

Opening Eyes to the Struggles of Others

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who received an Emerging Artist Award from Full Frame and a Filmmaker Award from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University for this film. Ford's older brother William was shot and killed 25 years ago, but the killer was never prosecuted. That injustice opened a wound in Ford's family that can never really heal, not only because of the grief of losing a loved one to violence but also because the loss and injustice has been denied recognition and reckoning. In the years since, we have watched as countless other black families have experienced similar losses at the hands of white perpetrators who are never prosecuted. Ford sets out here to grasp for his family's truth, putting it in the context of his hardworking parents, who left the Jim Crow South to pursue better hopes in New York and who raised Ford and his two siblings in very segregated Long Island. How does one tell a story that will always remain unresolved? Though the film has received critical acclaim, Ford has received some criticism for waiting until late in the film to reveal some information that likely was the basis for a claim that the shooting happened in self-defense. I appreciated his choice, after so many instances of watching stories of black people being shot followed immediately by tales of their misdeeds and explanations for why they brought violence on themselves. I felt Ford struggling for a more complete truth here, including how, immediately after his brother's shooting, the family sensed that their lost loved one, who had been unarmed, was being treated more like a suspect than a victim of the white perpetrator who shot him at close range and whose own circumstances and record were far from clean. Watch this film not to critique Ford's storytelling choices but rather to sit for a few moments with the pain that he and his family must endure for much longer. A limited theatrical release is planned, and you can follow the film at strongislandfilm.com.

"500 Years" is the culmination of a trio of films about Guatemala by documentarian Pamela Yates, and focuses on a populist uprising that led finally to the resignation of Guatemala's president in 2015 and, eventually, to his incarceration. It's a surprisingly remarkable story; the government in Guatemala is controlled by a small number of ruling families and is manifestly corrupt, and the indigenous Mayan population has been horribly

oppressed for 500 years. Yet in scene after scene, they show up in droves, prominently led by very fierce women. Even without following all of the nuances here, I was really amazed by what I saw. The film begins with a 2013 trial of a former president for genocide and crimes against humanity, which offers a glimpse of testimony of hundreds of Mayan people, some apparently quite brave judges attempting to hold onto the proceedings, and also terrible government efforts to subvert the whole thing. Our own government's history in Guatemala makes us complicit in so much that has happened here; this film offers hope and an important opportunity for bearing witness. In addition to Full Frame, the film also played at the Ashland Independent Film Festival on April 8 and you can follow its future trajectory at 500years.skylight.is.



The new documentary "Whose Streets" looks at how the killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. inspired a community to fight back and sparked a global movement.

"Still Tomorrow" is a profile of a 40ish woman, Yu Xiuhua, who became an overnight sensation in China after her poem, "Cross Half of China to Sleep With You," went viral. Some of what makes this film interesting is that something like that can happen in China -- and the film suggests that that could be, variously, because Yu writes in a (for China) frankly sexual way, because she is a woman, because she is disabled (she lives with cerebral palsy), and because she is a rural farmer. Much more interesting is Yu herself, who rejects such reductionist analyses of her while welcoming her new notoriety. She is a fascinating mix of what might seem like contradictions: clearer and more self-assured than most women, yet also insecure and longing for love and independence that her disability has denied her. She lives with her aging and practical parents, who married her off at 19 to a much older man who spends most of his time working in

the city and who clearly doesn't see Yu. (He finds her poetry "annoying," while she finds him annoying "just sitting there.>"). The film doesn't overplay her suffering, and yet that suffering clearly allows Yu to see and to write with aching honesty. The poems are beautifully rendered against the natural beauty that surrounds her, which feels both simple and lush. Definitely worth looking for, though no word yet about further availability in the U.S.

"Purple Dreams" had its world premiere at Full Frame, and was the first of three documentaries I saw depicting a year in the life of a particular school -- in this case, Northwest School of the Arts, a Charlotte, N.C. public magnet school that was the first high school permitted to perform the Broadway musical adaptation of "The Color Purple." The film follows the mounting of that pro-

duction, and especially its effect on six students from challenging life circumstances who experienced some visible healing and transformation in the act of embodying the struggle and triumph of Alice Walker's characters. The film's able white director, Joanne Hock, seems to conceive the film as a paean to the value of arts education, and it is indeed wonderful to watch the loving work of the students' theater arts teacher and director Corey Mitchell in coaxing such beauty and truth out of these young people. I will say there was a cringe-worthy moment during the talkback after the film when I wondered if the director fully realizes what the students themselves bring to the table; she recounted an audience member marveling at how well-spoken the students are and how she responded, "that's arts education," as though this is a Pygmalion exercise. This film certainly does illustrate how vital arts education is, but it also is a window to a few

souls who fight for expression among the many others just as worthy who never quite find an opening. I do hope this film finds a distributor who is awake to those realities; I'll be watching its Facebook page for updates.

"Zaatari Djinn" follows the lives of four Syrian children in a refugee camp in the Jordanian desert. The camp holds 80,000 refugees, 80 percent of whom are children. The film's Dutch director, Catherine van Campen, spent more than three years visiting the camp under really challenging conditions, building trust with the children and their families across deep cultural divides. The rapport van Campen built with her subjects shows in the intimacy of the filmmaking; the children appear quite unself-conscious and convey quite a few signals of their inner lives. Van Campen just journeys with them; there are no talking heads explaining their circumstances or laying context. What emerges from close observation and beautifully composed images is a sense of the resilience of children, and the glimmers of the impact of their displacement in this stark place. The film is currently available on Amazon, and more info can be found at zaataridjinn.com.

"School Life" (originally titled "In Loco Parentis," but recently renamed in hopes of capturing an international audience) is the second of the three docs I saw following a year in the life of the school (I'll cover the third next week). This one is the only primary-age boarding school in Ireland, regularly compared to Hogwarts in press coverage. The film is pleasant, even delightful, in the way films about nurturing children generally are, focusing especially on a couple, John and Amanda Leyden, who have been teaching at the school for more than 40 years. Their attentiveness and honed intuition for coaxing the best from their charges will warm even the coldest heart. That said, the film evinces no particular mindfulness about how privileged these children are compared to most other children, nor any contextual focus beyond the sweetness of it all. Of the three I saw, this was the least deserving of a large audience; I'll be curious how it fares compared to the other two. It's been acquired by Magnolia Pictures, which plans a theatrical release. You can visit inlocoparentis.ie for the latest information.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. Find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.



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MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY SUNDAY

CALENDAR April 2017

12
Space Shuttle Columbia First Launched Crewed by John Young and Robert Crippen - 1981

13
3rd President Thomas Jefferson born, 1743 Lee Bennett Hopkins born, 1938

14
Titanic Struck an iceberg shortly before midnight on April 14, then sinking.

15
Income Tax Day Artist/Inventor Leonardo Da Vinci born, 1452

16
Easter Garth Williams born, 1912 Aviator Wilbur Wright born, 1867