

Claims Department 68



In recent years, with the addition of two tiny, needy, adorable humans to the family, it's been hard to spend much time at Cinequest. I might get a day or two in, and the whole family might have a day visit, but mostly, I don't get around much anymore.

This year was slightly different, and I managed to see a couple of movies, hang out with my friends in the Lounge, and even go to the Opening Night party!

Cinequest for me is very much about The VIP Lounge. It's open to staffers, like me, and filmmakers, and press, and anyone who is willing to blow several hundred dollars on a VIP pass. It's usually where you can find Mike Rabehl, the head of programming, and my buddy Jason Wiener, who has been in various zines of mine over the

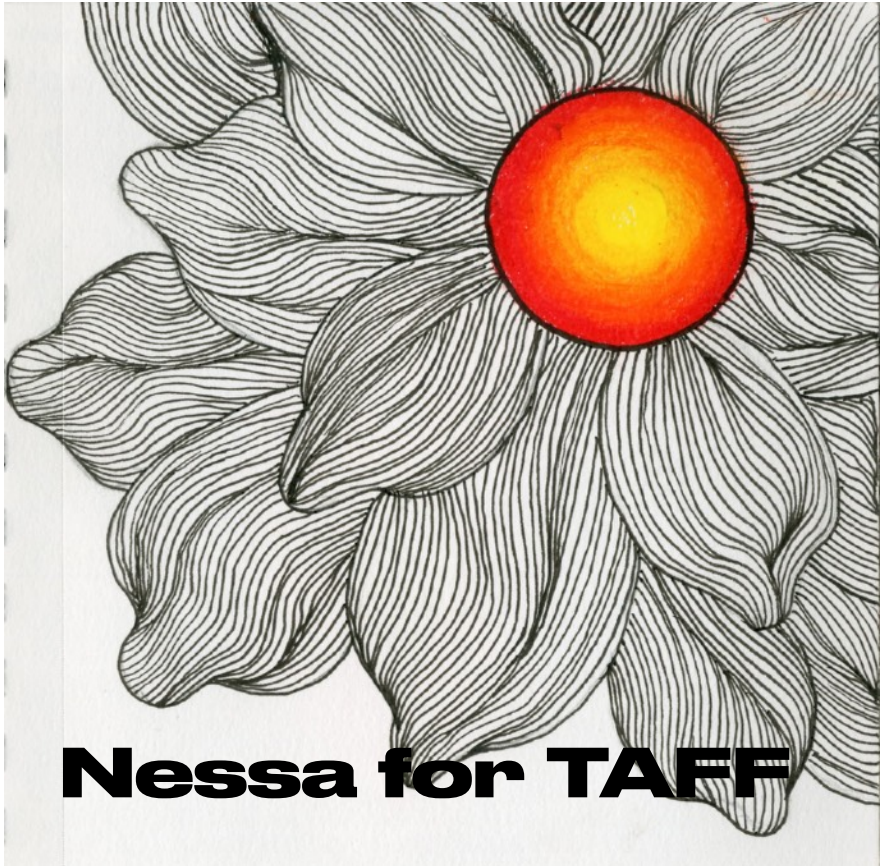
years. This year, I went in on the first day and, as often is the case, ran into Gary Singh. Gary is a Downtown legend, I think I met him in the 90s, but really we got to know each other when I produced *Rock the Block: The Story of the Cactus Club*, where we interviewed him. He writes for *The Metro*, the local lifestyle paper, and he's written a few books, including one on the San Jose Earthquakes soccer team. We chatted, I drank water, and then I headed home. Vanessa hadn't been feeling good, so I needed to watch the kids in the evening.

After that, I ran home to make sure Vanessa was OK, and she was clearly getting sicker, and I fed the kids, and told them all the people I met and talked to. The kids love movie. I made dinner, and I made sure Vanessa got some food, her meds, and then, once she'd fallen asleep and the kids were down, I headed over the hill to the Opening Night party. I hadn't met any of the new filmmakers, but there were the folks I always see, and there was really good food, in particular these amazing Chicken Tamales. I was pleased, but also tired, so I left about 10 and headed home.

The next day was important. For several pre-pandemic years, Cinequest had done Silent Film screenings, but they'd last done them in 2019. Vanessa loved them, especially because they always had the Mighty Wurlitzer, almost always played by the legendary Dennis James! I saw them do *Safety Last*, and Vanessa and I saw *The Wind* there I think the last time they ran Silents. This year, it was a classic adventure, 1920's *The Mark of Zorro*, and a Buster Keaton film, *Our Hospitality*.

This time, we brought the kids.

Now, we are lucky in several respects. The kids can watch a movie in a theatre and only get bored during non-action sequences. They are also both really good readers. So they could handle a silent, or at least that's what we hoped. *The Mark of Zorro* went first, and when the organ started, well, they were excited! Bella did get bored from time to time, but JP was rapt! I had one of those proud film dad moments when I get to sit with my kids doin' stuff I wish my Dad had done with me. Of course, Silent



Films in the Bay Area were rare, and certainly not with a live organist. And we did watch some Chaplin VHS tapes over the years. Still, I was so happy to share it with them.

