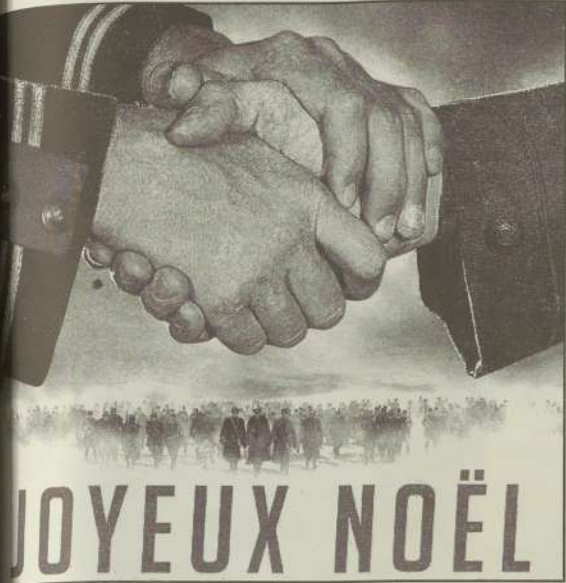


Portland International Film Fest

34 films from 36 countries play in ongoing festival



'Merry Christmas-' French entry

London Triplett
Editor

"Merry Christmas" ("Joyeux Noël" in France), the French candidate for Best Foreign Language Oscar, takes place in 1914 during World War I, when the French, British and Germans declare a temporary ceasefire, and instead spend Christmas fraternizing. It's unbelievable as this may seem, the film is inspired by actual letters written home during the war by soldiers on both sides stepping out and getting to know one another. The soldiers exchange cigarettes and chocolate, photos of loved ones and even soccer in No Man's Land (the area between trenches in which fire is rarely exchanged). The film opens with a hauntingly beautiful display of nationalism with men from France, Germany and Britain each standing in front of a sign reciting why their country is the most civilized and why other countries are inferior. After some bloody fighting, both sides decide to take a break to celebrate Christmas Eve. On impulse, a German puts up a Christmas tree on the top of the trench where the French and British can clearly see it displayed. Soon, dozens of Christmas trees line the top of the trench.

One of the lead characters, Nikolaus Sprink (Benno Fürman), plays a German opera singer who sings Christmas songs (sung by Rolando Villazón) for his fellow soldiers. Recognizing the melody, a Scottish bagpiper on the British side joins in. Soon, this leads to the officers on both sides declaring a ceasefire. Music plays a big part in this movie, although it is one that is not easily classifiable as a musical. Likewise, this movie is spiritual without being religious. Gary Lewis (also in "Gangs of New York") plays an Anglican priest and a stretcher-bearer who gives what he considers to be the most important mass of his life in No Man's Land, to French, British and German soldiers. He was also the most memorable character in the film, because of his sincerity in the role. This genuine authenticity is a dominant theme of "Merry Christmas" – it is not so much anti-war as an honest look at tired soldiers who simply want to go home. It is unbiased in its portrayal of all soldiers as equally bad and good. American Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." This quote is an excellent summation of the spirit of "Merry Christmas."

'The Giant Buddhas-' Swiss entry

Adam J. Manley
The Clackamas Print

Swiss filmmaker Christian Frie's Sundance Film Festival award-nominated documentary "The Giant Buddhas" is an explorative, thought-provoking excuse for a nap. The subject matter, the destruction of giant Buddha sculptures carved into Afghani cliffs as part of a cultural cleansing, is absolutely fascinating. Unfortunately, Frie takes an interesting and compelling subject and turns it into a droning, seemingly unending piece that will no doubt be hailed for its painful "artistic choices." The first problem to present itself is the narrator. Like the stereotypical voice found on relaxation tapes, he speaks in soothing, sleep-inducing tones. I found myself beginning to nod off within the first few minutes of this utter lack of vocal emphasis. Next, the prolonged shots. Meant to give the viewer an idea of the cultures, landscape, and emotional depth found in the film's subjects, the shots become increasingly dull. More so when the shots are accompanied by a distinct lack of sound, leaving the viewer all too aware of the fact that little to nothing in the unnecessarily long shot is moving. It's one thing to go to a museum or open a magazine and marvel at the beautiful still photography, but in the art of motion pictures – even documentaries – there are more factors to take into account than the beauty of a single shot. This error is compounded by another: the editing. Frie had plenty of interviews from which he could have extracted audio to

