

**MOST  
POPULAR  
ARTICLES**

**WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL**

**Chop Shop at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

Sally Franson on Sunday 04/06/2008 11:00 am , (6) Recommendations

Article Tools:

Ramin Bahrani's debut film, *Man Push Cart*, won accolades despite a very brief stint in urban arthouses, his sophomore project *Chop Shop* seems poised to garner even more. Set in Queens in the shadow of Shea Stadium, the film like its predecessor, focuses on one urban character on the outskirts of American society.

But this time, instead of an aging immigrant, Bahrani's protagonist is a prepubescent boy, Alejandro (Alejandro Polanco). Alejandro has no parents (or at least they're never mentioned), nor is school a possibility, for he works every day in the Iron Triangle, a sprawling industrial and automotive neighborhood just off of Shea's right field, trying to forge a life for himself and his sister Isamar.

The story arc to Bahrani's film is minimal, and the bosses and other men around the chop shop remain largely two-dimensional. Yet the film is still powerful as a result of its relentless focus on the rhythms of Ale's daily life. The thin-but-scrappy boy has a sweetly innocent face but will hustle anyone to make a buck; not only does he work at the chop shop, he also sells DVDs, candy on the subway, and any other odd job that comes his way.

Once Isamar moves into his tiny bedroom above the chop shop (why she wasn't with her brother earlier in the film is never clear), Ale becomes even more obsessed with entrepreneurial pursuits. In a plan that seems both childish and realistic, he hopes to buy a beat-up van from which he and his sister can sell food to the men in the Iron Triangle. He secures a job for Isamar at a similar van while he stashes away money in a tin can. But plans unravel fast for the siblings as money is lost and deals are broken, and Ale suffers as he learns firsthand how his sister was making her extra cash.

At a first glance of its synopsis, there's no reason to believe that the film should be anything but ugly. The location is ugly, the actions of the people can be frightening, and it would be easy to pity Alejandro and Isamar. But because they have no pity for themselves -- perhaps because they're forced to live their lives in the very present-tense - what bubbles up is less pathos and more admiration. Their lives are real with the lyricism of family love, and the metaphorical last shot of the film suggests that beauty can exist here on the edge of life, too.

1. [Brittany Zimmermann called 911, but no one came](#)
2. [Public Enemies with Christian Bale begins filming outside Wisconsin Capitol in Madison](#)
3. [Christian Bale stars in Public Enemies shoot in downtown Madison](#)
4. [Did Madison cops miss chance to catch Joel Marino killer?](#)
5. [Housing: Why the bubble popped](#)
6. [Enthusiastic crowd watches Public Enemies production in Madison](#)
7. [Joel Marino's grandmother: I heard the killer](#)
8. [Public Enemies shoot at Capitol wraps up at State Street](#)
9. [The Kissers bid farewell to Madison](#)
10. [Brittany Zimmermann: Madison media respond to 911 center revelations](#)