

## Different worlds, familiar hearts, at Wisconsin Film Festival

*TimeOut movie critic Steven Snyder is impressed by last weekend's festival*

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Believe it or not, sometimes it's hard to be a film critic. The more repetitive the films become, the more one starts to shrug his shoulders at movies that aren't exactly bad but are certainly far from great, the more frustrating the enterprise becomes. All year, we wait for the movies that will excite us, but sometimes we have to go through 20, 30, even 50 titles before we get there (think of how many weekends you avoid the movie theater, not quite interested in what they have to offer).

So imagine what it was like then to step foot in Madison last weekend and be swamped with cinematic gems at every corner, to go from screening to screening and to be increasingly wowed with the bold visions illuminating Wisconsin screens.

Two titles in particular captivated me - and I can only hope that general audiences will get a chance to check them out in the weeks and months to come.

"Chop Shop"

First, let me briefly address Ramin Bahrani's "Chop Shop," a movie that is startling in its realism, and affecting in its tenderness. It's a New York story, about a back alley street that lies in the shadows of Yankee stadium, where stolen cars are brought to be dismantled into components that can then be sold for profit.

At the story's center is a young child with an older teenage sister - two apparent orphans who are learning the angles of how to make a few bucks while surviving in this world ignored by the police. Clearly this is not a world where child labor laws are enforced.

The younger of the two seems more capable of seeing the score: the way that they are paid small stipends to do the work that no one else will do. But he's also the one with the plan: Save up money, bit by bit, so they can buy a lunch truck and then make the real money - selling food to the car guys.

It's an ambitious, yet naive, plan, the one feeble attempt these siblings can make in a bid to improve their lives. And what "Chop Shop" ultimately proves to be is a case study in the way poverty limits one's vision, closes off avenues of opportunity and creates a cycle of desperation that can accelerate into anger and violence. "Chop Shop" was one of the festival's great visions.

"Water Lilies"

One of the most creative, unsettling films I saw at this year's festival was CŽline Sciamma's "Water Lilies," which screened Friday evening, the festival's second day.

Underneath all the sexual frustration, the movie tells the story of three teenagers, all members of an amateur synchronized swim team. One of the girls is overweight and finds it impossible to seduce the man of her dreams, while another is slowly coming to the realization that she's gay, becoming obsessed with a third girl who reciprocates her flirtations while nevertheless continuing to chase after boys herself. It's both enticing and haunting, an enigmatic love triangle in which platonic friendship, sexual experimentation and raw lust collide.

But more than just the emotional stakes of young love, the movie is also about the struggles of adolescence, and just how hard it is to be a young teenage girl, struggling to find yourself. Sciamma's depiction of girls struggling to adjust to and survive teendom is suitably raw, avoiding dewy-eyed visions of first love and social conflict for a bruised, tender portrait of growing up as a confusing, traumatic period of constant readjustment. Losing one's virginity is presented as a thorny, harrowing event - metaphorically visualized by the sight of swimmers' lower halves kicking about underwater - and one girl's abandonment of her loyal but uncool friend for the chilly but beautiful alternative captures the selfish callousness that kids are capable of when social standing and self-esteem are at stake.

It's almost ironic - than from a festival with so many great visions of the world, it would be one of the most intimate visions that would linger the most vividly in the imagination.

I can hardly wait for 2009.

Did you go to the film festival? What was your favorite moment? Tell Steve Snyder at [SnyderReviews@hotmail.com](mailto:SnyderReviews@hotmail.com).