

Strong Start for International Film Fest

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all the heavy lifting that keeps the family in the horse-milk trade, and her in-laws fear the attention of a local meteorologist who is clearly sweet on their daughter-in-law. Her older son visits on holiday from his education in the city and, though the family way of life is prized by all, it seems unlikely to that he will return. This is an occasion to sink into a beautiful and unfamiliar world feeling the encroachment of change. Plays again on Feb. 20.

"April and the Extraordinary World," based on a graphic novel,

is a science fiction story set in an alternative reality, in which human technological progress is halted with the steam engine. Its main character is an orphan who comes from a long line of scientists who sought to formulate a serum that would perpetuate forms of life; her great grandfather only got so far as to make animals talk, which is how she came by a very charming talking cat. It's an extraordinarily inventive premise rendered in charming, hand-drawn animation -- and if the plot bogs down in over-complication at times, it is in most ways a real treat. Its American theatrical release will likely be

dubbed in English; I much prefer seeing films in the original language, and this subtitled French version including Marion Cotillard in the title role makes its alternative-Paris setting come alive. Plays again on Feb. 17.

"Landfill Harmonic" isn't necessarily a great film (though it's a perfectly fine one), but it is definitely a great story. A gentle and unassuming environmental engineer, Favio Chavez, went to work in a huge landfill in the capital of Paraguay, and was struck by the thousands of poor families who eke out a living sorting through the garbage for recyclable materi-



"Heavenly Nomadic" a dramatic film about a horse-herding family in Kyrgyzstan.

als that they can resell. Children in these families, he saw, lacked the means to dream -- and he reflected on the role that music had played in opening his own soul. Chavez began teaching music to the local kids, but lacked sufficient instruments -- and in truth, a violin costs more than a typical house for this population. Then his genius led him to another gentle and unassuming local man with a talent for building things, and that man (also possessed of a dogged determination) found ways to build quite usable instruments out of scraps from the landfill. Thus was born a quite talented children's orchestra that eventually caught the attention of the world media and the band Megadeth, and gained opportunities to tour around the world. A more humbling and inspiring story would be hard to come by. Plays again on Feb. 20 and 21.

"Above and Below" takes as its premise that there are people among us who are already, in a

sense, living in a post-apocalyptic world. It follows a handful of them -- a military vet participating in an experiment to simulate life on Mars in a remote part of Utah; a man who lives alone in an abandoned military bunker in Arizona; and a couple who take shelter in Las Vegas storm drains, a necessarily temporary existence that lasts only between rains. The director of this documentary takes a hands-off view of his subjects, mostly allowing them to talk about their day-to-day experience -- and I'm not sure the film adds much in the way of insight. Still, sitting with someone's story always has a purpose, and these folks on the fringes don't readily find an audience otherwise. Plays again on Feb. 24.

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