

Edinburgh International Film Festival – What's Worth Catching On Monday



Day Of The Flowers

Viva la revolución, big yin.

When their father suddenly dies, two Glasgow sisters – one a socialist activist, the other a party girl – take his ashes to Cuba to scatter them at the place where their parents met. Along the way, there'll be trouble with the law, trouble with the locals and trouble with each other, not to mention a revelation or two.

In 1998 John Roberts directed *Paulie*, a movie about a parrot telling his life story to a Russian janitor (it was for kids). Besides a TV movie in 2001, this is his only credit since then. I don't know what else he has been up to these last 14 years, but he has hit the ground running with this enjoyably realistic, almost Loachian comedy-drama. Eva Birthistle plays Rosa, the super-socialist whose politics are the sole driving force in her life. Her gradual awakening to the truth about her family and her relationship with her sister is the main focus of the story. Birthistle does a very good job as the intelligent and driven but shockingly naive Rosa. There are times in the movie where her ignorance is almost annoying, and Birthistle is never afraid to be unlikeable, but at the same time she really pulls you in to the story and you want everything to work out alright for her. Charity Wakefield is her sister Ailie; a whirlwind of heels and hairspray. Ailie is the type who brings an electric sandwich maker on holiday with her, but her apparent superficiality masks a much deeper understanding of things than her emotionally stunted big sis.

The cast are all very good in fact, especially when you consider that out of the four main actors, only Carlos Acosta as Tomas is playing a native of his own land. The two Scottish sisters are actually Irish and English and the suspiciously handsome Cuban Ernesto is in fact half Irish, half Greek/Rwandan!

What we see of Cuba is beautifully shot by DoP Vernon Layton – whether it’s the countryside Rosa ends up travelling through or the sweat-fuelled clubs where Ailie dances the night away – though he and Roberts seem to leave every scene with a faint air of danger hanging over it. This is writer Eirene Houston’s first feature after doing her bit for British TV with Monarch of the Glen and Eastenders, and it is an assured debut. She captures the sibling tensions very well, and while both sisters might feel a bit like one-note caricatures at first, they both show much more depth and similarity as the story progresses. It may suffer slightly in comparison to Paul Laverty’s similarly-themed work, but what wouldn’t? The bait-and-switch ending is a bit predictable but refreshingly underplayed.

The script doesn’t really do anything new with the themes of familial discord and reconciliation, but it is still an entertaining watch bolstered no end by the two strong female leads. Day Of The Flowers is screening in competition for the Michael Powell Award for best British feature and is having its World Premiere (yes, another one!) on Monday 25th, with the writer, director and some of the cast in attendance. There is a second showing on Wednesday 27th as well.



The Ambassador

Danes don’t just do thrillers.

Danish journalist, satirist and television presenter Mads Brügger decides to expose the corruption that is rife within

the diplomatic community in Africa by becoming a part of it. With cameras in tow (some hidden, some not) he buys the post of Consul for Liberia to the Central African Republic and starts trying to smuggle some blood diamonds. Wacky hijinks (and murder) ensue.

Mads Brügger is either one very brave man or one very foolish one. Either way, he has brought to EIFF a documentary that is as frightening as it is entertaining, and filled with characters and situations that are so absurd they have to be real. This film is a shocking indictment of the depth of corruption in some of these fledgling governments. It seems there is almost nothing that cannot be bought or sold if you know the right people and have deep enough pockets.

Things I Learned From Watching The Ambassador:

- A diplomatic passport costs between \$100,000 and \$150,000, depending on who you ask.
- If you follow Brügger's lead and try this for real, there is a very good chance you will end up cheated out of millions of dollars and/or dead.
- Pygmies always travel in pairs.

After a few minutes research, it seems that a lot of people are of the impression that The Ambassador is a Borat-style mockumentary, but Brügger assures us that is not the case. The film follows his travails as he tries to set up a relationship with a mine owner in the CAR, while simultaneously establishing his cover business of a match factory employing exclusively pygmies. The third strand played out sees Brügger go through the nerve-wracking process of having his bona fides confirmed by the government of Liberia. It is this last that is the most nerve-wracking, since without the proper accreditation from his "home" government, a diplomatic passport provides about as much protection as a chocolate fireguard if you are trying to leave the country with a case full of blood diamonds.

Brügger is a hugely entertaining host to this world, playing the role of the rich and dodgy businessman with considerable style. Even though what he's trying to do is shockingly illegal and immoral, you can't help but want him to succeed. I'm sure some will say that his irreverence will be making light of a terrible situation, but I disagree. This is an important story that deserves to be told, and if tying that message up in a funny wrapper makes it more palatable, then so be it. I do have one ongoing question though: where exactly did Brügger get his hands on so much cash?

The Ambassador is showing as part of the festival's Focus On Denmark strand. Its first screening is this afternoon, with the second show on Monday evening. Tickets for all festival screenings can be bought in person at Edinburgh's venerable Filmhouse Cinema or through the EIFF site [here](#).