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Best of Palm Springs Short Film Fest '09

The 2009 version of the Palm Springs International ShortFest and Short Film Market is concluded and, as the largest festival of its kind in North America, press more easily can navigate the 315 films via not only the programs at the Camelot Theatre multiplex but their film library, abuzz each day with buyers, filmmakers and press.



Our Neck of the Woods

Over the past 14 years, 64 films screened here have gone on to garner Academy Award consideration. Among the most notable films during this year's Festival:

Sparks (USA, dir. Joseph Gordon-Levitt) The Shooting Stars section of the Fest has radically improved, as evidenced by Gordon-Levitt's directorial debut. His editing as well of this Elmore Leonard adaptation is snappy and vibrant, as fire investigator Eric Stoltz thinks sexy rock star Carla Gugino purposely burned her house down in the middle of a larger fire, and he thinks he's going to get a confession while drinking

excessively with her. Gordon-Levitt (TV's *Third Rock from the Sun*) sure learned a lot from starring in Scott Frank's *The Look Out* and a feature from him will hopefully be warming up in the wings.

Cages (Mexico, dir. Juan Jose Medina) Winner of the Best Animated Short, Medina's eerie and fascinating ten minute film follows an old man who traps desert creatures, only to find an entity not of this Earth is trying to lay a trap for him.

Red Flag (USA, dir. Sheila Curran Dennin) A seemingly normal woman (Nell Gwynn) goes out on a series of blind dates where red flags literally pop out of the unacceptable men she meets. When Mr. Right appears, she waits expectantly for him to do something wrong. A charmer, attractively shot.

Found (Canada, dir. Paramita Nath) The most visually remarkable short of those screened, *Found* is nonfiction lyricism, a short doc on Toronto poet Souvankham Thammavongsa, who explores her father's discarded scrapbook that documents the family's escape from Laos in the 1970s. Nath utilizes live action, animation, old movies and text with a searing impact and Thammavongsa tells us how her family could not afford the equivalent of \$2.50 to go to a hospital when she born, a baby "about the size of a pop can."

The Clockmaker's Revelation (Mexico, dir. Paula Froehle) Director Froehle has created a wonderfully dreamy short of a female clockmaker whose supernatural thoughts accompany her during her work. With lush music and the image of grandfather clocks with curtains providing a view into another dimension, this is a film that is contemplative and relaxing, despite its allegorical wonder.

Our Neck of the Woods (USA, dir. Rob Connolly) Connolly won the Best Short Award at Sundance with *Our Neck of the Woods*, an offbeat but carefully observed slice of life. A foreman (a very sympathetic Nathan Johnson) at a plant that spray paints lawn decorations in the shape of deer falls for a new employee, a girl from the Russian republic of Georgia. Married, he still wants to save her from the soul deadening of the job and plans to steal money to send her away. With the deer spontaneously bursting into flames and an alternate reality heard over the plant loudspeaker, Connolly shows a wicked, smart wit.

The Happiness Salesman (United Kingdom, dir. Krishnendu Majumdar) Christopher Eccleston, tremendously effective in films like *Jude* and *Elizabeth*, struts his stuff as a possible door-to-door Satan who tempts a young women with a constantly crying baby to trade her soul for an ideal future, which he can show her on a laptop. Majumdar nails the creep factor of Steve Gomez's script and raises the hair on the back of the neck with a terrific take on an old theme.

Once Upon a Crime (USA, dir. Lilli Birdsell) This combination of black and white live action, art and animation poses a hard-nosed female prosecutor against Snow White, who is condemned for her connection to a case that allegedly involves necrophilia, animal cruelty and child endangerment. Birdsell has found a visually arresting way to wring more humor out of a storybook character.

Abuelo/Grandfather (USA, dir. Mary Anne Kellogg) Kellogg, a choreographer and former dancer for Twyla Tharp and Martha Clarke, impresses in her first film. It's an endearing tale of a 12-year-old girl (the gifted Britt Flatmo), whose mother has recently died and rejects her Spanish-speaking Argentinian grandfather during his visit, until he warms her heart again by teaching her to dance the tango.

You're Outa Here (US, dir. George Griffin) A hilarious, high-speed blast of jazz, with lyrics and singing by Lorraine Feather, inspired by Fats Waller's music. It's a blend of stylized animation detailing all the reasons why the central character must kick her boyfriend out the front door. A rare instance of both song lyrics and visuals kicking serious comedy butt simultaneously.

Boarding Pass/Pasaje (Puerto Rico, dir. Ana Clavell) Another terrific animated short, but here, Clavell's soft focus imagery hits the audience hard, as we see the withering away of a young girl, Marysol, whose mother, already gone, had passed on AIDS to her. Despite its uplifting and poetic ending, Boarding Pass is an important reminder that animation can deal with crucial, disturbing issues often untouched in live action.