

Film reviews

March 05, 2020

Honey Boy

MA

As part of Shia LaBeouf's 2017 stint in rehabilitation, he was required to write about his life, specifically his relationship with his father. Thus was sown the seed for LaBeouf's screenplay for *Honey Boy*, about the complex relationship between a 12-year-old child actor and his unstable father.

Although Otis Lort (Noah Jupe) has a successful TV career, he and his father live in one small room of a run-down garden court motel on the outskirts of LA. A recovering alcoholic, James Lort (Shia LaBeouf) is a Vietnam veteran whose psychological issues come to the fore in his erratic parenting.

He clearly loves Otis, yet he bullies and berates him constantly, as if to compensate for his own inadequacies. All Otis wants is for his father to act like a father, to hold his hand and treat him like the 12-year-old boy he is. However, the only people who provide him with any semblance of tender loving care are a shy young sex worker (FKA Twigs) and Tom (Clifton Collins Jr), both of whom Lort considers a threat.



The film shifts between this crucial period in Otis's life and 10 years later, when his older self (Lucas Hedges) is in rehab, diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and tasked with writing as a therapeutic tool to confront his past. LaBeouf, Hedges and Jupe, in particular, give achingly believable performances.

Director Alma Ha'rel collaborated closely with her friend LaBeouf on the project from its early stages, then with cinematographer Natasha Braier and editors Monica Salazar and Dominic LaPerriere to give a documentary feel to *Honey Boy*, cutting back and forth between time lines. Composer Alex Somers' music deftly complements the narrative throughout.

At the 2019 Sundance Awards, *Honey Boy* won a special award for Vision and Craft.

The Peanut Butter Falcon

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Shia LaBeouf gives another impressive performance in *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, a riff on the buddy road movie, written and directed by Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz, specifically for Zack Gottsagen.

Because Zak (Gottsagen) has Down syndrome and no family to support him, he lives in an aged-care facility, where he regularly tries to abscond. Aided by his roommate Carl (Bruce Dern), he breaks out and goes on the run, wearing only underpants.

His goal is to attend the wrestling school run by his hero, Salt Water Redneck (Thomas Haden Church).

He accidentally teams up with Tyler (LaBeouf), who is being pursued by vengeful fishermen (John Hawkes and rapper Yelawolf) whose livelihood he has inadvertently compromised, if not destroyed. Also in hot pursuit is empathetic Eleanor (Dakota Johnson) from the care facility.

Filmed in the backwaters of South Carolina, it is beautifully shot by Nigel Bluck. Hopefully *The Peanut Butter Falcon* is still screening somewhere. It's got a lot of heart.

The Leunig Fragments

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The Leunig Fragments provides limited, occasionally intimate, insight into the man whom the National Trust declared a national treasure in 1999. No longer the youthful idealist who hoped to change the world in his lifetime, Michael Leunig is a septuagenarian, aware of his mortality and how much he would still like to change. He is particularly mindful of how much we all could and should learn about life, land and art from Indigenous Australians, and how much we owe them.

Leunig frankly admits that he has sacrificed his personal and family life for his art. He is pretty bleak about the ill-effects of parenting handed down from one generation to the next. Sunny, the only one of his four sons who agreed to be interviewed, lives near his father, but only occasionally sees him. Leunig doesn't see his siblings; he didn't attend his parents' funerals.

Yet Leunig has maintained contact with the teacher who first suggested to him that he could be a cartoonist. What an inspirational young woman she must have been, introducing her young charges to the humour of the Goons and Tom Lehrer! Now she is an old lady, rendered immobile and mute by a stroke. When he visits her, holds her hand and stares into her eyes, Leunig wonders what she is thinking.

Political commentator Phillip Adams describes Leunig's technique as "weaponised whimsy: it draws you in, then throws a punch". Usually compassionate, occasionally provocative, often melancholic, Michael Leunig resembles the wistful little everyman of his cartoons.

