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Sidewalk brings culture to Birmingham

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As those who have been paying attention know, Birmingham has quietly developed into a center of culture. The Sidewalk Film Festival, which took place Sept. 23-25, is an example of that process.

While it's hardly the first film festival, it may well be the most inviting. Whereas Cannes or Sundance lean towards the elitist, with only the most famous and/or most qualified allowed to take part, Sidewalk is more akin to Slamdance, Sundance's red-headed stepchild.

Literally anyone can submit a film to Sidewalk, and if one happens to be a resident, Alabama filmmakers get special preferential treatment in their own special blocks of short films.

What sets Sidewalk most apart from the pack however, are its most impressive features — affordability and hospitality. Where else can one see an entire weekend of films — over 60 shorts, 10 documentaries, and 15 features, with over 60 of them from Alabama alone — for a mere \$25 (\$20 for students and Sidewalk members)? Or a single film/block of films for \$7?

Further, where else can you go to the movies and stand a good chance of actually speaking to the majority of the filmmakers themselves, as well as most of the stars?

Things kicked off with a screening of "Americano," a Spain-set, Hemingway-fixated movie set during the famed Running of the Bulls at Pamplona. The bulls footage was jaw-dropping, as the cameras were clearly there and right in the middle of the action — even if the actors were only cleverly edited in, for obvious reasons. The film stars Dennis Hopper (in full bizarro mode), his daughter Ruthanna (who also produced), "Dawson's Creek" refugee Joshua Jackson, the ever-amusing Timm Sharp (HBO's "Six Feet Under"), and the way-sexy Leonor Varela (TV's "Cleopatra" and "Arrested Development").

The cast is engaging and the dialogue and situations are good fun — particularly the scene involving midgets and pit bulls re-enacting the Bull Run and another absinthe-fueled scene which the director revealed wasn't faked. All in all, a good way to kick off the festival, even if the cast weren't able to make it, on account of the hurricane.

The heart of the festival began Saturday morning. That's when the choices one makes become considerably trickier. Like most film festivals, there is an art to deciding what one should or shouldn't see, when to snag a bite to eat (and where, and what's quickest), and how to time everything just perfectly so one doesn't arrive too late to the next intended screening.

John Erick Dowdle's "The Dry Spell", a highly amusing low-fi feature-length film about a haplessly single guy (the hilarious Chip Godwin) trying to end his drought and meet the girl of his dreams, while reflecting on the ones left behind in an amusing fashion.

While decidedly low budget, and somewhat comprised by its excessive use of narration, the film made up for it by having a wonderful, delightfully twisted sense of humor and a fun cast. Great music as well, including Velvet Underground, Sonic Youth and a groovy score just for good measure.

Arguably the most entertaining films at the festival were the shorts. Space limits pointing out too many, but among the most notable were the fun "Maestro," featuring Saturday Night Live's Seth Meyers as a would-be conductor who practices at a bowling alley with the sounds naturally occurring around him and "Artistic License," about a DMV photographer who takes himself a little too seriously, with hilarious results.

"Joyride" is a wonderfully perverse computer-animated short scored to Queen's "Bicycle Race" and features more political and social satire in its six minute run time than an entire episode of the "Daily Show."

Other honorable mentions include the extraordinary stop-motion animation of "9," which was like a Tool video with a more readily understandable plotline; and "Broadcast 23," a wonderfully photographed (dig those split screens) Bigfoot tale, with a humorously perverse twist ending. "Moondance," despite not including the Van Morrison song it cribbed its title from, did feature CCR and Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs in its tale of a Little Red Riding Hood-turned weapon-flinging vigilante taking down the baddies of the enchanted forest (i.e. The Big Bad Wolf, Hansel and Gretel, etc.).

Steven Tsuchida, whose "A Ninja Pays Half my Rent" was a highlight of last year's festival, continued his winning streak with the instant