

CLAIMS DEPARTMENT



It's Cinequest time, so I'll be writing about that.

I love my local film festival and I've been working for them for more than 20 years. I'm happy to say that this year, the films are fantastic, and I've already seen a few of the features and there's two that are absolutely phenomenal.

The shorts are great, but that may be because I did a lot of the picking!

Here are a few of my favorite things that'll be showing over the next couple of weeks, shorts and features, and stuff you should seek out, because it's all great and festival stuff ain't great about getting to a theatre near you.





I love Boy Bands.

Well, a particular flavor of them, more in the mode of New Kids on the Block than N*Sync or Backstreet. Maybe it's that I came of High School in their peak period and once had an NKOTB bedspread. Maybe it's because *Step-by-Step* is an absolute bop, and *Please Don't Go Girl* has everything a ballad needs. Who knows, but also, it's good stuff.

Fanatics is the kind of short that wakes me up from a slump of those films that never quite hit. In fact, it did it so thoroughly, I ended up watching it twice.

Charlie and Gerald used to be a boy band in the early 2000s, arguably the high-water mark for American Boy Bandery. They fell out of favor, and now, well now things are tough. They need an infusion of cash, and faster than a bunch of quickees behind a dumpster can provide.

And then there's a contest!

This contest could save 'em up real good, and there's stiff competition, and old wounds to overcome.

This is kinda a 'We gotta put on a Show to Save the Farm!' short, and it does that really well. There's more layering here, with hilariously dark humor and a spirit that Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland would have been proud of.

Probably Judy a bit more than Mickey.

The real key to this short is that these are two characters who are utterly lovable, even if they might not be surface likable. You pull for them despite their flaws, and hope that they'll reach for the brass ring, and maybe grab it.

Andrew Chappelle, who I've been seeing just about everywhere the last few years, is great as the co-star and wrote the piece. The direction by Taran Killam (of *Saturday Night Live* fame, but more importantly, the best thing about *Drunk History* re-enactments!) is superb, and that entire short plays out as a crowd-pleaser that takes a turn or two before you realise that those are the kind of turns that happen only in a world where songs like *U + Me = Us (Calculus)* or *I Want it That Way* could be a reality. The world we're given here is far more full of joy and potential than ours, and the lens we view it through is an excellent example of how you film a fantasy without filming a fantasy.

Fanatic shows as a part of *Something Funny* on Sunday, August 20th at the Hammer Theatre in Beautiful Downtown San Jose, and then again at the ICON Showplace in Mt. View on Friday, August 25th.





Sloane—A Jazz Singer

The story of America in the 20th century is the story of Jazz.

The major names in the history of Jazz are some of the most fascinating humans who made it through those decades. Names like Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, and Billie Holiday are widely known even today, decades after they've passed. They were icons of talent, who re-defined American singing traditions, and among their number, though less known today by non-afficiandos, is Carol Sloane.

Her talent, staggering. Widely-held by other performers as one of the great jazz interpreters, Carol Sloane was in the midst of some of the most important moments in the development of American music. Not only was she a contemporary, and friend, of folks like Ella and Carmen McRae, but she was there as the world of rock 'n roll became the dominant form of popular music.

The documentary *Sloane: A Jazz Singer*, looks at Carol Sloane's career as she prepares for a show at Birdland. Now in her 80s, she's got a show at such a legendary venue and it's built around the reveal of the power she still possesses in performing for a live recording.

And as powerful a performer as she still is, her personality is even more powerful.

Sloane telling us her story, the ups and downs of several decades, from the heights of the *Tonight Show* and performing around the world, to working as a legal secretary, she has had a life and knows how to pass her memories to us with clarity. She imparts her triumphs and her failures with the same passion: the passion of the performer. She's giving us the story, her story, and when things get heavy and darker, she doesn't shy away, she goes into it, through it. She demonstrates that she is a human who understands the path of time, and what every decision means, and what it meant. She seems to understand her life as a road, and it passed through some unpleasant, and often boring, neighborhoods, but it also gave her grand vistas.

This is a film constructed around interviews, but formed through the use of archive materials. Television performances, hundreds of photos, and perhaps most impressively, audio tapes. The way it plays visually is so impressive, and deeply textured, both in image and sound. This isn't verite, not even slightly, nor is it archive-constructed like *Amy*, but a hybrid that takes the best of both and runs in the interplay. At times I was brought into the world of the archive doc, but the moment I got the familiar feeling of oversaturation in memorabilia, bam, Carol Sloane of 2019 reappears and takes it all over again.