place over these otherwise interesting shots, but he failed to do so. In fact, he even left more interview footage in than he should have. In one instance, the documentary cuts to interview footage, and for the first few seconds the subject is completely silent. Then, his expression revealing that he has just been alerted to the fact that the camera is rolling, he takes a large breath and begins to speak. That's not creative choice, it's just shoddy editing. Then there's the music. It was wonderful. Always invoking the desired emotions from the viewers, keeping their attention, and giving the documentary a sense of forward movement, there was just one problem with the music: it wasn't used enough. Another thing that could have covered those painfully lengthened shots and monotonous narrator, and it was sorely underused. Amidst all this, set there almost to prove the fact that this could

have been a much better documentary, there were moments when Frie remembered how to construct a film. These moments, which utilized the proper amount of music, narration, interviews and shots both active and beautifully still, only highlighted the things that were wrong with the rest of the piece. And just as the viewer begins to think their money hasn't been wasted, the oasis of adequate filmmaking is gone and the documentary returns to its original goal of providing a naptime for moviegoers. In the end, "The Giant Buddhas" fails because it has too little information to spread out over the 95 minutes that this documentary runs. Perhaps if Frie had been more concerned with presenting what he had in an interesting way rather than meeting the minimum time requirement to call it "feature length," it may have been a captivating film. As it stands, Frie's potential audience is better served by turning to Google.



'My Nikifor-' Polish entry

Mike Kimberling
The Clackamas Print

"My Nikifor" is the cinematic celebration depicting the struggle of the last eight years of Poland's outstanding untrained painter Nikifor Krynicki. Krynicki is introduced as an elderly peasant, a beggar who is caught urinating on a flower garden. The slight, dirty man is an outcast in his society although many are seeking his paintings. Krynicki presents himself as a

burden early in the film. The illiterate painter stumbles upon Marian, a young struggling artist, husband and father of two. Krynicki, although suffering from a severe speech defect, informs Marian that his art is no good and that he will stay and paint for him. Krynicki's candor with those around him provides genuine comic relief in an otherwise serious film. Krynicki becomes a returning burden upon Marian, stubbornly refusing to remove himself from an art studio where he was never invited. So begins the conflict between the experienced artist who wants to be accepted and the short ordered artist who only wants to be rid of the elderly man who eats two lunches a day. Where this film succeeds greatly is in its ability to illustrate how little we understand about art. This point is made hilariously clear when Krynicki travels to his debut art show only to be told by the guard at the door that the museum is closed to outside parties. This film is a celebration of art itself, and not just through the representation of Krynicki's work or his resistance to the art establishment. The film achieves an undeniable beauty through its random, though seamlessly woven shots of Poland's spectacular snow covered landscapes. "My Nikifor," testifies (though perhaps indirectly) not only to the misunderstanding of art but also to its exploitation. When the struggle

between the two artists first begins, Marian is an artist sold on painting banners for the local political party. While Marian inadvertently takes on the role of Krynicki's caregiver, he is never pleased with the task. Marian's boss finds out Krynicki is suffering from Tuberculosis and has the old man thrown from Marian's studio into the winter streets, but not before asking Marian to steal a few of Krynicki's paintings for his own collection. Marian is appalled by the request, but is condescendingly reminded by his boss that artists are in fact "a dime a dozen." Marian leaves his work to care for Krynicki in his ill health. Marian's wife becomes angry at her husband's disregard for the exposure of Krynicki's Tuberculosis around their two children and leaves him. As crushing as this is to him, Marian does not give up caring for Krynicki, who is his representation for art. "My Nikifor" finds integrity by withholding unnecessary dialogue clichés, redundant casting, and over-dramatic scenes associated with most Hollywood movies. While watching Marian sitting bedside to a dying Krynicki, one is reminded that there is still beauty in art, and in filmmaking.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT



The festival runs through Jan. 25. Tickets and showtimes are available online at www.nwfilm.org.