



Mississippi
Alberta
North Portland

Vancouver
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Ireneusz Czop (left) and Maciej Stuhr star in 'Aftermath,' a powerful Holocaust story that was inspired by a true story of a Polish town. The movie plays again on Sunday, Feb. 23 as part of the Portland International Film Festival. The entire festival has been extended to Feb. 26 to make up for earlier cancellations due to snow and ice. For a complete schedule, visit nwfilm.org.

Favorites to Watch

It's the final stretch for Portland International Film Festival

The Portland International Film Festival is in the final stretch and, as of this writing, I've seen 17 films since my last post. Here are the ones you can still see in the festival's final days, along with three more of my favorites to watch for in hopes of a theatrical or DVD release (and my ratings on a 10-point scale).

One of my favorite films of the festival was "Aftermath" (9), a powerful Holocaust story that apparently was quite controversial when it was released in Poland. Inspired by a true story of a Polish town, the film involves two brothers, the older of whom is returning home for the first time since immigrating to Chicago 25 years before. Franciszek's return has been occasioned by the fact that his brother Jozef's wife has suddenly left the village and moved to the U.S. with the couple's two children and won't say why. Upon his arrival, Franciszek finds that Jozef (and he, by extension) are the target of some hostility in the town. With some digging, he traces the hostility to Jozef's actions in unearthing some Jewish headstones that were repurposed for

paving after the town's Jewish cemetery was destroyed during World War II.

It turns out that the headstones are just the tip of the iceberg that Franciszek encounters, and part of the achievement of this film is how genuinely successful it is at unfolding a very suspenseful tale of literally buried secrets. Significantly, the film does a better job than most Holocaust films at depicting how great evil may reverberate on unwitting successive generations. What drives the two men (one of whom seems to be anti-Semitic himself) to pursue the truth, how each reacts to the successive discoveries, and the reactions of the townspeople all are depicted with stark psychological realism. Full of devastating insights. (Plays again on Feb. 23)

"Ernest and Celestine" (8) is the best children's film I have seen at the festival, which inevitably means it offers much for adults to enjoy also. It's the charming story of a mouse, Celestine, and her friendship with a bear, Ernest. In the world of this delightfully animated film (based on a series

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BY JUDGE
DARLEEN ORTEGA



of French children's books and justly nominated for an Academy Award), bears and mice live in separate worlds, above and below ground, nursing age-old antipathy with urban legends about each other. Celestine and Ernest have artistic souls, which contributes to their outsider status in each culture, and also provides a basis for them to bond. Of course, as outsiders, they also share a willingness to carve a path outside of convention, which lends a revelatory quality to the world they create for themselves. It's not a new theme, but it is very well executed here. And something about listening to their dialogue in French makes it all the more delightful. (Plays again on Feb. 23)

The central enterprise of "The Great Passage" (6.5) is the arduous task of creating an ambitious dictionary (for which the film itself is named) during the period of change in which books are fading in significance and online resources are on the rise.

The film spans a period of 13 years, beginning in 1995, and charts the progress of the project along with the parallel maturation of a bookish young man at the center of the story, Majime. Shy and socially awkward

and working in the sales department of a large Japanese book company, he is tapped to replace the main editor in the company's dictionary department when the man resigns to care for his ailing wife. Majime (whose name means "diligent") naturally exhibits the painstaking care and love of words needed to be inspired by the project of creating a "living dictionary" that incorporates modern words and slang. The work and the support he receives from the small department of misfits he works with also assist him in his own work of coming out of his shell (just barely) and learning to communicate enough to woo the quiet chef he meets through his landlady.

The Great Passage proceeds at the pace you might expect from people who love words and dictionaries, but it is a gently comic story with interesting characters that feels distinctly grounded in Japanese culture. (Plays again on Feb. 19)

"American Dreams in China" (7), though a bit uneven, offers a window into China's perception of how the Chinese are treated by

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