

FILMMAKER

Olivier Assayas and
Kristen Stewart on

**PERSONAL
SHOPPER**

Garrett Brown on the

**FUTURE OF
CINEMATOGRAPHY**

Kristi Jacobson's

SOLITARY

Julia Ducournau's

RAW

Eduardo Williams's

**THE HUMAN
SURGE**



These

Uncomfortably Exciting

TIMES

Jessica Brillhart on the
FUTURE OF VIRTUAL REALITY

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Kapur acknowledged that Eastern nations all have their own unique storytelling traditions, he also contended that there is a sensibility connecting cinema from regions as diverse as China and India and which differentiates their tastes from Western ones. "What they call melodrama, we call mythology," he explained. "The West has a habit of dulling life down and making it intellectual. Asian storytelling has a mythic quality." Indeed, fate and destiny affected the plot in many of the fest's Asian cinema selections, and I couldn't ignore that I found myself weeping and sincerely moved in a lot of films that I wanted to write off as sentimental. Learning the intricacies of these divergent sensibilities seemed a valuable lesson, if not just for cross-cultural understanding then for business savvy, as the Asian and especially mainland Chinese market is increasingly one to which filmmakers and studios around the world are striving to appeal.

Cucalorus Film Festival

BY WHITNEY MALLETT

Let your freak flag fly. That sentiment bleeds into every nook and cranny of the Cucalorus Film Festival, now in its 22nd year, where frightful genre films and micro-budget experimentations crash into each other against the backdrop of backyard bonfires in coastal North Carolina. Set in the 100,000-plus person city of Wilmington, home to a couple colleges and the largest film studio outside of California, Cucalorus feels first and foremost for filmmakers, with an uncommon amount of money invested in supporting directors, producers and actors to make the trek to the Southeastern locale, transforming the four-day noncompetitive nonjuried event into a community-building affair. Full disclosure: I attended the festival as a journalist as well as a filmmaker.

I arrived in Wilmington the morning after the election, timing that underscored the theme of end times threading through the program, from Etta Devine and Gabriel Diani's *Diani & Devine Meet the Apocalypse*, a comedy about a couple escaping Los Angeles in the wake of unexplained cataclysm, to Sarah Adina Smith's *Buster's Mal Heart*, a nonlinear dive into Y2K paranoia and ontological reckoning starring *Mr. Robot*'s Rami

Malek. Another foreboding highlight was the thrilling, class-conscious Korean zombie film *Seoul Station*, which stuck closely to the expectations of the genre while interrogating patriarchal power structures and problems of homelessness caused by real estate development.

Genre has an interesting status at the festival, which spotlights examples of filmmakers playing with conventions in different ways. Jorge Torres-Torres's experimental narrative about a woman suffering from memory loss, *Fugue*, was introduced as "horror-ish," while my favorite of the fest, Ingrid Jungermann's film *Women Who Kill*, chronicled a love triangle between serial killer-obsessed Park Slope lesbians, combining murder-mystery and romantic comedy.

The freaky playfulness of the program was well matched with performances like an evening of modern dance and a costume karaoke party in a sports bar, formerly a second-wave coffee shop where much of *Dawson's Creek* was filmed. Throughout the weekend, the introductions were often as entertaining as the films themselves. Programmer Aaron Hills donned wigs and ears to introduce the films in his *Convulsions* series. Before *Diani & Devine Meet the Apocalypse*, local comedian Kevin Yee belted out a pop ballad about wanting to lick his lover's tears. And setting the tone for Peter Sheehan's documentary *Gip*, about a 90-something-year-old Alabama juke joint owner, Maurice Martinez, aka Marty Most, gave a sprawling and illuminating introduction about the roots of the blues, finishing off by playing a little music on the hose from a gas stove. Late one evening, in the backyard of Cucalorus's year-round candy-colored headquarters, Jengo's Playhouse, we were treated to a display of fire breathing and fire juggling. "This is about as much Burning Man as I can take," someone next to me in the crowd whispered.

Two events at the fest seemed to garner the most buzz: visiting Canadian comedian Shirley Gnome playing a kazoo with her vagina and Stanley Kubrick's daughter Vivian Kubrick presenting never-before-seen footage from the then 17-year-old's behind-the-scenes documentary chronicling the making of *The Shining*. She presented the footage in person along with Garrett Brown, the film's Steadicam operator, and Joe Dunton, the legendary camera engineer who func-

tioned as a technical advisor on the set. There was a local connection as Dunton, a British native, is a longtime Wilmington resident. He first discovered the town while working on Dino De Laurentiis's film *Firestarter* in 1984.

Nicknamed "Hollywood East," Wilmington saw a boom in TV and film production in the '80s. In the year 1986 alone, the city hosted productions of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, Michael Mann's *Manhunter*, and *Crimes of the Heart*, starring Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek and Sam Shepard. More recently, amenities like a 37,500-square-foot sound stage and the largest special effects water tank in North America have enticed big productions like *Iron Man 3*, shot in 2012. However, in the last couple of years, North Carolina's tax incentive program has changed to a new grant program, making the state more attractive to smaller story-driven productions rather than billion-dollar blockbusters. In December 2015, the North Carolina Film Office launched a filmmakers' fund in partnership with Cucalorus to support film and video projects made by local NC filmmakers. Cucalorus was given \$10,000, which it divvied up between nine projects chosen through an open application process. One of the fund winners is Dunton's daughter Erica, who's been making independent films for years — her 2011 feature *To Get Her* shot in Wilmington with a local cast and went on to win the Best of NEXT Audience Award at Sundance.

In Wilmington, the commune has replaced the studio to some degree. The modest budget, studio-funded films of the 1980s don't really exist any more. Today, there's superhero movies and crowd-funded films and little in between. In this brave new world, Cucalorus has emerged as a grassroots and community-centric organization supporting film, as well dance and theater, through grants and artist-in-residency programs, set in their hippy-dippy creative campus that boasts a stationary furnished van and an outdoor shower. Their annual film festival helps them expand their community to the filmmakers who come from around the country and around the world, forging relationships and suggesting a model of filmmaking support that some of these visitors might take back to their own cities. ■