The next day, Saturday, I was actually going to be on the clock, sort of. I used to do the pre-show announcing on a lot of films every year. Recent years, it's one or two a year, though I'm hoping I can do more next year.

But, Vanessa was still sick. She'd gotten worse.

The kids and I had come back from our trip a week and a half before, all of us with coughs, and I briefly had a fever, but Vanessa was REALLY sick, hacking and wheezing like nobody's business. I made her Get-Well Soup in the morning, which didn't actually help, sadly, though she devoured it.

I spent Saturday morning letting Vanessa sleep while I did house things. I ran to the store to get some fixin's for dinner so Vanessa wouldn't have to cook. That was easier than I thought. I gave Bella a butter knife, a jar of peanut butter, and a thing of honey, and moved the bread down to where they could reach it. They ended up feeding both themselves and JP!

I headed over the hill and grabbed lunch first – Korean BBQ at Gen.

I have written often of my love for Korean BBQ, and Gen is the best one out there today. It's a chain, but it's all-you-can-eat, the meat is good, and they have really good service. I sat down and ordered and enjoyed the hell out of cooking my own food in a place that ain't my house!

After that, it was off to the lounge. I ran into two folks with a film I absolutely adore – Berdyans'k. It's an Irish-Ukrainian co-production that is one of the finest Science Fiction films I've seen in years. The story follows Lera, a young Ukrainian woman who fled to Ireland, who uses a VR headset and a Dark Web séance software package to communicate with her sister who has died fighting in the war. It's an incredible and emotional film, and it packs a lot into 15 minutes. Tom, the director, was a great guy, and his wife, a hilarious Serbian, was an absolute delight! We chatted, and then the lounge closed, so we headed over to Scott's seafood, where a lot of filmmakers were hanging around. They had a really nice chicken skewer.

Now, the film I was seeing and announcing that evening was directed by the cousin of my friend Gretta. She was coming down from Seattle, and I hadn't seen her in ages, so it was nice. We ended up meeting in front of the Hammer Theatre, the one place in San Jose where you can find a lot of Chihuly lamps. She introduced me to her family, so many of whom had come in. I got everyone in to the theatre, and I did the announcing.

The announcing went incredibly well! I got to be funny, give info, and get the audience into it.

Oh, and the film?

Tim Travers & The Time Traveler's Paradox.

The story is pretty simple: Tim Travers is a scientist who has decided to test out the classic Time Traveler's Paradox. He builds a time machine that sends him back in time one minute, where he shoots himself in the head. This should have caused a paradox, but it doesn't. So, Tim goes back and does it again. And on and on.

After a while, he starts to collect Tims, and they go about trying to figure out what's going on. This leads to all sorts of weird stuff, some sexy times, and a lot of violent stuff when we get a hit man, and then another, and then a God shows up.

OK, it's a foul-mouthed feature, but it's hilarious and moves so very well. It features a great cast, most notably Joel McHale (of *Community*) playing a version of Art Bell, Danny Trejo, and Felicia Day.

The reaction of the crowd was insane, and the film won Best Comedy, and it only helped the film land.

We then did a Q+A with the director, Stimson, the lead actor, Sam, and Felicia Day.

I've done a lot of these over the decades, and this one stood out because there were literally no questions about budget or shooting. Some of it was about the context of the film, some was about the science of the film, and I got to ask about individual elements specific to the actors. I had a blast!



After that, we all basically sat around talking. Felicia did a very nice thing, I asked her to record a short message to Vanessa, and she did...and SHE COMPLIMENTED MY BEARD!!!

After that, I headed out to the courtyard waiting to join in on the post-screening party. I met up with Tom and Lara, his wife, after and we were talking. She was a big fan of Felicia, but she was too shy to go and say HI. So, like I do, I called Felicia over, introduced her to Tom and Lara, and walked off.

I was reminded that I had done the same thing for Elizabeth Upchurch and Neil Gaiman in 2012.

The party was nice, they had a lot of food, including these lovely meatballs that I devoured. I talked with a ton of filmmakers, and really enjoyed myself.

I drove home, hoping to come back the next afternoon, but alas, it didn't happen. I stayed home and took care of Vanessa and the Kids. They were actually really good all day, which made dealing with the sheer amount of snot coming out of Vanessa a little easier.

It was also the first night I slept on the couch. It's almost two weeks later and I'm still there. We just can't have both of us getting sick.

Monday was up, and I went over to Cinequest for lunch, hanging out in the Lounge. My buddy Sam, a genius director of short comedy sports documentaries, was coming in for the fest! He's a good guy, and Vanessa and I met him in 2014 when he was with his film *Cardboard Titanics*, about the Cardboard Boat Racing in Alabama. He showed up and we hung out, and met a bunch of new folks, including Lucy, an Australian filmmaker who made an amazing film called *Disarmed*, which is just a kick to the gut. She, on the other hand, is an absolute hoot! We hung out, Tom and Lara joining us, and we just had a blast until I had to run back to work.

