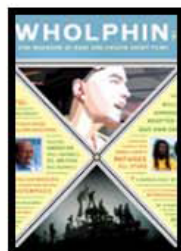


WHOLPHIN NO. 7 - Heroes and Aliens

Posted by Michael Tully

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In his introductory letter to the seventh volume of [McSweeneys'](#) quarterly DVD short film magazine, editor and executive producer Brent Hoff makes a case for the existence of UFOs. He even writes about his own past encounter with an Unidentified Flying Object. This might lead one to believe that alien life will be the main theme of this issue, yet the topic only makes a direct appearance in two films: Carson Mell's animated *Field Notes From Dimension X* and Jeremy Vaeni's documentary *David Huggins: Experienced*. Looking at the collection as a whole, a different pattern emerges. Whether it's a laudable display or an ungainly one, a communal act or an individual one, heroism is the tie that bands most of the selections together in *Wholphin No. 7*.

Both on camera and off, Benh Zeitlin and [Court 13's](#) spiritually transcendent *Glory at Sea* is one of the most audacious and life-affirming spectacles of recent memory ([read my full review here](#) if you haven't already). First, there's the story itself, in which a few remaining souls in post-Katrina New Orleans band together to do the impossible: build a makeshift boat in order to reunite with their drowned loved ones at the bottom of the sea. Second, there's the story behind the production, in which the filmmakers embraced the same reckless spirit of their characters and risked life and limb to get at a deeper, more ecstatic truth. *Glory at Sea* is a work of defiant heroism in every possible way. Its inclusion alone makes *Wholphin No. 7* a must-have release.

The first selection on the DVD's main menu is a 30-minute version of the [feature-length documentary](#) *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars*. Banker White and Zach Niles' rousing film is a powerful example of heroism borne out of desperation. For ten years, a bloody civil war ravaged the West African nation of Sierra Leone, forcing many innocent citizens to flee their homeland and find refuge in neighboring Republic of Guinea. Haunted by scars both physical and mental, a few of these individuals formed a band in order to perform for their fellow refugees and let their songs provide a much-needed distraction from the constant sorrow in their lives.

On the other side of the cinematic spectrum, one of Norway's most popular actors Kristoffer Joner makes his directorial debut with *Cold & Dry*, a cautionary tale about heroism gone dangerously wrong. A scientist gets carried away with a groundbreaking invention that hasn't been thought all the way through. Pretty soon, he's the only one left on Earth. The thrill of seeing himself on television, of being recognized by neighbors, has led to this terrible predicament. Joner's stylish dark comedy has something serious to say about our place in the world and how ego and delusion can distort it.



Another film dealing with heroism of a different sort, Nacho Vigalondo's *Choque* is a hilarious example of machismo at its most infantile and misguided. A man (Vigalondo) and his girlfriend discover a basement arcade and decide to ride the bumper cars. But when a group of teenage boys appears and begins to target his girlfriend, the man overreacts. Then he overreacts again. And again. In only eleven nearly real-time minutes, Vigalondo brilliantly exposes man at his most shamefully un-heroic.

In William Lamson's performance art video piece *William Tell*, a modern man updates Tell's apple-and-crossbow incident with a soda can-and-BB gun experiment of his own. Dressed in homemade armor and struggling to balance the can on his head, this modern knight shoots bullets at a polished piece of marble hoping for a ricocheted BB to knock the can off his head. Yes, this is as stupid—and funny—as it sounds. Like Vigalondo did with *Choque*, Lamson uses a silly premise to make a genuine point: oftentimes, the tougher and more heroic a man tries to act, the more ridiculously clownish he becomes.

Connecting the remaining selections to the theme of heroism would be stretching it, yet they help to make *Wholphin No. 7* an even more dynamic experience. Based on an essay by William S. Burroughs, Gus Van Sant's post-film school production *The Discipline of DE* shows the benefits of living life by "Doing Easy." Nicholas Berger's unexpectedly serious documentary *Nutkin's Last Stand* is about England's quest to rid the country of dangerous American grey squirrels in order to preserve their native red ones. Another excerpt of a feature, animator Bob Sabiston's *The Even More Fun Trip* uses his rotoscoping technique to add a more surreal dimension to his documentary about an artistic Texan's visit to an amusement park. Arthur Metcalf's hilarious *Fantaisie in Bubble Wrap* is pure short film bliss. And, finally, Wholphin's own Emily Doe and Brent Hoff present the eye-opening (pun intended) and informative *Look at the Sun*, in which viewers learn that the sun has recently undergone some major changes, though no one is really sure how permanent or dangerous those changes will be.

One hopes McSweeneys and Wholphin will continue to thrive, as this quarterly release has become a holy grail of sorts for short filmmakers all across the world. *Wholphin No. 7* keeps that tradition happily alive.

— Michael Tully