The incredible stuff is the stuff that is closer to Carol than to the many superstars whose names are still widely celebrated. When we see or hear Carmen McRae or Ella or Dizzy, we recognise them, but we connect with Carol, she engages us so deeply that they become a part of her story, not Carol Sloane being an ornament on

their legendary tree. Perhaps nothing makes the point of the power of Carol Sloane more than the fact that when he hits us with that show we've been waiting for, and we're through to the end, I instantly wanted to hear the whole thing.

This is a wonderful documentary, and director Michael Lippert has choreographed a film that is the story of a life and its intersections.

Sadly, Carol Sloane left us in January, but this documentary serves as a stronger, more-lasting memorial than any tombstone ever could.

Sloane: A Jazz Singer shows Monday, August 28th at the Mountain View ICON Theatre.







I have lived in the Santa Cruz mountains of Northern California for almost nine years.

The mountains are a strange place. They draw you in and somehow change you. When you look the first time, you kinda see it, but like the proverbial frog in the proverbial pot, you sink in as it gets weirder around you. All that may be why I became so engrossed by *Hundreds of Beavers*, arguably the single-most avant garde feature I've seen in years.

The premise is this: an applejack salesman, Jean Kayak (played by the amazing and long-named Ryland Brickson Cole Tews), sees his entire operation blow-up, and thus he is set to a new path, becoming a fur trapper. He takes on the creatures of the forest in a life-or-death battle, and sets about fulfilling a quest, Well, a couple of quests. It's very much structured like a video game, complete with side-quests and map-cuts. This is a structure that a lot of science fiction and fantasy films have taken in recent years, but this doesn't seem to play in those fields at the same time as being exactly in that space

And in that realm lies its brilliance.

The look of the film is black-and-white, high-contrast/concept. The work they did with backgrounds is amazing, and it turns the film into a wonderland. Immediately I came to the sensation of Guy Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World*, or even more closely, *Night Mayor*. It's not just the black-and-white, but the use of the contrast to bring us in to a place that is either charming or disquieting, usually in equal measure. The setting's non-reality is key to the marvel of the film because it plays in a universe that is almost exactly the same as Bugs Bunny and his ilk inhabit.

The lack of almost any dialogue ramps it up, especially when we get the sound of blubbering tears or screams. The atmospheric sound seems a natural encounter, and the breaking of it to be a transgression. This ties it to the silents in a much more real way than *The Artist* managed. They both feel like silent films, but here, they're working with the idea and tropes and when they do give us intentional words/utterances, they mean something. The sound design is so smart, minimalist, full of nuance, but precise.

The action is both surreal and comical, like in Looney Toons. The way everything is presented is with a sense that Jean is unbreakable, an unkillable machine bent on taking out his terrible fur-covered foes, but he is surrounded by death... or at least the kind of death that is represented by 'X's across the eyes and drag-marks across the snow. Here, we are given a slapstick reality that plays in the unreal as much as a Mario Bros. game, but the stakes are actually there.

In *Hundreds of Beavers*, we get little things that add up. A great bit of physical acting, when Jean nearly goes eye-first into a

stump that has been beaver-gnawed into a stake-like death device, is just one of dozens of Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton-worthy pieces of physical comedy. The cinematography amps everything up, and there are times I'm biting my nails like I would watching *Safety Last* at The Stanford.

The fun bit is that every animal is a giant, fur-suited human. This is the closest it ties to the cartoon world. They're big, and they have so many human attributes that play off that size. This makes Jean's hunt for beaver into a great big comedy treasure hunt that finds more and more with every turn of the spade.

This is one of the finest pieces of truly unique cinema you'll ever see. It builds beautifully, it never pauses too long to let the air out of the audience, nor moves too quickly so that nothing lands. That sweet-spot is something that many films, especially surrealist films, miss.

You might remember a short film I talked about obsessively years ago: ['Lullaby for Lucious & Sumat'](#) by Alvin Campana. The connections between the two feel deep: the use of large furry characters, puppetry (and the fish in this one are AWESOME!) the idea that the world is different in ways we both do and don't understand, and most importantly, the way that the setting falls somewhere between Magical Realism and Deep Fantasy, like Dali fighting Borges with Philip K. Dick as the ref.

You really should set aside the time to give *Hundreds of Beavers* watch. It's one of those viewing experiences that you will absolutely cherish.





The history of cinema may seem to be about the fluidity of the camera.

Starting in the 1910s, we saw movement of cameras through space to allow for greater exploration of the scene. This idea evolved rather slowly, but eventually things accelerated with the 1990s and 2000s making handheld camerawork very much the norm in many areas of film, especially in genre. Even filmmakers who had been long champions of the lock-down camera, like Kevin Smith and Jim Jarmusch, have gone all glidey. When we encounter a film that doesn't play in those fields, we can be jarred by it.

Then again, it also can allow for a stage that is a powerful platform for all sorts of performance. This latter is best exemplified by *SHARE?*, the fantastic new feature from Ira Rosensweig.

