



Proudly independent

14th San Francisco IndieFest highlights

by David Lamble

SF IndieFest turns 14 as San Francisco's Sundance for the rest of us kicks off at the Roxie (Feb. 9-23) with the un-spooling of cult director Abel Ferrara's *4:44 Last Day on Earth* followed by the first of IndieFest's awesome parties, a *Spinal Tap*-themed bash at Sub-Mission; 80+ features and docs; Roller Disco Night (2/11) and the *Big Lebowski* Party (2/18, both at *Cellspace*) and IndieFest's Valentine blast, *Love Bites* (Roxie, 2/14, 9:30 p.m.).

No Look Pass Her nickname's "Etay," for Emily Tay; her folks – refugees from Burma's 50-year, viciously repressive military junta – push her through to Harvard; once in Cambridge, since Harvard has no sports scholarships, Etay does what she must, including cleaning toilets, to make the grade in women's basketball, competing with archrival Dartmouth for the Ivy League championship. Borrowing her trademark scoring play, the no look pass, from former men's pro Allen Iverson, Etay draws attention for her off-court moves: coming out as a lesbian to teammates; finally breaking into a provincial German pro league with her best friend Katie; and finding love with a pert little US Army lass.

Director Melissa Johnson dips into a feel-good zone with this true-life tale of a most unlikely sports heroine who busts all nature of taboos from LA's Chinatown to achieve a measure of respect in a foreign basketball world where American players must win or get a quick ticket home. Johnson's cameras provide a rare look at several sheltered worlds: a Burmese immigrant mom insisting that her still-closeted daughter submit to an arranged marriage, and a Harvard coach whose profanity-laced pep talks could match Bobby Knight. Johnson's doc ranks right up there with such LGBT sports classics as *Training Rules*, Dee Mosbacher and Fawn Yacker's expose of homophobia in the Penn State women's basketball program (2009 Frameline). (Roxie, 2/11, 5 p.m.; 2/12, 12:30 p.m.)

Sahkanaga What would you do if you caused the death of a sibling's pet in a fecund part of the woods where dead humans started popping up? What if a best friend confessed to an abusive moment – forced to cross-dress by the high school coach – and this same kid wanted you to kiss him?

In director John Henry Summerour's unsettling coming-of-age story cradled in the pitiless beauty of rural Georgia, we meet Paul, a doe-eyed teen whose natural beauty, curiosity and precocious intelligence provide him a possible lifeline out of a suffocating backwater berg where people bond around Church and Civil War reenactments. We see Paul as a pretend rebel with a rifle, a reluctant assistant in his dad's funeral business.

The terrible teen travails give way abruptly to an even worse secret: dead bodies on the outskirts of town, near a crematorium whose African American operator has a contract with Paul's dad. The ensuing scandal threatens a complete social and business debacle for Paul's family. Director Summerour, drawing on a true-life story that rocked Walker County, GA a decade back, eschews cheap horror-film tricks to increase our fear of the unburied dead with his ability to manipulate Southern Gothic imagery and an acute sense of the proper pacing for this story, and his young lead's ability to command our attention with unexpected moments of stillness. Young actor Trevor Neuhoff draws skeptical adults into the grip of stories about childhood's end. (*Roxie*, 2/18, 5 p.m.; 2/22, 7:15 p.m.)



Scene from director Michael Roskam's *Bullhead*. (Photo: SF IndieFest)

Bullhead Michael Roskam's labyrinthine drama, Belgium's official Oscar contender, begins with a mysteriously bulked-up farm worker – remember when Barry Bonds' head grew to planet-like proportions? It takes us a while to learn the secret behind Jacky's involvement with illegal steroids – he both feeds them to the cattle on his family's Belgian farm and pokes them into his own ass – and it is a truly horrifying one, giving a terrifying new edge to the macho taunt, "Don't break my balls!"

This cops-and-crooks tale has so many digressions it would qualify as HBO miniseries: Belgium's ongoing almost-civil war between Jacky's tribe, the Dutch-speaking Flemish majority, and the rival French-speaking Walloons; the criminal gangs that traffic horrible human-growth hormone shit into people's bodies and the food chain; bad sex-obsessed childhoods that morph into hideous marriages; and tacky, druggy dance clubs. There's a

festering urge for revenge on Jacky's part, and a deeply suppressed homo flirtation with a narcotics cop by Jacky's onetime childhood best friend. This one belongs in the Bonds defense team's Netflix queue. (*Roxie*, 2/11, 7:15 p.m.; 2/13, 7:15 p.m.)

Last Days Here Don Argott and Damian Fenton, creators of 2009's doc hit *The Art of the Steal*, return with the wildly improbable, truly scary comeback story of Bobby Liebling, the over-the-top front man for the 70s doom metal band Pentagram. In the early 70s, young Bobby blew a certain record deal by pissing off the producer. What followed was a cascading series of reversals that left Bobby – friendless, puffing on a crack pipe, digging into his needle-scarred arms looking for demon bugs – buried alive in his aging parents' subbasement. The parents, who estimate they've sunk over a million bucks into their almost-corpse of a son, have abandoned all hope.

The cavalry arrives in the form of an insanely dedicated fan and a gorgeous, much younger girlfriend. Catch this one for a drowning man's desperate attempts to both court and sabotage his resurrection. (*Roxie*, 2/18, 7:15 p.m.; 2/20, 9:30 p.m.)

High From the early 60s through the late 70s, Larry Kent was English Canada's best-kept cultural secret. A prolific pioneering auteur, Kent's nine features broke all kinds of social codes about recreational drugs, sex-starved women, random queer hookups and guys who keep their hats on in the house. Don't miss this 79-minute romp as a perpetually stoned hetero couple's drug-fueled escapades take a turn towards minor and then not-so-minor crime. Filmed in B&W alternating with drug hallucination-simulating color, our feckless boy/girl pranksters would find themselves in a real pickle if the film lasted another reel. Kent assembles beautiful, very white bodies who seem oblivious to the thin line between experimental and hardcore porn. Once banned by the Quebec Film Board, this is a gem found in the rough. (*Roxie*, 2/19, 21, both 7:15 p.m.)

Exley Larry Kent proves he hasn't entirely lost his knack with this absurdist tale about a bad day in the life of a dude trying to hustle up the dough to visit his dying mom. Starts promisingly with dueling hetero and queer sex scenes, but then devolves into a trite, meandering morass that demands a level of acting that's not in the room. (*Roxie*, 2/18, 9:30 p.m.; 2/20, 7:15 p.m.)

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