

True News

A SUNDAY IN THE CITY

My city has changed more than me.

There is a microfilm birth certificate in the bowels of Daley Center which proves my claim. I have made enough sojourns into the city to keep my birth right.

As I was sitting in front of a computer at my office on a Sunday morning in early May, my mind told me “this is stupid.” The fifth consecutive Sunday at work is not healthy. The work ethic that had been tried to be kept a reasonable bay had crawled back into my skull like a parasitic brain worm. No matter how much time devoted, how many tasks can be juggled at the same time, there will always be work.

Remembering that Dann Gire had touted the Chicago film critics festival, I scanned the festival page to see what was playing - - - and immediately a shorts program caught my attention. I purchased a ticket on-line, then headed towards Chicago.

Easier said than done since I-90 construction, a Cubs game, a film festival, warm weather, a big theater and downtown shopping district draws

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suburbanites in droves.

Weekend drivers are the worst. However, weaving through the construction bottle-necks and leaving the highway well before the early Cub traffic exit, I got into the familiar territory of Lincoln and Diversity.

It is always easier to find non-permit parking around the Catholic Church. It is only 10 city blocks to Addison and Southport which appears now to be the new Heart of Lakeview.

I knew about the rehab construction boom before the fiscal crisis. The neighborhoods are filled with new construction two flats and condos. But Chicago is

still mired in the overbuilding hangover.

But one thing that is newer is the busy sidewalks. Block after block there is a pattern: young couples with small children and/or large dogs. The hipsters have started to spawn.

A steady diet of houses, corner taverns, nail salons, small boutiques, crowded sidewalk patio restaurants and empty storefronts hit me while I walked north on Southport. With the encroachment of patio furniture, plastic fencing and large armored baby strollers, navigating sections of the sidewalks was like the old Frogger arcade game.

Since I arrived an hour early for the show time, I had time to walk the neighborhood and see Wrigley Field.

Blocks away you begin to hear the parking hawks, "Easy Out!" The going rate appears to be \$20 until you hit the Clark street \$30 pavement rental.

For 90 minutes before game time, Wrigleyville was fairly quiet. The bars and restaurants across and down from the stadium were nearly vacant (maybe one family or a small group or two). At one point there were more traffic guards per corner than Cub patrons.

As for the construction



site, it was a war zone mess. It still amazes me that the city allows the public to wander around an active, open construction site. Behind the construction fences, piles of debris, broken concrete, wood forms and dirty equipment could be seen. Since Waveland and Sheffield were closed, one could not get a good look of the new bleacher construction or the new videoboard.

It seemed like the game was going to be a hot ticket since there were more people looking to buy tickets (scalpers looking to flip them near game time) than actual sellers. The Cubs had their own scalpers sitting under a Af-

rican safari tent next to the McDonald's.

A traditional Sunday Cubs crowd was filtering toward the main entrance. There were middle age men taking their elderly fathers to the game, a reversal of past memories. There were small groups of high school kids giggling about school. There were the faded Cub cap, grumpy faced displaced bleacher loyalists who were still basically homeless in their own ball park.

Walking back West along Addison, I found more non-baseball congestion in the streets. There were several lounge sleepwearing zombies walking

home with their fresh Starbucks swinging a plastic bag of sweet starch goods. Then a wind tunnel shear body suit professional jogger wired to the hilt with Nike software and iPod tunes would huff past.

But the trend factor comes to full metal when you turn the corner and find the food trucks. Nothing is more “now” than catering to the foodies with street sweets like donuts or other hand food, like hot perogies. What was more interesting than the food choices were the actual food trucks themselves. They seemed like they were from the set of *Max Headroom*.



Another fixture torn from that 1980s TV series is the cultural significance of being connected to a global network. Half the people sitting in groups at the outdoor cafes were glancing down at their smartphones. The art of conversation has been slowly replaced with the photograph, tweet and emoji character.

But instead of television celebrity our culture is getting replaced with a more self-indulgence individuality. Many people think social media is a reality show of their own life to be lived for their friends and followers. It is a narcissistic carnival side show mirror room. At one point, they share everything; the next minute they complain about a lack of privacy. It is the paradox of interconnections.

But these are mere observations on a warm spring afternoon. The overall youthful vibe walking these streets was a sense of contentment. Even though if one took the time to glance in the alley, they would see rat traps the size of large carry-on baggage. New facades may merely mask old problems.