This is a science fiction story that brought my mind immediately to a classic E.M. Forster story *The Machine*

Stops. We open with a single man, alone, in a sparsely decorated room. He can interact with a screen using the green text that marked old computers. Eventually, he finds that he's able to access a video-based network that allows others who are trapped (and perhaps others...) to view and communicate with one another. By producing content, they are able to earn credits towards materials for their cells.

You can certainly see almost immediately the parallel between the *SHARE?* Universe and the TikTok universe, no? The amazing thing is that there is one single camera position, but it's also incredibly dynamic. Yes, each of the rooms are shot from the exact same set-up, but the rooms are different, and more importantly, there's the variety of stuff on-screen. There is a lot of picture-in-picture going on, and that allows us to experience the world of the various captives. Well, the inverted world of the captives. There's near-constant text on the side of the screen, with data about their available funds or commands, the most important of which being 'SHARE?'

This kind of film is a risk. You have to have a magnetic cast who, in essence, become your movement. The lead, Melvin Gregg, is fantastic, and Bradley Whitford, he of *The West Wing* and Jake's dad on *Brooklyn 99*, is absolutely perfect for the role as a mentor/obnoxious jerk with a heart of slightly-less-than-gold, perhaps.

Alice Braga, though, is an absolute revelation. She is great as the one who questions the entire system, and is eventually won over, in a way, while still maintaining her paranoia, and something akin to idealism. She is an ideal science fiction actress, as she makes herself real at the same time as realisti-

cally interacting with the non-reality of the world she finds herself in. Everyone is great, but she's an absolute marvel. When she gives herself over to the world she finds herself trapped in, she turns the entire piece into something more and more fascinating. And when she turns from that, it carries even more power. The ultimate message of the piece is likely summed up in a single line: "Overall, we're kept comfortable and distracted." If there is a better phrase to sum-up the world of today, and especially the influencer/TikToker/Instalebrity/OnlyFans world, I don't know what it is.

This is an absolute masterpiece of a thought-experiment. Sadly, most thought experiments end up being far too deep into themselves, but this one, this is not that at all. It's fascinating, and dynamic. We can find elements of people we are acutely aware of in our social media feeds. I did a bit of a look: one of the screens we see for a period is exactly my TikTok friend Tom, another is absolutely a dead-ringer presentation-wise for my Instagram friend Lisa. The performances feel like performances, at times, and while I would sometimes complain that would make the piece feel theater-y, it is actually far more realistic in the way those captives interact with the system, because it is EXACTLY how we interact with the systems we've found to keep ourselves distracted and comfortable. You can tell that it's a choice, especially from Gregg and Danielle Campbell. They give great performances that demand you delve in deeper with every second they are on screen.

There are so many other messages here as well. There is a simple one about group dynamics, about leaders and the prices they pay, or have extracted from them. There's the idea of our choices be-

ing finite, free will being an illusion, or at the very least limited. There is, also, Plato's Cave going on. I almost look at it as an inverted-*The Matrix*. There is no shortage of thoughtful mental discourse that *SHARE?* makes possible. In fact, I'd argue it forces it on you, and in a way that you eventually realise is exactly what you wanted all along.







A few years ago, in the *Before Times*, I reviewed a short called [Followers](#). That film looked at the dangerous world of making your mark with more and more extreme content that is required to build the brand. That film was about the capture, the hunt for fame. I was lucky enough to see *Under the Influencer* which is about one who has finished the hunt, caught the rabbit, and now needs to find a way to keep catching it when the audience has started looking elsewhere.

Under the Influencer should be depressing as hell; it's about Influencer World, a setting as dark as Hollywood in the 1920s. Instead of hitting us like *Requiem for a Dream*, it feels like it's going to play out almost like a good-hearted *All About Eve* if it were directed by Frank Capra, but then it does something completely unexpected.

It becomes the story of a life.

We follow Tori (played with incredible emotional flexibility by Taylor Scorse) as she navigates a continuing social media presence that may well have peaked. She's in her mid-20s, and her team is attempting to keep her in the limelight. She, though, has grown weary of that world, but still keeps going because moving on could easily mean moving out of the public eye. While the professional side of her life seems to be on a slide, her world is broader and more entangled than her viewers could understand.

Now, the parts of this absolute feast of a film are magnificent, adding up to a sum that can't be denied, but there are intangibles that toss us into another dimension. Taylor Scorse is fantastic, largely because at no point does

she feel as if she's trying to play Norma Desmond. Instead, she goes in for a human trying to avoid becoming a caricature that an audience can love. This is a tightrope that any actor would have trouble with, but at the same time, it is not a performance that is made by the material, but one that turns the solid script into something nearly brutally realistic.