Whether it was brave or foolhardy of him to allow director Kasimir Burgess and cinematographer Marden Dean to film him in his home and studio on and off over three years, the resultant documentary is well worth viewing.

Undertow

MA

Filmed in and around Geelong, *Undertow* is described as a psychological thriller by writer-director Miranda Nation. Her screenplay explores various issues, primarily the effect on a couple of losing a baby and, secondly, the irresponsible, drug and alcohol-fuelled, misogynistic football culture.

Press photographer Claire (Laura Gordon) is devastated not only by the loss of her stillborn baby but also the subsequent suspicion that her husband Dan (Rob Collins) might be having an affair with young Angie (Olivia Dejonge). Or is Angie the girlfriend of Dan's best friend Brett (Josh Helman), who is trying to find direction after retiring from professional football?

Claire's obsessive concern for Angie becomes increasingly maternal as events unfold and as she and Dan drift further apart.

Although the screenplay is deliberately structured to keep Claire and the audience guessing at the truth, it does restrict the actors' characterisations, undoubtedly talented though the four leads are. Conversely, little about their physiology is left to our imagination. Scenes of simulated sex contrast oddly with awkward group therapy scenes of grieving parents.

The highlight of *Undertow* is Bonnie Elliott's cinematography. Water is a constant theme, whether it's amniotic fluid, bathwater or the wild South Coast surf. While Elliott seems to prefer closeup shots of faces and bodies, her many panoramic shots of Geelong, the bay and the beaches must make the Geelong Tourist Bureau very happy.

A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood

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What an unexpected gem this film is! Screenwriters Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster were inspired by *Esquire* journalist Tom Junod's 1998 article "Can you say ... hero?", a profile of Fred Rogers, the star of the children's television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, which ran from 1968 to 2001.

Each week Mr Rogers would explain complicated topics like divorce, illness, disability and death, using toys, puppets and marionettes and hopefully engendering in his young audience the concepts of empathy and kindness.

Directed by Marielle Heller and starring Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers and Matthew Rhys as investigative reporter Lloyd Vogel, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood* is based on the true story of the friendship that grew between the two men.

Disconcertingly, the journalist finds that Rogers is subtly turning the tables and interviewing him about the difficulties that he and his wife Andrea (Susan Kelechi Watson) are experiencing as first-time parents, as well as his unresolved issues with his estranged father, Jerry (Chris Cooper).

Far from writing his customary hatchet piece, Vogel learns from Mr Rogers how to manage anger, how to forgive and how to be a more effective partner and parent.

Heller tells their story in a straightforward way, which is both accessible and entertaining.

If only our world leaders had a Mr Rogers in their lives.

The Biggest Little Farm

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When documentary maker John Chester and his wife Molly are evicted from their rental property in Los Angeles because their beloved rescue dog Todd is an habitual barker, they set up farm on 200 acres one hour north of LA. There they dream of making a sustainable farm, in harmony with nature.

To do this, they enlist the ongoing advice of Alan York, a pioneer of biodynamic viticulture. Over the next seven years, the Chesters and their farm experience drought, flood, fire, wind and dust storms, their fortunes see-sawing with the vagaries of the ever-changing climate. All of this they record on film.

The final cut features many intimate shots of animals, big and small, which leavens the serious issues confronting the Chesters. Emma, a large sow formerly known as Ugly Betty, is the film's leading lady. Under the watchful eye of her consort, an old rooster named Mr Greasy, she regularly produces vast numbers of piglets. Sheep dog Rosie keeps away predatory coyotes.

Jeff Beal's unobtrusive score neatly complements this deftly crafted, engaging and relevant documentary. *The Biggest Little Farm* has won multiple nominations and awards at film festivals throughout North America.

Tricia Youlden is a retired drama teacher. She was very pleased with the Oscar results and hopes everyone enjoyed Mardi Gras 2020. Tricia is looking forward to the upcoming Alliance Francaise Film Festival 10 March - 8 April