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N.H. Film Festival's nonfiction entries especially impressive

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Two middle-aged American men set out to win the "world's toughest race" 3,000 miles across the Atlantic in a rowboat in "Row Hard No Excuses." MovieWeb photo

By Gina Carbone October 18, 2007 6:00 AM

Maybe it's because I feel like I'm being enlightened instead of just entertained, but I have a special thing for documentaries. Last year "The Trials of Darryl Hunt" hit all my informed outrage buttons and was my pick at the New Hampshire Film Festival (then Expo). This year more documentaries got under my skin — especially one that locked in on my awe and inspire buttons.

There were a lot of ups and downs over the four-day fest as I enjoyed, disliked, loved, shrugged at and was frustrated by 18 films. There were 18 N.H. films featured but not all of my 18 matched that list. (I tried!)

I started at 1 p.m. Thursday at The Music Hall for "The Castle." Whether it was the local content or greater awareness of the festival, the theater was about half full and last year at this time it was virtually empty. (Happily, I found attendance up everywhere.) "The Castle" is Neil Novello's documentary on the now-empty Portsmouth Naval Prison. It features local faces like the Rev. Arthur Hilson of New Hope Baptist Church in Portsmouth (then a prison counselor) and Kittery, Maine, real estate agent Sandy Domina (the widow of former prison commander Col. Walter Domina). The doc was alternately amusing and insightful, using footage from a 1972 film to help show life inside the walls. One frustration was the lack of intel from former prisoners. We hear current voices from one side of the bars, but not the other.

The second film was a much greater frustration, not for the content, but the presentation. I had missed a previous chance to see "Abandoned in the Arctic" and was very much looking forward to the recreation of Lt. Adolphus W. Greely's Arctic expedition. This kind of adventure story is right up my alley, but halfway through the screening the digital projection started breaking up. Finally, it stopped. At first they were going to try to fix it, then said they couldn't but hoped we could attend the other showing on Saturday morning at the Sheraton. Director Gino Del Guercio, producer Geoff Clark and narrator/explorer/Greely's great-great-grandson James Shedd came on stage to tell the remaining audience members how the film ended. Truly a shame. (Why was there no backup disk?)

As a member of the New Hampshire Grand Jury I watched the five nominated films at home before the festival: "The Busker," "Out of Balance," "The Stag Hunt," "The Front Runner" and "Nowhere Fast." I was impressed by the acting of the two young leads (including Ayla Barreau of Exeter) in "The Busker," which won

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Stephen Croke the New Hampshire Filmmaker of the Year award, but in keeping with my doc kick I felt most love for "Out of Balance." It had the misfortune or good fortune — depending on your view — of coming so close after "An Inconvenient Truth" as to cover similar ground, but with a direct message against a particular company: ExxonMobil. Al Gore never featured music by Pondering Judd or Satan's Teardrops, so my props go to Portsmouth-based director Tom Jackson.

One local doc I got a hoot out of was "Taking Back Odiorne," Aaron Marine's unexpectedly funny look at the serial flasher at Odiorne Point State Park in Rye. Not only can we see local faces (like Spotlight contributor Chris Elliott and Herald reporter Karen Dandurant) but we hear contradictory descriptions of the flasher, lending him a mystique worthy of a Seacoast Sasquatch.

Sean Tracey of Portsmouth followed a much-easier-to-find wanderer: "The Jesus Guy." I think I enjoyed his post-film Q&A more than the film itself, which left me wanting more information on What's His Name's (yes, that's the name he went by) life before hitting the road as a barefoot preacher. But Tracey made the conscious decision to keep the documentary about What's His Name as the man you'd meet on the street, not the guy who brushes his teeth at night — if he is invited into someone's home. Fascinating, complex subject and the Muddy River audience I saw the film with asked thoughtful, probing questions. Definitely an audience for this guy's life beyond his newspaper stories and "20/20" interviews. (He is something of a media junkie.) The Q&A ended with Tracey talking about distribution, saying people were interested overseas. Hearing no domestic interest yet, local producer Chase Bailey piped up: "Let's talk."

Fans of short, straight-to-the-heart documentaries couldn't ask for more than "Where's Herbie?" a 12-minute look at the life of 91-year-old Herbie Loveitt, a lobsterman in Georgetown, Maine. This sweet old charmer's spirit comes right through, especially bonding with his wife of about 65 years, Virginia, who is dying of Alzheimer's.

One of the most powerful wake-up-call documentaries I've ever seen has to be "Recycled Life," about the children and families who are born, raised and work in the toxic Guatemala City Garbage Dump. The inhabitants recycle the city's trash to make money and survive. Children roam throughout the piles, picking up refuse to eat. People are run over by tractors. People are buried during mudslides. Horrifying, unbelievable lifestyle, but they are born into it and after a Jan. 2005 fire at the dump their lives are turned upside down. Members of SafePassage.org spoke after the screening to talk about programs put into place to educate the children and help them get better lives. Just heart-breaking.

