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SF IndieFest: Double Feature

So we finally got a chance to use our incredibly expensive film school education this weekend, putting our NYU Baseball tee on and hitting two IndieFest screenings in one day. And it wasn't just any day -- it was Superbowl Sunday. Needless to say, the fellow film fans in the seats could only be described as die-hard.

Our first flick was at The Roxie, and when we were told "This is perfect for you, with your NYC experience," we were immediately scared. *High Life* is a project film about a small group of artist-hipsters moving in and out of a Williamsburg loft during a single day. Workshoped three months by the cast and shot in one weekend, our first thought was "Mike Leigh." And our assumptions held, as while the action was shot during two two-hour takes on three cameras, it was obvious that what we were witnessing was an experimental theater piece on film. And that's not always a bad thing.

The festival host introduced it as "A quintessential indie film," which is meaningful on many levels. Digitally shot and digitally projected, it can't have cost much, that's for sure. It also reminded us of what independent filmmaking was like in the age before Ed Burns and 'IndieWood,' when crews were small and crane shots non-existent. What it lacked was an inspired production and a compelling narrative. **What it had in spades was pretty, talented young actors from NYU's Experimental Theater Wing.** Okay, we have to disclose that we shared many a dorm meal with ETW students **and now have a huge crush on *High Life* actress Sharon Eisman.** That said, the performances by Michael Wiener and Priscilla Holbrook we felt were flat and affected, and we had a hard time empathizing with their characters.

If you can imagine a low-budget, less-sensational *Kids* crossed with a low-budget, less-British Mike Leigh film, you have a good idea of what *High Life* is about. Our feeling was that the drama never really reached a true emotional peak -- we were left cold to the machinations of most characters, and frankly found the "Is Bosco going to kiss Chris?" thread most compelling. While the archetypes were distinctly recognizable (one audience member remarked during the QA "They remind me of my friends in West Oakland"), we wonder if the film doesn't have veiled contempt for them. As director Lila Yomtoob admitted, "I work in the industry, but I'm not well connected. I'm not very schmoozy."

As Ms. Eisman remarked about the audition, "She [Lila] sat and watched me read the paper for five minutes." Our Mike Leigh influence assumptions were confirmed when the director asserted that while her film could have easily qualified for Dogme status, her influences were more Cassevetes, Leigh and McKay than Von Trier. After making the film, she looked to apply as a Dogme film, but was amused to find out that: "It's a total joke, they're making fun of themselves, very meta." Still, Dogme directors generally have a firmer handle on cinematography and sound than this film does.

After the Apocalypse is a classic genre film. What *High Life* is lacking in cinematography and sound technique, this film has up the yin-yang. Don Hwan Lee and director Yasuaki Nakajima do an incredible job with the foley and other effects in this wordless narrative, and Hiro Ota's score is played largely on an appropriately post-industrial and haunting steel drum (and other found instruments, we presume). We assume that the film, which looked like it was shot on location in Brooklyn, was photographed digitally, but could have been photographed on black and white stock and transferred poorly.

Oh, and did we mention we have a crush on Sharon Eisman? Call us, Sharon!



Bosco (Max Faugno) paints Maya (Sharon Eisman) in *High Life*.