Film Fest Wraps Up with Awards and Accolades

By Kristin Sterling

When the 18th annual Columbia University Film Festival wrapped up in New York on Sunday, May 8, School of the Arts (SoA) filmmakers took home more than $120,000 in awards, and half of the 40 films selected to be screened by industry professionals in the Los Angeles portion of the festival that took place this week.

One of the big winners was Julie Anne Meerschwam, whose film Celamy received the IMAX Outstanding Achievement Award, Lifetime (Entertainment) Student Filmmaker Award and the film division award for best cinematography. The film depicts the rise and fall of a little girl’s relationship with her imaginary friend and how they created a life together after the death of the girl’s mother. In creating the film, Meerschwam put herself in the imaginary friend’s position, considering what it would be like for her and the obstacles she would have to face, including the realization that for the welfare of the child, one day the friend will have to turn around.

“I tried to put a human face to the Palestinian/Israeli story—a personal story that touched on complex issues in a gentle way,” explains Zoabi.

At the Columbia festival, Be Quiet received the New Line Cinema Outstanding Achievement in Filmmaking Award and joined Gary Gotham’s goddess and Cady Abuza’s The Trip in winning National Board of Review of Motion Pictures awards. Ben Hayduck’s Pedalfoot, the story of a 10-year-old boy preparing for a piano recital and coping with a mother who wants him to attend Juilliard, won the Tribeca Entertainment Outstanding Achievement in Screenwriting Award.

“It is humbling to think of all the great work that came out of this year’s festival,” says Hayduck. “Any number of films could have been recognized in a similar fashion.”

Phil Johnston’s film Flightless Birds won the New Line Cinema Best Director Award and the 20th Century Fox/Farrelly Brothers Outstanding Achievement in Comedy Award. The absurdist comedy features a town in South Dakota, with only five residents, that fights back against government efforts to dissolve it. Seeking a miracle to save them, the town hosts a festival and things begin to turn around.

Other festival awards included:

Arthur Korn Memorial Award: Mitchell Gutman and Jennifer Westin
Cinecolor Award: Tala Hadid, Your Dark Hair Also Brian
Comedy Central Best Comedy Screenplay Award: Brett Levner

Snow Whites of Suburbia

Film Mark Thomas Inc. Best Film Award: Alessandro Tanaka, 5G
Hallmark Entertainment Producers Development Award: Toby Adlington, Dancing Ground
HBO Films Young Producers Development Award: Anupjoy Singh, Long After the Marigolds Die
James Bridges Development Award: Felippe Barbosa, A Day at the Bottom of the Ocean
Kim Kagen Award: Andrew Lloyd, At the Beach
Lifetime (Entertainment) Student Development Award: C.C. Webster, Great Run
New Line Cinema Development Award: Chris Truage, Thornbike
The Ezra Litwak Award for Distinction in Screenwriting: Aija Nathaniel, Neither the Veil Nor the Four Walls

Reflecting on her time at SOA, Meerschwam says, “The M.F.A. program has helped me tremendously. We [the students] have created a group that helps and supports each other and works on each other’s shoots. It is an incredible group of people committed to each other’s success. It is surprising and highly unusual.”

Hayduck adds, “The minds I’ve encountered at Columbia have recast the way I think about film. My teachers and classmates are of the highest caliber, so the whole experience and environment is heightened—you just keep on learning and improving when it’s like that.”

Alumni Get a Boost Through Sustainability

School of the Arts alumnus Catherine Stewart, SoA’99, and Anmaramie Jaco, SoA’02, are among 15 filmmakers who have been selected for the Sundance Filmakers and Screenwriters Labs. During the three-weeklong, hands-on workshop, emerging writers and directors gain experience rehearsing, shooting and editing scenes from their screenplays under the mentorship of accomplished directors, editors, cinematographers and actors.

Stewart is working on her film Young Fatig, set in post-apartheid South Africa, in which three unusual love stories intertwine on the streets of Johannesburg amid a volatile landscape of fear, hybrid cultures and shifting identities.

Jacq’s film, Salt of the Sea, features a Palestinian American girl who travels to the West Bank and meets a young man who joins her on her journey across borders.

Kathryn Bigelow, SoA’81, Malta Scotch Marmo, SoA’06, Ron Nyswander, SoA’91, and former SoA adjunct professor Philip Seymour Hoffman are serving as creative advisors to the lab and joint faculty and student filmmakers such as Sandy Field, Michael Hoffman and Robert Redford. The lab is being held at the Sundance Village in Utah through June 30.

Columbia Students Look at Urban Sustainability in Two Cities

Columbia and Barnard College students participating in a new program sponsored by the Center for Urban Research and Policy (CURP) recently completed a study of the development challenges facing two major international cities: New York City and Mexico City.

The program is designed to introduce undergraduate students to the importance and rigor of social science research. In this case, students were asked to propose research projects that take social and environmental approaches to understanding urban sustainability.

The yearlong study combined classroom learning with significant fieldwork experience. Students spent the year conducting their field research in New York City and traveled to Mexico City for five days in the fall to observe and document inner-city conditions there.

Using small neighborhoods as units of analysis, the students observed that corruption and the misallocation of natural resources have prevented urban strategies in both cities from reaching their development goals.

Developments such as the one led by Mexican business tycoon Carlos Slim in Mexico City’s ancient city center Zócalo, and the redevelopment of Times Square in New York, they found, are aimed at attracting tourist revenue, rather than combating fundamental problems such as corruption and uneven development.

The projects were capped by workshops led by Sudhir Venkatesh, CURP director and associate professor of sociology and African-American Studies, as well as by a series of presentations from experts in the field.

“I think it’s important to expose people early to research, which means while they are juniors and seniors thinking about their careers,” Venkatesh said.

The students looked at a number of social issues, such as the role of informal economies in each city, and the allocation of resources to security initiatives, as well as at such environmental issues as air quality, green space, solid waste and water.

In both cities, they found that a growing investment in policing, private security guards and surveillance cameras represent efforts by municipalities to manage the symptoms of social inequality rather than address underlying causes.

While both cities have large groups of licensed and unlicensed street vendors, they found that unregulated workers in New York tend to be undocumented migrants who suffer from discrimination and poor working conditions whereas in Mexico City most unregulated workers are accepted members of society.

Finally, they observed that low-income neighborhoods are more likely to contain pollution and toxic land use, but less likely to contain green areas that would help mitigate effects of those health hazards.

Parks may serve as the comparison city for next year’s Urban Research Workshop. For more information, visit the Center for Urban Research and Policy online at www.columbia.edu/cu/curp.