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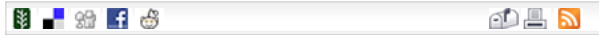
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Film Fest Continues To Shine In 10th Year

More Than 200 Films In Festival

By [Adam Malecek](#), Staff Writer

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MADISON, Wis. -- Movie fans turned out in force this past weekend to view a smorgasbord of independent films and world cinema at the 10th annual Wisconsin Film Festival in downtown Madison.

In its 10th year, the festival, which ran from April 3-6, continued to build on its excellent tradition and offered another strong lineup of diverse film offerings. More than 200 films were screened during the festival.

By Sunday, the majority in the audience at screenings I attended had seen at least five films over four-day festival, and many had seen 12 or more.

Indeed, one of the many joys of the Wisconsin Film Festival is picking a handful of films you might not know much about and going to watch them with an open mind. That's what I did this year, and, as with years past, I was pleasantly surprised.

"Shotgun Stories"

"Shotgun Stories," written and directed by Jeff Nichols, is a riveting drama that kicks with the impact of a shotgun blast. The film follows three brothers -- Son, Boy and Kid Hayes -- who are haunted and scarred by the memory of a drunken father who never bothered to give them real names and who left them when they were young.

The father, whose only appearance is in a coffin at his funeral early in the film, went on to clean up his life, finding success and fathering a second family of sons with another woman.

The father's death tears open old wounds for the sons he left behind, and a tense feud develops between the two sets of sons. With the merciless determination of a Shakespearean tragedy, the film depicts the vicious cycle of revenge between the two warring factions that, despite loss and heartache, neither side seems able to break.

The story, which unfolds in backroads Arkansas, is an affecting study of masculinity and violence that stayed with me long after the film ended. Michael Shannon, with his terse dialogue and hard-set face, gives a magnetic performance as the oldest son Son Hayes.

To learn more about the film and watch the trailer, visit [the film's Web site](#).

"Stuck"

Those looking for a smart, well-made, gross-out thriller with plenty of cleverness and blood will find much to love in "Stuck," a film by University of Wisconsin-Madison alumnus Stuart Gordon.

The film follows the ordeal of Tom (Stephen Rea), who at the end of an exceptionally terrible day, is struck by a car and gets lodged headfirst in the windshield. The car's driver, Brandi (Mena Suvari), who was driving under the influence of drugs, panics and drives home, where she locks the car and her still-alive and trapped victim in her garage.

As Brandi hopes Tom will hurry up and die, Tom, bloody and broken, fights for survival and a way to turn to tables on his captor. Gordon does an excellent job controlling and building the suspense, and he sprinkles in a good amount of outrageousness material to keep the audience both entertained and shocked.

View the [film's trailer here](#).

"Chop Shop"

"Chop Shop," the stunning second feature film by director Ramin Bahrani, tells the story of Alejandro, a 12-year-old Latino street orphan in the "Iron Triangle," a vibrant, sprawling, industrial neighborhood teeming with auto-body repair shops, scrap yards, and garbage dumps on the outskirts of Queens, New York.

This candid, unsentimental film meshes the feel of a documentary in its straightforward depiction of Alejandro's struggle to survive amid his bleak environment, with a filmmaker's eye for poetic imagery and character depth.

Remarkably, many of the actors in the film are nonprofessional and were casted on location where the film is set, helping to achieve the sense of heightened reality that permeates the film.

The charismatic Alejandro Polanco, who comes across mature beyond his years in the film, gives a riveting and heartbreaking performance as Alejandro, an orphan who is forced to hustle and scrap daily while he comes to terms with the hard facts of his life.

The film offers a slice of life of a harsh side of America that many aren't familiar with or don't care to think about. This film and its actors put a human face on the challenges of those living on the fringe of the American Dream, and the result is devastating and powerful.

To read more about "Chop Shop," visit [the film's Web site](#).

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"Fermat's Room"

In an impressive feat, festival director Meg Hamel was able to attain a copy of the Spanish film "Fermat's Room" (La Habitación de Fermat) (with English subtitles), giving audiences at the Wisconsin Film Festival one of the earliest screenings of it in the United States.

Tense, clever and thought provoking, the film tells the story of four notable Spanish mathematicians who are invited to attend a mysterious weekend excursion to a remote location. The ostensible goal of the meeting is to bring the mathematicians together to solve one of the world's greatest enigmas.

But things are not as they originally appear, and the foursome must solve incoming logic puzzles and submit the answers through a handheld PDA in the given time limit -- or face some unpleasant consequences. As the pressure builds, the four must solve the puzzles while also deciphering the larger enigma of why they were chosen and how they can escape their fate.

"Do you know what prime numbers are? If not, you better leave now," one of the characters says, in the opening lines of the film -- setting the tone for the dry ironies throughout. Happily, an understanding of mathematical concepts is not at all required for viewers to enjoy this film.

The mathematical conceit is simply a clever backdrop for the human drama that unfolds in thrilling fashion. At its core, "Fermat's Room" is an exceptionally well-made "whodunit" that engages the mind and quickens the pulse.

The film's trailer is only available in Spanish, without English subtitles, but this is a film that audiences will likely enjoy more the less they know about it going in.

It's unclear when "Fermat's Room" will be released in the U.S., but for fans of smart, stylish thrillers, it's definitely one to wait and look out for in the future.

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