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Outfest 2011 Feature Film Scorecard

LAURIE K. SCHENDEN



KIM YUTANI, OUTFEST PROGRAMMER, WITH COUNTRY SINGER CHELY WRIGHT (SECOND FROM RIGHT) AND FILMMAKERS BOBBI BIRLEFFI AND BEVERLY KOPF.

A sampling of independent films at Outfest, the 29th Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, includes the good, the hilarious and the confusing-as-hell.

Wish Me Away

Country music awards, packed stadiums, sexy video shoots—makes you wonder why you never heard of Chely Wright, right?

According to my absurdly unscientific poll, few LGBTers knew of the country singer before she came out over a year ago. *Wish Me Away*, the documentary feature about Wright's Kansas upbringing, her climb up the Country charts and her ultimate revelation that she's gay (comparable to announcing you're a terrorist in Nashville), won over hundreds of filmgoers at the packed Directors Guild of America theater in Hollywood.

She looks amazing, sounds great and reveals through interviews and some emotional home video how she mustered the courage to risk her career, because her "big lie" was tearing her up like a Midwestern tornado. The film is so well-produced you'd think her career should be right up there with Faith Hill or Taylor Swift, but in LGBT eyes, she may be on her way.



WRITER-DIRECTOR WENDY JO CARLTON, CURVE BLOGGER LAURIE SCHENDEN, CENTER, AND ACTRESS FAWZIA MIRZA, RIGHT, AT THE OUTFEST SCREENING OF *JAMIE AND JESSIE ARE NOT TOGETHER*.

Jamie and Jessie Aren't Together

Women toss off their clothes like Kleenex in *Jamie and Jessie Aren't Together*, but the film isn't about sex. It's about friendship, love, secret and not-so-secret desires, and how the lines of friendship can get blurred. Oh, and the characters sometimes break into song (come on, you do it too).

Writer-director Wendy Jo Carlton said she only started writing the script (inspired by her own relationships) last June. That was just a few weeks before *Hannah Free*, a film she directed, screened at Outfest 2010.

Sure, *Hannah Free* (about a dying woman played by Sharon Gless who reminisces about her longtime love), got a lot of critical acclaim. But the charming, sexy and funny *Jamie and Jessie*, about several hot, young friends who act on impulse and sort it out later, got my attention.



EMILY "E-TAY" TAY, LEFT, AND TEAMMATE KATIE ROLLINS, SUBJECTS OF THE DOCUMENTARY *NO LOOK PASS*, WATCH THE FILM'S PREMIERE AT OUTFEST.

No Look Pass

Athletes will love this film. The winner of an Outfest programming award, *No Look Pass* was directed by former Harvard basketball player Melissa Johnson. The documentary feature follows the thrilling achievements of Harvard basketball star Emily "E-Tay" Tay, as well as her turmoil with her traditional Burmese parents.

As a former college hoopster, I thought Johnson captured the dedication, discipline and camaraderie of a college team sport, balancing it with Tay's desires for a career as a pro player and a life with her girlfriend over her parents' plans for an arranged marriage.

Along with actual game footage, Johnson collected some witty, profound and/or funny interactions between the shy E-Tay and the vivacious teammate Katie. A searing half-time tirade by the Harvard coach at a critical game shows what great access the filmmakers had.



NO LOOK PASS DIRECTOR MICHELLE JOHNSON, RIGHT, WITH AN OUTFEST VOLUNTEER, LEFT, KATIE ROLLINS, AND EMILY TAY AT THE OUTFEST PREMIERE.

Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same

Dating a lesbian from outer space is not all that uncommon, from what I hear. However, Madeleine Olnek's film, made on a metallic shoe-string budget, is a hilarious, campy syfy flick that depicts three lesbian aliens searching for love in all the right places on planet Earth. Olnek's quirky sense of humor blends nicely with the cheesy special effects, corny intergalactic dialogue and inevitable dyke drama (that apparently transcends galaxies).

Lisa Haas as the hapless, girlfriend-less stationery store clerk is an endearing, unsuspecting Earth lesbian. Veteran actors Susan Zeigler and Cynthia Kaplan and comic Jackie Monahan give the lesbian space aliens distinct personalities, despite the monotone vernacular and identical baldpates.



FILMMAKER-ACTIVIST ANDREA JAMES, COMIC JULIE GOLDMAN, JILL SLOANE GOLDSTEIN AND NIKKI WEISS, FROM LEFT, AT THE DGA 1 FOR OUTFEST SCREENINGS.

She Monkeys

I rode along with the young women competing for a spot on an equestrian acrobatics team in the Swedish film *She Monkeys*, winner of the Grand Jury prize at the Tribeca Film Festival. But I couldn't hold my seat. A coming-of-age story dubbed with English subtitles, newcomer Emma looks up to and defers to Cassandra, her biggest rival and best friend on the team. The two young women were both captivating, but with scenes that included a Tanya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan-like clash, it felt as if they had jumped on a new path.



OUT SINGER-SONGWRITER CHELY WRIGHT GREETES FANS FOLLOWING THE SCREENING OF HER DOCUMENTARY *WISH ME AWAY*.

Vacation

Like the bad acid trip the characters experience mid-film, *Vacation* has some disturbing moments. The premise of four friends on a spontaneous trip to a North Carolina beach for a week is promising, but the tension, depression and desperation (a blender as a vibrator?) just made me want to pack the car and go home. None of the four women—the liar, the needy ex, the psychotic or the sexually frustrated—are all that likable. Nobody leaves transformed, unless you consider an accidental death a transformation.

We Were Here

Through victims' pictures and personal stories and interviews with several survivors, this winner of the Outfest Audience Award for Outstanding Documentary Feature tells the story of the origin of AIDS via its impact on San Francisco. Directed by David Weissman & Bill Weber, the team behind "The Cockettes," "We Were Here" feels difficult to watch yet necessary, because it reveals how quicker official action could have saved lives, and because it's imperative that time and medical advancements do not allow society to forget.



Blogger Bio: For more than a decade Laurie Schenden has covered the entertainment industry for Curve, the Los Angeles Times and Germany's Spotlight magazine. Her cover stories for Curve magazine have included Sharon Stone, Melissa Etheridge, and the cast of The L Word. She's also an award winning documentary filmmaker and one of the co-creators of the Laughing Matters film series, seen on Logo.