The Music Box Theater is a classic stage and film venue. Ornate lobbies and main theater from the golden era of films when theaters were truly Dream Palaces. I had not been to this place in probably 25 years. It was good to time travel back to the anti-mall cineplex. The seats were small, metal and squeaky.

As the patrons filtered

into the main theater, I saw a of patrons: the pony tailed grad student reading a textbook; a mother-daughter day trip; four art students who flipped a coin in the morning (heads films, tails the beach); the young, single out of town associates; the thick glasses film buffs; the young couple without kids; the elderly retirees who have moved back into the city to take in the culture; and various *Reader* readers looking to experience something new.

I guess I would fall into the latter category, or at least looking to re-connect to the past. Over the years, I have become accustomed to watch deep cable imported French, Swedish and Korean English subtitled shows. I have purchased classic imported anime films. I know how difficult it is to “create art.”

So a hour and half riff through films and animation shorts selected by Chicago area film critics seemed like fun.

I settled into a mid-row seat about five rows from the back. By the time the lights dimmed, 38 fellow spatial dis-bursed ticketholders had settled in for the festival offerings.

My reaction to the shorts was as varied and diverse as the shorts themselves.

Chop My Money is the story of three street kids living in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The film combines music video, documentary, and narrative styles. The story was told through the words of young street kids (actors) of the film. But as

an informational film, it was very choppy. The scenes were simple, the dialog more quips than insight in their plight as being devoid of adult supervision or a normal home life. The journalist voice inside my head wanted to know the answers to who, what, when, where, how and why these boys stories were important. But I never got any answers.

The documentary had no context to the street kids. We don't know who they are, how they got to the streets of the Congo city, or what will happen to their parents or siblings.. It was merely a series of sound bite quotes and kids wandering the stark contrasts of African ghetto streets. It would seem that the script and continuity was lacking in the film. It probably could have been better as an hour long, in depth *Frontline* special on the plight of street kids than a film short.

Guest Room – This short film did have a fully constructed plot. It is a story of a young woman with Down Syndrome grapples with identity and adulthood after an unexpected turn of events with her boyfriend, who is also has a mental disability. She lives with her boyfriend's parents in their guest room. The parents seem to be liberal, understanding and open to their son's affection toward their boarder.

The conflict between young lovers is a standard story, but this film tells it through unusual characters. It puts a clear,

simple and fresh take on how any relationship comes with highs, lows, risks and uncertainties.

This film did not break new ground in story telling, but it was a good story and a nice ending.

Spearhunter – This documentary rides the fence of being too bizarre to be believable to being a lost skit from SCTV. The central figure of the film is not interviewed because he had passed on. It is about what he left behind that is the strange fascination of the filmmakers.

It is a story of one man, Gene Morris, who lobbied his state officials to change the law to allow him to spear hunt. An accomplished hunter, he needed to push himself into the hardest kill - - - the spear to take down big game. So this rural Alabama hunter proclaims himself the world's greatest spearhunter and erects a museum dedicated to his own obsession.

Now, it is true that one man's hobby can turn into a life long passion. But this takes that passion to obsession very quickly.

The offbeat interviews with Morris' girlfriends, acolytes, and critics explain his devotion, tactics and his unique legacy by self-funding his own personal museum.

This film fits into a documentary category as it featured interviews with people with first hand knowledge (and appreciation) of the subject matter, a hunting zealot who got state

officials to authorize spear hunting as a sport (many to get rid of his pestering petitions). The film tells a complete story of a subject that most people will never encounter.

SMILF – A young single mother (Frankie Shaw) struggles to balance her old life of freedom with her new one as a mother. This proclaimed semi-autobiographical take on self-esteem, young motherhood and personal change . comes to a head during one particular nap-time when Bridgette invites an old boy friend over for a visit.

Prior to watching this, I was aware that the writer-director Shaw had parlayed this short into a pilot series for cable television. So I went into it more as a actress show reel than a fully completed film. I was right. It seems like many young comic actresses are trying to follow the foot steps of Chelsea Handler in an attempt to land a cable television series.

