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'New Faces' of indy works

BY CRAIG SAILOR, Staff writer

The Grand Cinema is calling it the highest-profile film event ever in Tacoma: Filmmaker Magazine's "25 New Faces of Independent Film."

These are the up-and-coming directors, actors, editors, designers and other budding film creators to keep your eye on.

For the next week, close to 40 films will be shown at the Tacoma art house theater.

They've won numerous honors, awards and film festival selections, But what makes this event special is that nearly half of those "new faces" will be in Tacoma to present their films and meet audiences.

The fare ranges from collections of shorts to full length features and from comedies to dramas to documentaries.

Here are some of the week's highlights with an emphasis on movies being shown by their directors, actors and a production designer:

'WAR DON DON' When: 2 p.m. today and 6:15 p.m. Tuesday

Director Rebecca Richman Cohen used her background in law and international human rights to create a documentary profiling Issa Sesay while he was on trial for war crimes in Sierra Leone. Prosecutors said Sesay was guilty of heinous crimes against humanity. His defenders said he was a reluctant fighter who protected civilians and played a crucial role in bringing peace to Sierra Leone. Cohen gets access to prosecutors, defense attorneys, victims and, from behind bars, Sesay himself.

'OPUS JAZZ'

When: 4:15 p.m. today and 5:30 p.m. Thursday

Beautiful people. Beautiful dancing. Beautifully filmed. Beautifully edited by Zac Stuart-Pontier. Billed as the first film conceived, created, produced and danced by dancers from the New York City Ballet, this cinematic revisiting of Jerome Robbins's 1958 ballet "N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz" features dancing that The New York Times called "competitive and brisk, embodying the intoxicating spirit of being young and free." It was filmed on locations around New York. **'HABIBI RASAK KHARBAN,' 'FORBIDDEN TO WANDER,' 'MARJOUN AND THE FLYING HEADSCARF'**

When: 6:45 p.m. today and 2 p.m. Monday

Who: Director Susan Youssef will attend both screenings.

Susan Youssef is the filmmaker traveling the farthest to attend the event. A native of Brooklyn, she's now based in Amsterdam. "Habibi Rasak Kharban" (Darling, Something's Wrong with Your Head) is a work in progress that tells the story of a forbidden love in Gaza. "Forbidden to Wander" is a 35-minute documentary that chronicles the experiences of a young Arab American woman traveling on her own in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf" is a 10-minute film about an Arab-American girl who must come to terms with her sexuality while balancing the mores of two different cultures.

'THE NEW YEAR'

When: 3:15 p.m. Saturday and 8:15 p.m. Monday

Who: Actress Trieste Kelly Dunn will attend both screenings.

In Brett Haley's "The New Year," Sunny finds herself stuck in Pensacola, Fla., in her mid-20s, working at a bowling alley and caring for her terminally ill father. When she runs into a successful high school rival who is home from New York for the holidays, Sunny questions her life at a crossroads between chasing her old dreams and creating new ones.

New York Times reviewer Andy Webster said, "Highest praise goes to Trieste Kelly Dunn as Sunny: not too smug or gorgeous, but smart and attractive, she steadily, wordlessly conveys her character's internal struggle."

'PUTTY HILL'

When: 5:45 p.m. Saturday and 7:30 p.m. Thursday

When a young man dies of a heroin overdose, his family and friends gather for his funeral. Their memories paint a portrait of a community hanging in the balance, skewed by poverty, city living and a generational divide. What makes this film unique, says Grand director Philip Cowan, is the structural style of filmmaking from director Matthew Porterfield. Though a fictional narrative, the characters are occasionally interviewed by an off screen voice – the dialog largely improvised. Critic Roger Ebert says, " 'Putty Hill' makes no statement. It looks. It looks with as much perception and sympathy as it is possible for a film to look."

'BILAL'S STAND'

When: 8 p.m. Saturday and 4 p.m. Monday

Who: Director Sultan Sharrief will attend both screenings.

Four years in the making, employing newbie actors and done on a shoe string budget, "Bilal's Stand" follows a Muslim teen's decision to go to the University of Michigan despite the naysayers in his family and at his high school. Filmmaker Magazine says of the movie: "Rough around the edges, it's told with enough freewheeling inventiveness and first-person verve that it transcends its obvious financial limitations and offers a glimpse of utterly authentic working-class black life in the industrial Midwest. In the world of cinema, studio or independent, this might as well be Mars."

'PREMATURE', 'CHOICES', 'CUTS'

When: 3 p.m. Sunday and 3:30 p.m. Thursday

Who: Director Rashaad Ernesto Green will attend Sunday's screening.

This collection of shorts from up and coming African American director Rashaad Ernesto Green centers on young people of color confronted with the issues of their lives, times and circumstances. Green,

who's currently making his first feature, says his subject matter is "what I know. That's where I'm from and also because the industry historically hasn't presented stories about people of color that are complex and far reaching as a number of mainstream movies."

'NEW LOW'

When: 5:10 p.m. Sunday and 8:40 p.m. Wednesday

Who: Director Adam Bowers will attend Sunday's screening.

This romantic comedy with an edge stars its director as a neurotic young man trying to decide between two girls and what that means about him as a person. Adam Bowers, a self described Woody Allen fan, says it's very autobiographical. "I couldn't stop dating these girls who had lots of baggage and issues." Then he met a woman that was polar opposite. "I was in awe of her. (But) after a few times of hanging out I realized we had nothing in common."

'PHANTOM MENACE REVIEW'

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday

Creator Mike Stoklasa was not a fan of George Lucas's "The Phantom Menace." In fact he hated it so much he created his own movie – a 70-minute review of the 1999 film. He uses clips from the movie mixed with a variety of found images to illustrate his laser beam criticisms. Ranging from witty to just plain sarcastic, his unconventional narrator's voice sounds like he's been hitting the cough syrup a bit too often – especially when trying out various ways to pronounce "protagonist." It's comedic, irreverent and spot on.

'HOUSE OF THE DEVIL'

When: 6:15 p.m. Wednesday

Who: Production designer Jade Healy will be in attendance.

Saluting the more suspenseful and less gory slasher movies of the 1980s, Ti West's "House of the Devil" follows a young college student who takes a baby-sitting job and spends the night of a lunar eclipse in a old house in the middle of the woods owned by a creepy couple. You can see where this is going. London's "Time Out" called the film's nostalgic design "subtle enough not to dampen the seriously sinister atmospherics." Credit that to production designer Jade Healy.