

Meats & Romance

Contributed by Lily Percy
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Brent Hoff is exactly the kind of person that you would want at the helm of a short film compilation, especially one that bears the sacred indie lit name of McSweeney's. Charming, interesting and funny, Hoff in many ways epitomizes all of the qualities that have continued to make Wholphin, which released its fourth and latest edition this month, a success both among subscribers and festival-goers.

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The key to Wholphin's success has been maintaining a perfect balance between political, social and outright attention-grabbing films on each of their compilations. Their latest DVD release, for example, contains: Alex Vlack and Andrew Zuckerman's High Falls, a film about a couple, played by Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard, exploring their own issues with trust; an excerpt from Lynn Hershman-Leeson's Strange Culture, an experimentally conceptualized documentary following professor and artist Steve Kurtz, who for the more than two years now has been suspected, in odd and seemingly unjust circumstances, of taking part in terrorist activity by the U.S. government; and a revealing look into the world of Hatred, a Scottish satanic metal band made up of 10 to 13-year-olds.

Trusting that viewers will want to sit through such material is not easy, and Hoff does not take the responsibility lightly. "I think it is a difficult task to ask people to sit down with my three hours worth of content, even on a quarterly basis, to sit down and trust that I'm going to give them something interesting every time. So I look for the intent of the film: Why should I spend that time? Why were they making it? It's all about respecting time."

SM: How many times do you actually end up seeing the films before they're selected for the DVD?

BH: A lot. (Laughs) Some of it is actually unbearable because sometimes we will also have to edit films, and so we'll be watching that a million, million times. The worst by far is the re-subtitled sitcoms because they NEVER EVER work. Ever. Ever. Ever. We literally have to re-write those scripts probably five times on each draft and then watch them probably three times in between to figure out where all the typos are and the grammatical problems, everything. It is extraordinarily miserable—not that I'm complaining. This work—I love this work; it's the best.

SM: Then why keep doing the re-subtitled sitcoms, if those are particularly difficult?

BH: When I hear that there's a Russian Married With Children, I'm basically sort of interested. I just want to see what the take is. But it is true—I am often disappointed. I always want there to be more of a weird cultural...obvious cultural alterations. There are some, but there aren't many, so we just re-script them anyway and turn them into totally ridiculous things. It's a lot of work—sometimes they're great, and sometimes they're not so great.

SM: Do you have a conscious theme in mind when you're compiling these short films?

BH: The conscious theme is desperately trying to keep them interesting, you know? I would never in a million years pick up a DVD compilation of short films and think, "I bet this is good." You know? Who are you going to trust? You can barely trust a single film much less someone who is trying to gather 10 or 12 or three hours worth of films...How do you trust them? I don't even really trust myself. (Laughs)

It's a mix tape, and you gotta make a good mix tape. I mean, you do sort of think about people watching more than one short film at a time, but I don't like themes. People—programmers or curators or editors or whatever—I feel like it's them trying to prove that they're creative too by coming up with a theme. Like: "I've got a theme—it's films of meats and romance. And I've curated films about meats and romance." That's like putting their personal imprint on it, but there are always inevitably a couple of bad films about meats and romance that you wish they'd just left off and foregone the theme.

I don't know where that came from—Meats and Romance. (Laughs) There's the title of your article: Wholphin DVD—Meats and Romance.

SM: How do you sort through all of the films that you get?

BH: (Pause) With care, hopefully with care. We seek out or have heard about some of the films that we get. At the end of this interview you might be like, "You know, I did see one short film that was hilarious or weird," and I'll write it down and look at that. We get a lot of our actual gold finds that way, just from people kind of telling us or sending in e-mails. People will e-mail us and say, "I saw this at Rotterdam—you should get this." Which is great. Then, of course, we get a lot of submissions.

Often we will Google great artists like, say, Jim Jarmusch, and ask ourselves, "Has he made any short films? He's got to have made some interesting short films, and he doesn't have a short compilation out so..." We e-mailed him yesterday and said, "I don't know if you have anything or not, but if you have something on your floor, let us see it." Because he's not thinking like, "How can I get my short film out into the world?"

Miguel Arteta and Miranda July—they're in the midst of other films, and they make shorts because they just want to make that script. And there's no other purpose than for their own satisfaction of making it, and those are always the films that are the best anyway, so we do a little bit of investigation and track stuff down.