It was such a narrowly defined situational premise (a mother with body type and self worth issues who needs a sexual release to reclaim - - - we assume - - - part of her lost youth). But we learn nothing about the mother's social-economic situation, her child's father or even her potential lover. It seems the only point of the film was one long ironic quip that having a child will ruin your sex life.

One Year Lease – Told entirely through voicemail messages, One Year Lease docu-

ments the travails of two tenants as they endure a year-long sentence with Rita, their cat-loving landlady.

This docu-drama was probably thought of as a new premise to story telling: using voice messages from one's crazy landlady to tell a tenant's story. But the messages and the images of the mostly vacant apartment, its house cat and the furnishing of a trendy apartment really did not put any context into the voice over answering machine messages.

The disconnect between the landlord's complaints and no real background on the tenants gave viewers no reference points to judge whether the landlady was crazy, annoying, a busy body or just lonely. And we get little information to feel any true empathy with the tenants.

STOP – A young man's post high school college livelihood is put to the test when he gets stopped by the police on his way home from sports practice.

STOP was the most complete live-action short film in the series. Filmed before the recent high profile police- black youth headlines, an athlete who is walking home at night gets stopped by two officers.

Civil libertarians will note that there is no probable cause for the stop (so this would be considered an illegal search even though there was causal consent). Instead of speaking up for his own rights, the young man relents to cooperate with the

stop.. The police take him to the police car and search him and his back pack.

There is visible tension during this encounter, where the young man is almost baited into creating a situation. But no reaction is forthcoming as they continue to search his person and possessions. The police find nothing out of the ordinary, and send him on his way like they did nothing wrong. No harm, no foul.

Spoiler alert: here is where a twist makes this a very good film. How we view the stop suddenly changes after the young man gets home. When he returns home, he gets into his room to take out a hidden tiny plastic bag. He then sneaks past his mother to the bathroom to dispose of the "evidence." It is open to interpretation whether a lesson was learned or that luck was truly on his side.

To be fair, I went to the festival see the final two animated films. I had high expectations for both of them since I saw trailers for both.

The OceanMaker – This is a story of a young female pilot who flies the clear skies looking for clouds. This is because the seas have disappeared and water is the most valuable commodity on the planet. She has to fight off vicious sky pirates so she can seed the clouds to create rain. But sky pirates use large wind socks to capture the water of the clouds by condensing it by flying through them.

This computer animated

film looks basic, theater quality release. The landscapes show the barren setting. The modified airships look realistic. The premise seems reasonable. That is the best part of the film.

This is one of those films where the computer graphics, background paintings and action animation movements "wow" the creators so there is no real need for an actual script. In fact, there was no dialogue in this movie.

A good premise without a solid background story of the young pilot does support a viewer's investment in the film. It seemed to be less than half a movie - - - the missing dialog and the missing motivations of the characters was needed in order to fully explain the danger, their actions, and how the story gets resolution.

The program ended with the acclaimed animation short, **World Of Tomorrow**, Sundance and SXSW film festivals Grand Jury Prize Winner written and directed by art film favorite, Don Hertzfeldt

This is a story of a little girl is taken on a mind-bending tour of her distant future. Herzfeldt taps his surreal vision of the world and simple childish animation style to tell the story of how future technology will eventually rob mankind of its soul and its inner child.

Of the shorts, WOT had the most character interaction (and dialog) but at the same time less character development. It

had some humor and some sadness, but it really was a commentary on modern technology going to someday rule our lives.

One of the themes of the film is despite how advanced we get in our lives, there is a nostalgic longing for the comfort of simple, childhood memories. Memories are the antidote to the modern sterile, static, interpersonal blues.

So what did I learn from this day in the city? First, there is a diverse collective of artists trying to tell their stories in their own way. Second, that the strongest connections are created by flashbacks to one's own tried and true fond memories. There are universal cultural passages through school, relationships, wins, losses, work and play that are the touch points to further examination and commentary on our lives. However, many of us merely leave it to habit and daily work routines to rue our experiences. If film teaches us anything, it states that change is possible only if you want to change.

Yes, we are conditioned to avoid failure. But without failure, we will not learn from our mistakes. One can live by luck alone since luck is merely a fortunate event created by one's search for opportunity. One failure can lead to everlasting success.

In the afternoon traffic jam back home, I realized that there is more than 6 plus work days. As dumb as it sounds, life is actually meant to be lived.