cinematic stories covered the wide spectrum of boxing and the profound way it touches human lives.

The festival began Friday with a screening of ‘The Silent Boxer,’ written and directed by Dre Didderiens, which told the story of Juliano Westhiner, a deaf Romany boxer living in Holland. Westhiner hopes to be the first Dutch boxer in over twenty years to qualify for the Olympics.

The interesting feature follows Westhiner as he trains for qualifying bouts, deals with court-ordered anger classes following an assault charge, and navigates home life in the Romany caravan park. There a community’s hopes are heaped upon his shoulders.

In the end Westhiner does not qualify for the Olympics. His failure to make the team is perhaps hindered by a hand injury, or the Romany culture, which sees him marry his teenage girlfriend, become a father, and take a full time job, all in quick succession.

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A group of short films, featuring documentaries and dramas, told a variety of boxing stories in creative fashion.

“Broken,” written and directed by David Wendelman, captures the emotions faced by a club fighter struggling with his identity after being told to retire by his trainer and promoter.

He is also haunted by the memory of his father, a once popular wrestler in Mexico, who smuggled the family across the border for a better a life in America, only to die as a day laborer and a broken man.

An animated film from Iran, directed and animated by Yahya Ghobadi, “Return” shows how boxing influences a man battling addiction to turn his life around and reclaim his family.

“The Gunner,” produced by Winner Take All Productions, features former cruiserweight contender Jamie Drubin.

The Long Island native talks about his life in boxing and what is required to be a professional fighter.

In telling his story Drubin mentions his father, who “began to teach me how to throw punches as soon as I was able to walk and have balance,” and continued pushed him throughout his fighting career.

The theme of fathers and sons in boxing was also prevalent at last year’s festival.

“Stealing the Show,” from debuting Irish director Matthew Dobbyn, documents the sacrifices demanded of Belfast born Dee Walsh as he focuses on his dream of becoming middleweight champion of the world.

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The story of dedicated Albany, NY trainer Jerrick Jones and his charge of young pupils is told in "Inside the Ring."

The important role that Jones has in the youngster's lives is underscored when each one of them describes him as a father figure who helps them with much more than throwing the straight right.

"Fight Day," directed by Chris Cassidy, tells the poignant story of Showtime Boxing analyst Steve Farhood and his commitment to service.

Once a month for over five years, Farhood would visit with the patients of Manhattan's Cabrini Nursing Home to screen and discuss a historic boxing match.

Farhood's patience, compassion, and humanity are abundantly in evidence as he interacts with the patients, knowing that his mother had been scheduled to be a patient there before her unexpected passing.

The tale of a young, deaf, African-American boxer saddled with raising his infant son after his wife dies from childbirth complications is told in "Championship Rounds."

Directed by Daniel Stine, "Championship Rounds," features accomplished actors Harold Perrineau, Larry Gilliard Jr., and Michael Bentt.

The film captured the festival prize for best short film.

The slate of feature films presented at the festival showcased Celtic flavor, the code of the streets, the tribulations of a global icon, and the growth of a boxing community.

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Acclaimed Irish documentarian Andrew Gallimore presented two films at the festival.

“A Bloody Canvas” tells the fascinating story of former world champion Mike McTigue, who left Ireland to seek his fortune in America, only to have fate return him home for life-changing experiences.

McTigue’s co-star in the film is history, as the boxer’s adventures dovetail with the immigrant experience in America, the Irish civil war, the Jazz Age, and the Great Depression.

Sadly McTigue ends up penniless and a resident of New York’s infamous Graymoor Mental Hospital suffering from what is now known as pugilistic dementia.

The only bright spot in his final days are the regular visits from devoted family members.

The authoritative tones of Oscar nominee, and former amateur boxer, Liam Neeson grace Gallimore’s second film as narrator of “The Gentleman Prizefighter,” which chronicles the life of James J. Corbett.

Another colorful Irish character, Corbett was famous the world over for his exploits both in and out of the ring.

As heavyweight champion of the world he transformed boxing from bare-knuckle brawling to a respectable sport.

Understanding that his charisma radiated beyond the ring, Corbett conquered the stage as one of the pioneers of vaudeville and then moved on to the silver screen.

Corbett emerged from San Francisco’s tough Irish quarter to become a national hero and

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Neeson's familiar Irish lilt brings authenticity to the exciting tale.

"The Gentleman Prizefighter" won the festival prize for best foreign film.

"White Rock Boxing," directed by Cliff Springs, tells the story of an old-school gym dubbed the "Mecca of boxing in the south."

The White Rock Gym is located in the back roads of South Carolina and has hosted Muhammad Ali and Michael Spinks. Today the gym is a training ground for boxers of all ages.

Submitted from the UK and written and directed by Adam Simcox, "Kid Gloves" shows two characters from disparate backgrounds headed towards an inevitable clash.

Former two-time world champion Pauli Malignaggi makes his acting debut in "Omerta," a mafia crime film written and directed by Craig Tubiolo.