Because we've seen this, right?

We've watched the rise, burn, and crash of stars, right? We've seen one YouTube sensation after another do everything to make it, then claw and scream and fight and fall and inch themselves back up a bit before the drastic, the drama, the endgame. We know this arc; Kenneth Anger loved it when he imagined it for every Tinseltown star of the Golden Age. This time, we're given the kind of performance that makes us not only fall for our lead the way an audience online would, but the kind of presence that infuses a film with both warmth and confusion. Nowhere is this more apparent than when we she her finally takes a jump into music, a dream of hers that her assistant had been trying to get her to dive into. The segment, and the montage that plays out under it, is exactly what a film like this needs. It's not a triumphant step; it's a real step. That moment nearly had me in tears...which really would have worried my officemate.

The vulnerability of Tori is baked into the script, as is a devil-angel dichotomy for her producer and assistant for the first half of the film. Maybe it's not a devil-angel thing, but more a Ghost of Christmas Past vs. Ghost of Christmas Future sorta thing...only way less dark. There's a Ghost of Christmas Present, too, and it's another exceptional performance. The entire character slate is full of classic film archetypes, only brought forth into something newer, or at least less pat. There's the mysterious stranger, the mystic, the plucky (and persistent) sidekick, the hired gun, the rising star, and even a sorta whacky neighbor. Somehow, these don't add up to something that feels like everything else, though. They feel like the people in your neighborhood, the people that you meet while you're walking down the street each day.

When it's boiled down to syrup, and we get the great reveal of the reality behind Tori, there you feel a turn out of the city and into the desert we only vaguely know. It doesn't feel like Tori is lost, though. It feels like Tori is finally finding herself. She is far more lost when she is in her element than when she takes herself out of it. Pulling that trick off is the mark of a filmmaker who knows what they're doing, and actors who understand that a perfor-

mance is an enabling process. When we get a lovely one-on-one exchange between Tori (I'm sorry, Vicki...) and a young man she just met, the dialogue is infused with patter and reaction and reflection, and most importantly, retention. We can see how she draws it in and lets it stew, and every moment from then on reflects on that in a way that is clear. That montage I mentioned earlier? Same thing happens, and it plays out across the rest of the film too. Same with her breakdown. Same with everything. Every moment infuses every scene, and you can sense the changes in Tori, and more importantly, in the entire film. This is a film that feels as if its an evolution, and not just a plot that plays out; it is a reality that we just happen to get a glimpse of through a screen.

Also there is the single sweetest, most perfect moment I've ever seen on screen. It surprised me with the simplicity, the perfection, and the absolute joy it filled me with.

I can't recommend *Under the Influencer* enough. It's one that made me think, and feel, and ultimately, want to get up and tell people.

But here, not on YouTube.

Under the Influencer shows on August 21st at 930pm at the Hammer Theatre in San Jose, and then again August 24th at 11am at the ShowPlace ICON Theatre in Mountain View.







Twenty-Five Short Films: One Triplet Each

A Boat for My Brother

A Younger brother's passing
Demands a Viking Funeral
And requires red tape.

A Holiday Casserole Your Man Will Love

She's a YouTube Chef
Who makes a mistake or two
There will be blood...

Creeper

You can not shoot yourself
With a trigger finger
That isn't there.

AlieNation

There are monsters at the borders
Some of them exact a price
Others require more.

Notice of Rejection

It's never easy to hear no
Especially for a filmmaker
Whose Surreal visions are genius

99 cent Pizza

Asking Questions
Can change reality
Sometimes for the worse

Fudgie Freddy

You are what you create
And even when you do not want to be
It will eventually catch up to you.



That's Our Time

A shrink and her client
They're getting somewhere
Perhaps the end of an unexpected road...

The Film Factory

Through the right lens
Even the ruins of Europe's last film factory
Can shine like Rita Haworth

One Second in Small Francs

Coins tell stories
Short stories, small stories
Jingling in our pockets

Innersekt

Let's say you're in a cult
And the time is now.
Do you drink the Flav-R-Aid???

Fanatic

Boy Band on hard times
A contest rises with glorious prizes
And an unexpected champion

WTF2020s

Foul-mouthed
But true
The definition of this decade.

Walking Backwards

An artist must confront
The things that make them
An artist.

To the Desert

The beauty of the movement
Be it body or camera or music
Is what moves the soul

The Podcast

True Crime podcasts
Can hit close to home
When you become the topic



Alright, that's enough from me!

I'll be back next time with a more regular issue, though I know I'll be writing about *Asteroid City* which I saw and loved!

I'll also have some food stuff, Trump indictment views (I've gotten way deep into reading indictments!) and hopefully my order of more Haldeman stories shows up!!!