Tuesday was pretty normal, save for the fact that little JP got in trouble at school, which would happen a lot over the next week. I'm pretty sure we got to get 'em on different meds. The same thing happened with Bella.

That evening, there was a short film program, and I went for the first film. It was called *Afri – The Coming Night*. It was a beautiful, lyrical short film about a world where there was never night and them finally having to deal with the arrival of the darkness from the two suns. It's a beautiful short, and one that I recommend, though I think it's wrapping up its festival run.

I then headed off, which meant I couldn't watch *Disarmed*, but I'd seen it a half-dozen times as I programmed the festival.

I headed home, and it was the last time I was at Cinequest 2024.

BUT...

After the festival, they do an on-line festival where folks can watch the films from the festival in the comfort of their own home. I loaded up several and my GHOD, were they great!

The first one I sat down on the couch with Bella to watch. Now, Bella's 8, so you wouldn't expect a documentary about a 1950s movie to be high on their list, but this was an exception because they're a crazy kid. *The Conqueror* is a feature doc about the 1953 film of the same name. Now, why would a kid of 8 be so interested? Well, the story goes that there were nuclear tests, above ground, being held in the prevailing wind path of the location. Bella is, more than anything, fascinated by nuclear power and the bomb, and thus, we really enjoyed it together. The film, with John Wayne cast as Ghengis Khan, was a classic bomb, but the documentary is unbelievably engaging, even at nearly two hours.

If you can keep an ADHD-riddled child interested, you're doing something right.

The next film I tried was *My Divorce Party*. It featured Rumer Willis, who I always enjoy, though it was really an ensemble comedy. The humor was broad, at times a little too broad, but it got laughs that weren't cheap. I loved the way that they fluctuated between beautiful vista shots (they were set near Palm Springs, and long-time readers will know my love of Palm Springs) and intimate shots of the actors. This was a female-led comedy that worked on a couple of levels, though none so much as the archetypal level, where each of the friends in the group represented a type of friend many females have. I really thought it was a smart film, and like *Tim Travers & The Time Travelers' Paradox*, it's foul-mouthed and at times a bit extreme. Still, I loved it the whole way through.

After that, I needed to do a documentary. Because I love docs.

Quixote in New York is a documentary about a legendary Flamenco dancer, Carrete, wants to have a big ol' show in New York. His dancing career ain't got much mileage left, he's 82 and dancing is hard on

the body. He gets his shot, and it's wonderful, and he's quite a character. What I love about it the most was the camera work. This isn't a fluid movement doc, nor is it a handheld intimacy. It's mostly single shots, tableau-style piece. In some way, it reminded me of the early work of Jim Jarmusch, but it still manages to get to the subject without distance or detachment. It also kinda reminded me of portions of *Beyond the Mat*, especially the Terry Funk section.

After that, a short. I'd seen all the shorts, but I do love going back. *Deal of a Lifetime* is shockingly tender, and very funny, portrait of not only the desire to keep death at bay, but the unexpected problems that arrive for the living while preparing for it. Cross is great, as he is in pretty much everything, but here he gets an incredible amount of tenderness across. It's like those moments in *Arrested Development* where Tobias actually connects with Lindsey.

I followed that up with another short – *TR(ol)L*

This was an awesome visual experience, very late 1990s. The story is of the time when a chain letter circulated



trying to get the decade-old music video, *Hangin' Tough* by the New Kids on the Block, as the top video on *Total Request Live*, the MTV program that was serving the young people and putting their favorite videos from acts like Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys, N*Synch, and 98 degrees. Putting an old video on was something of a coup, largely because the folks who were doing it weren't the show's main demographic.

It's so stylish, and I loved that about it. It mimicked everything from old AOL Instant Messenger to Eudora eMail systems. I loved that, and the interviews were really good.

The next one was another doc, and one about the Arts, but totally different approach. *In Between Realities* is about the incredible Michel van der Aa, a contemporary composer whose work I remember from my days listening to classical music podcasts. He uses electronics, found sounds, and natural sounds. His works like *Upload* are incredible, and this was a simple presentation like *Quixote in New York*, but at the same time dealing with technology in a way that never felt intrusive. I absolutely loved this one while I was programming the short films, and I re-watched it and am still as much in love with it as I was then.

That's all I got through before I took the kids off to the Southbay Championship Wrestling show in Santa Clara. They are getting more and more into wrestling, and we had a real blast. This was an all-woman's show, and the talent was OK, it's a small indy promotion that has some fun talent, but few folks you're likely to see on your TV any time soon. There were a couple who might just need more ring time, they have the look, and the main event had one of them – Jrod, who was far and away the tallest woman they had working with 'em, and she has a strong athletic look, and she plays a strong heel. I thought it was a fun show, and we got to meet Lady Frost, an AEW wrestler who was doing a meet-n-greet and signing at the show.

I did get to see Christina Von Eerie, the wrestler who I actually once did an issue of *The Drink Tank* about.

And so, when I wasn't helping Vanessa, or trying to get over my own headache and fatigue, that's what I happened to be doin' lately.