SM: It seems to me that short filmmakers do this for the creativity, rather than as a chance to break into feature films.

BH: Definitely more and more. I mean, you hear people talk—I was just at the Palm Springs Film Festival and people were talking and they were kind of positioning short films as this sort of tool or calling card to get your feature made more than anything else, as if that were the end all, be all goal. This is absolutely just plain bad advice at this point. There's more of a potential revenue for short films than there ever has been before, and it is definitely moving more that way; so the pressure to make a short film that could be turned into a feature so you can make a feature and make money is becoming less and less a factor.

You're seeing all kinds of directors in the form, from established directors to first time directors that are just kind of interested in a short in and of itself. I think that's great. Ideas have a right length—whatever the idea is, there's a perfect length to tell that idea, and it is not necessarily a feature length. It doesn't have to be a 1hr 10 film to constitute a good telling of an idea. It can be 34 minutes, you know?

SM: I have to ask you about Chris Waitt's Heavy Metal Jr., which was my favorite film off of the new collection. I watched that film on a loop. How did you find it?

BH: Isn't that one awesome?

SM: It really is!

BH: I found it in the promo section in Amsterdam. It was at (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam)...I like to go through those way-back bins, the kind that no one else is looking at. It's just insane! You couldn't have scripted that thing. When you see the girls dancing—when you find out where they actually are...I really wanted to pee myself during that scene, and I've seen that like 50 times.

SM: That's one that could never get old. I was so crushed when I learned that the band, Hatred, had broken up.

BH: Just about 10 minutes ago I was at a screening trying to track down Chris Waitt, the director of Heavy Metal Jr., primarily and only to get an MP3 of "Satan Rocks." I'm sorry, man, I need that song, and everyone needs that song!

SM: Do you think that there will ever come a time when short films will see wide theatrical release?

BH: It's a little early, but as theaters turn digital that may certainly be one of the first things that happens. There are more and more networks that are looking at shorts programming as something that's viable. We get calls—we just got a call today from "the best network on television" asking about potentially doing a shorts network and working with us. So, it is certainly changing in terms of television, but theaters are still big old projectors, and transferring short films to film is really just not feasible. So until that actual conversion takes place--which it is--there's still no theatrical release. Which is why we'll still be producing DVDs.

SM: Since Wholphin is available via subscription as well, I'm curious as to the kind of response that you get from subscribers.

BH: A couple of our films, such as Khadija Al-Salami's A Stranger in Her Own City which is about a young tomboy girl living in Yemen, we've been getting hundreds of e-mails from people who have been donating to her college fund. We've funneled them all to the director, and the director has a college fund set up and is navigating that. Rather than just you know, "We make films, and we all go to premieres and we think we're cool...", this is actually going to affect a life in a positive way. People were like, "I want to give 5000 dollars right now. Tell me where to write a check." That's awesome. The same thing with the new issue. I've had people come up after screenings and ask where they can donate to Steve Kurtz's legal defense fund, and I send them to the Website and people are donating to his cause. So there is a more realistic, tangible effect.

I'm also really personally proud that Foreign Policy and The Wall Street Journal ripped the Walleyball film and put it on their Website. You know, nothing I ever do will ever affect international politics, but it was part of the conversation.

SM: You do a really great job of balancing political or controversial films and films about, say, Heavy Metal drummers on each collection.

BH: This is not pedestal building. It really is—what are the best films? That is the only criteria. And sometimes the best films are intensely controversial, and sometimes they are intensely retarded. And I love both.

SM: If a filmmaker is looking to submit a short film to you, what do they need to keep in mind?

BH: Meats and romance. (Laughs)

SM: That is going to be your new slogan.

BH: Let's do it—whatever the fuck that means, "Meats and romance." (Laughs)

I can't talk about it without sounding totally dorky and pretentious, but we look for intent. You can tell what a film is intending to say or what someone is intending to say. Whatever your intent is, that's the weird irony, you usually succeed. If you want to make something that shows how clever your shot selections are, then you'll make something that shows how clever your shot selections are. But if you want to present an idea without getting it wrong, as honestly and truly as possible—you get that across.

For more information on where you can subscribe or purchase Wholphin DVD, or to learn more about submitting your short film, visit www.wholphindvd.com.