I tend to give documentaries more leeway than feature films, which I pick apart for script, acting, cinematography, music, editing, length, what have you. Sometimes I appreciate one item but get tired of another. Take "Neptunus Rex," the stylish, hip (too hip?) Best Student Film winner directed by Robert Scott Wildes about two renowned cloud scientists. The 40-minute film could've been a lot shorter and tighter, but it showed clear visual talent in the quirky, colorful direction of a Wes Anderson or Jared Hess.

I caught two other impressive student films: "Last Day of December" and "The Little Gorilla." "December," by Bogdan George Apetri, was visually and emotionally chilling but featured one of the best snow-covered chase scenes out there. "Gorilla," which won Best Short Drama Film, is just an adorable achievement about a little boy who channels his inner King Kong to climb a New York City jungle-jim. Harry Kellerman makes great use of sound and visual comparisons.

I'm a fan of short features. Attention span headed south? Could be, but "My Name is Wallace" — a slow sheltered man calls a 900 number after the death of his mom and bonds with the "hottie" on the other end — found a decent length at 17 minutes. My favorite fiction film of the festival was the eight-minute "Sniffer," a clever futuristic film born out of an ad where a man and women sniffed each other's armpits. (That's what the producer said at the Q&A!) Writer/director Bobbie Peers wanted to make something out of that, and so came the story of a world where lifeless droid-like citizens wear gravitation boots to stay on the ground, until one man gets tired of his cold existence and literally lets himself fly. Magical little film.

I was less impressed with the full-length features. The two big names of the festival were "On Broadway," starring former New Kid on the Block Joey McIntyre, and "The Sensation of Sight," starring Oscar nominee David Strathairn. I much preferred the former; "Broadway," which won the Grand Jury Award this year, is a warm comedy about an extended Irish family in Boston. McIntyre's character, Jack, puts on a play about his uncle's death as a way of getting closer to his father. At the Q&A after the screening, producer/co-star Lance Greene said they were seeking distribution with the hope of hitting theaters in the New England area next March to piggyback on St. Patrick's Day. This would be the area for it.

I was disappointed in "The Sensation of Sight," winner of the Best Feature Award, which I found slow and esoteric; I couldn't quite sympathize with Finn (Strathairn), an English teacher in a small N.H. town who has a mid-life crisis after a school tragedy. Just didn't connect with me.

The one film that connected with me most — my favorite of the 2007 festival — was "Row Hard No Excuses," directed by Luke Wolbach. This year's Best Documentary Winner is a great benchmark for the genre. I'm nowhere near an outdoorswoman, but it's impossible not to be swept away by these people who decide to race 3,000 miles across the Atlantic in rowboats. At their own expense. The entry fee was something like \$15,000 plus \$150,000 for the boat. And the only prize is a trophy. Mad! The film focuses on two men, John Zeigler

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and Tom Mailhot, old friends ("old" being the operative word; they are both well over 40) who decide to raise their own money and enter this race with the mind not to just finish, but set a new world record. We follow them across the ocean and see intimately into their lives — from painful ass chaffing to tense personality conflicts to the deflation after it's all over. How do you move on?

On top of that, the doc draws us into the fascinating world of the other racers. The Spanish pair that spends the whole race joking around (or on the cusp of madness, could go either way). The New Zealanders out to beat their own record of 42 days at sea. The young couple who'd only been married two years and saw this race as a test of their marriage and preview of things to come. I took one look at the tall, gray-tinged athletic man and petite blonde woman and thought "Uh-oh. She's the weak link." Fast-forward into the race and he's the one curled up in a ball, shaking during a rainstorm. He quits the race and she soldiers on alone, saying into the camera how many people (like me!) thought she wasn't right for the race for one reason or another, but being on her own has given her independence and confidence. She fought her way across that ocean solo — the last one to finish at 111 days on the sea. She is my hero. But if I want to remember her name I'll probably have to watch it again, which I hope to do.

As much as I loved "The Trials of Darryl Hunt" and "Recycled Life" and any number of other films this year and last, I have no desire to see them a second time. I got what I needed and I won't forget them. But I would buy "Row Hard No Excuses" for its inspirational kick-in-the-arse and reminder that I'm not doing myself or anyone else any favors by prejudging. Out of the legion of amazing documentaries at this festival, this is the one you shouldn't let yourself miss if it comes on TV or DVD. See now. No excuses.

Gina Carbone wishes she had seen a lot more films but she also has to eat, sleep and watch "Dexter" on Netflix. She can be reached at gcarbone@seacoastonline.com.

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