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Mad City Chickens at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival

Kristian Knutsen on Friday 04/04/2008 4:30 pm , (14) Recommendations

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Screenings of Madison-made flicks at the Wisconsin Film Fest are almost always a good time, as the audience is usually filled with cast, crew, supporters, and fans ready to cheer on the show. This was certainly the case on Thursday night, when the documentary *Mad City Chickens* made its world premiere at Monona Terrace. Neither the crowd nor the movie disappointed, with both making for one of the most fun experiences I've ever had at the festival.

This atmosphere was immediately established at the entrance to the auditorium in Monona Terrace, where filmmakers Tashai Lovington and Robert Lughai were handing out *Mad City Chickens* buttons, bite-sized chocolate eggs, and of course, Peeps. The audience was into it too, with one woman wearing a bright yellow outfit that all but clucked, while others conversed energetically about their experiences with raising chickens. Even Mayor Dave was there, sitting near the front and at stage right, perhaps looking forward to his cameo in the documentary.

All hushed, though, when the lights dimmed, and the film started to the strains of "Also Sprach Zarathustra" and the view of an eggrise over Earth. That was only the start of the opening sequence, though, which introduced a family plunging headfirst into the art of chicken keeping amidst mixed animated and live action shots of the inseparable duo of chickens and eggs. The audience roared with applause, and the tone for the film was now set too: audacious and whimsical, an approach that would persist through the end credits.

Mad City Chickens is a story about chickens in the city, or more appropriately, a set of several stories. As close to universal as a food source can be, chickens and their eggs were once a regular element of many a family's lives in the U.S., and remain so throughout the world. That way of life largely disappeared in this country, though, due to the rise of industrial farming, but is slowly returning to many cities as people rediscover the experience of keeping the birds in their backyards.

Madison is a leader in this movement, starting with members of the self-described "Chicken Underground" who illegally raised the birds for years before a limited amount of chicken-keeping was authorized by the city back in 2004.

Thus was the stage set for the film, which deftly weaves multiple stories and contextual issues about urban chickens and their keepers in a non-linear fashion that one rarely sees in a documentary, particularly one so focused on introducing a novel concept. While *Mad City Chickens* is not a direct advocacy documentary, it does a great job of piquing one's interest in taking the poultry plunge, not to mention partaking in a big omelet or plate of grilled pollo.

Viewers were led from one thread to another through the film, tied together with comic interludes of soundtrack-synched bird head-bobbing and the deadpan narration by local actor and comedian Craig Johnson. The history of the Chicken Underground, the legalization of keeping the fowl in Madison, a tour of the McMurray Hatchery in Iowa, a coop of the birds at Troy Gardens, the nutritional benefits of free range eggs, the issue of bird flu, and chicken art by S.V. Medaris; all are woven around the two main stories presented in the film. These were the experiences of the family raising their first flock, and the rescue of a discarded factory farm bird by Nutzy Mutz and Crazy Catz owner Liz Perry, tales that added heart to the mix of facts and whimsy.

Then there's the ballyhooed giant chicken, a late sequence that typified the spirit of the documentary, complete with a breaking of the fourth wall and a fantastical connection to a real-life element of the movie.

The crowd ate it all up, delivering multiple rounds of applause through the ending credits set to "The Blue Danube" and an appreciated disclaimer that "no chickens or other animals were harmed in the making of this film." A Q&A session with the filmmakers after the screening was similarly spirited, with plenty of questions about raising the birds and more applause for the documentary's contributors.

Lovington and Lughai explained that they entering *Mad City Chickens* into film festivals around the country (including those in fowl friendly cities like Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Austin), and have been contacted by a producer rep in L.A. who is interested in watching it for potential promotion. They also said that a DVD should be released within a year or less, and viewers should count on plenty of extras.

"I never thought I would sit here mesmerized, open-mouthed over a chicken movie," declared one audience member at the end of the evening. Neither did I.

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