The drama is a real life depiction of life in the mafia controlled neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in the 90's.

A strong audience turnout for the Saturday afternoon screening surely sent positive vibes across the river as Malignaggi handily won his "Battle of Brooklyn" later that evening against Zab Judah at the Barclays Center.

"Boogaloo," written and directed by Liam Mulvey, points the camera at the life of Philadelphia middleweight contender Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts and captures the back room machinations of the fight "game" in the city of brotherly love.

Watts was arguably the best middleweight out of a quartet of contenders that included "Bad"

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Bennie Brisoce, Willie “The Worm” Monroe, and Eugene “Cyclone” Hart. They all fought during the golden era of Philadelphia middleweights in the 70’s.

The film spends time allowing the viewer to get to know the humble and personable Watts, but also to peer into the world of matchmaking, promoting, and moving a fighter through the ranks.

Although Watts was not able to become the first Philadelphia boxer to win the middleweight title, he had the respect of the boxing community and the distinction of being the first fighter to defeat Hall of Fame legend “Marvelous” Marvin Hagler.

The festival winner for best feature, “The Trials of Muhammad Ali,” directed by Bill Siegel, is a fascinating documentary that explores Ali’s lifelong journey of spiritual transformation.

Traveling with Ali from his Louisville roots, through his years in exile, to receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the film traces Ali’s path from poet to pariah to global ambassador for peace.

Boxing icon Bernard Hopkins, who attended the Friday screening, stated “I loved the film. It showed me so many things about Ali’s life that I didn’t know. He could do so many things. If he hadn’t been a boxer, he could have been an actor.”

A trio of films, one feature and two shorts, explored the growing community of women in boxing.

“Boxing Chicks,” written and directed by Frederick Taylor, presents the case that if men can build their self esteem through sports and physical fitness, why not women?

The participants in the film believe that positive expressions of aggression encourage women to find their true selves.

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Filmmaker Jill Morley provides a first-person perspective of women overcoming their demons through boxing, while telling a larger story about abuse, trauma, mental illness, and healing in "Fight Like a Girl."

Morley's battle with severe depression takes us into the world of women boxers as she seeks to heal from trauma absorbed during her childhood.

Once in the gym Morley meets several women (Susan Reno, Kimberly Tomes, and former world champion Maureen Shea), who all turned to boxing to resolve their own issues. The women form a strong bond of support, friendship and camaraderie.

Despite having to be hospitalized for depression, Morley perseveres and stays focused on her goal to compete in the New York Golden Gloves.

At the same time Reno wins the gloves, Shea rebounds from heartbreak, and Tomes, now a professional, seeks to avenge a loss from her amateur days.

While Morley digs deep to find the fortitude to compete in the ring, she also digs into her personal life to reach the core of her issues.

Conversations with her parents, particularly her mother, are powerful and revealing.

At the Saturday afternoon screening Morley, at the behest of Jill Diamond from the WBC, was presented with a special WBC medal for inspiration, education, and courage. Her fistic comrades Shea, Reno, and Tomes joined her at the podium.

"Outside the Ring," a short film directed by Joanne Green and Steve Lindsay, provides another insightful look into the lives of women and boxing.

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The film focuses on a group of women who have been the victims of violence who are reclaiming their bodies and finding empowerment through boxing.

They are taking part in the Shape Your Life program, started by Green, Toronto Newsgirls Gym owner Savoy Howe, and Brock University Professor Cathy Van Ingen. The program's goal is to work with female victims of violence and provide them with a channel to express their own healthy aggression.

Viewers follow this group of women as they discuss their histories and reflect on the change boxing has brought to their lives.

Training scenes in the gym show the women encouraging, celebrating, and supporting each other on their respective roads to empowerment.

A memorial that is part of the final credits is dedicated to a woman in the group who, despite the support available to her, made the decision to take her own life.

At last year's festival each day closed with a panel discussion prior to the screening of the day's final film.

This year each day concluded with the presentation of a "Garfield" award followed by a screening. Named after the late John Garfield, the award was established for actors who have enhanced the image of boxing through film and television.

On Friday evening actor Burt Young, of "Rocky" fame, was presented with the award along with Anthony P. Rhodes, the School of Visual Arts Executive Vice President.

Mr. Rhodes received the award in recognition of his unwavering support of the Shadow Box Film Festival and the students at SVA in their pursuit of artistic excellence.

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Friday's awards presentation was followed by a screening of Garfield's "They Made Me a Criminal," featuring the Dead End Kids.

On the festival's closing night Garfield's daughter Julie Garfield was in attendance to host a Q & A and present the award to Holt McCallany, of TV's "Lights Out."

The final film screened was her father's all-time classic "Body and Soul," usually at the top of any boxing and film fan's list.

In its second year the Shadow Box Film Festival continued to provide attendees with a variety of films that captured the positive and powerful impact boxing has on people from all walks of life.

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