

## Out of Hours

# The 67th Edinburgh International Film Festival

Starting with a whimper, Opening Night film *Breathe In*, and ending with a naked plea for funding, perhaps the biggest question posed by the 67th Edinburgh International Film Festival, Artistic Director Chris Fujiwara's sophomore effort, was just how many movies featuring Nazi zombies does a mainstream film festival need?

The answer apparently was two, *Frankenstein's Army* and *Outpost 3: Rise of the Spetsnaz*, which for most people is probably too too many. While Richard Raaphorst's steampunk aesthetic *Frankenstein's Army* was at least imaginative and amusing, if slight, the inclusion in the programme of Kieran Parker's *Outpost 3: Rise of the Spetsnaz*, the astoundingly inept second sequel to derivative but fun direct-to-DVD B-movie *Outpost*, served to illustrate just how unfocused this year's festival was.

A decidedly baffling choice for the festival's opening film, writer/director Drake Doremus' *Breathe In*, about the romantic complications and emotional turmoil caused by a foreign music prodigy's stay with her host family, featured decent performances from Guy Pearce and the lucent, beguiling Felicity Jones but was yet another inconsequential study of how difficult it is to be rich, talented, white, and attracted to the young stuff in middle class America. Low-key, measured, and utterly predictable, *Breathe In* is angst and po-faced without ever being involving.

While teeth-grindingly, stab-yourself-in-the-eyes irritating, a far better choice for the opener may have been Indie darling Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha*, a film aimed squarely at the kind of people who found Sally Hawkins' ditsy character in Mike Leigh's *Happy Go Lucky* not quite annoying and cutesy enough. Frothy and slight, it

**Frankenstein's Army. Photographer: Lukas Zentel.**



**Monsters University. Left to right: Mike and Sulley among other monsters. ©2012 Disney/Pixar. All Rights Reserved.**

features co-writer Greta Gerwig as the kind of 30-year-old sociopathic woman/child we're supposed to find adorable because she dances with abandon in the street while dispensing bon-mots like: 'I'm not a real person yet', as she struggles aimlessly towards her own personal epiphany in a Woody Allen-esque, French New Wave-inspired Noo Yawk where in reality some stressed-out, homicidal commuter would push a kooky chick like Frances under a subway train.

Built on a six-decade tradition of bold, groundbreaking, boundary-pushing, international cinema, the Edinburgh International Film Festival has somewhat lost its way in recent years ever since the disastrous decision to move it from August to June, and while Fujiwara's triumphant programme last year went some way to redressing the damage done by 2011's scaled-down 're-imagining', this year's festival was defined by its safety that Fujiwara blames on its funding deficiencies, the festival's poverty responsible for its failure to attract big name talent. Funding issues however can't be blamed for a poverty of ambition.

While there was a strong focus on Korean cinema this year (well, with Bong Joon-ho heading the awards jury it'd be rude not to), as has become traditional, Pixar's latest release, *Monsters University*, received its UK premiere and a rapturous reception from the Scottish capital. A prequel to *Monsters Inc.*, a better title may have

been *When Mike Met Sulley* as *Monsters University* recounts how our heroes (John Goodman and Billy Crystal) first meet and become rivals, before eventually bonding in their quest to become top scarers and win the respect of university principal Dean Hardscrabble (Helen Mirren). It's not as good as its predecessor *Monsters Inc.* or last year's *Brave* but it is a Pixar film, automatically making it better than 90% of the programme, and the animation and voice talent are wonderful, though the absence of the delightful human toddler Boo (who isn't even born yet in this one!) is keenly felt. A fun, family-friendly, crowd-pleaser, *Monsters University* was indisputably one of the highlights of the festival.

The rest of the fare on offer however was rather more muted though no less satisfying. *Sound Of My Voice* director Zal Batmanglij once again collaborates with the sublime Brit Marling on zeitgeist-courting eco-thriller *The East*. Marling plays ex-Fed Sarah, an industrial spy/provocateur tasked with infiltrating a bunch of right-on eco-terrorists who are taking the fight to corporate America. As Sarah gets closer to the group's charismatic, messianic leader (Alexander Skarsgård) and their missions or 'jams' become darker, she finds herself being seduced by the cause and going native. Morally ambiguous and tense without being overwrought, *The East* is that rare beast; intelligent, adult multiplex fare that credits its audience with at least



Neil and Oscar from *I Am Breathing*.

as much intelligence as its makers.

Skarsgård also appeared in *What Maisie Knew*, a touching, tasteful, tear-jerking contemporary reimagining of Henry James' classic novel of marriage break-up and custody wrangling as seen through the eyes of a child which has the potential to be a 21st century *Kramer vs. Kramer*.

With a title that sounds like the kind of backdoor grooming treatment you may expect to find in an Essex beauty salon, Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* however, felt like watching a Bret Easton Ellis-penned *High School Musical* sequel shorn

of all the sex, drugs, rape, and nihilism, and what's the point of that? The tale of spoiled, privileged, Hollywood rich kids burgling spoiled, privileged, Hollywood celebutards, *The Bling Ring* is another pretty, superficial addition to Coppola's pretty, superficial back catalogue with only a ferocious performance from the luminous Emma Watson to recommend it. Perhaps one of the most perplexing films you'll see at a cinema this year though was *Primer* director Shane Carruth's *Upstream Colour* which mixed sci-fi, paranoid conspiracy theories, and

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animal husbandry into a conventional mumblecore romance. Imagine if James Herriot wrote a Philip K Dick-style film for Terrence Malick and you'd be within spitting distance of Carruth's beautiful, obtuse, head-scratcher.

Sixty-seven years ago the festival began as purely a celebration of the documentary and with films like the devastating *Fire In The Night* about the Piper Alpha disaster, the heartbreaking *I Am Breathing* charting a young father's battle with motor neuron disease or the bruising, immersive *Leviathan*, the festival's strong commitment to documentary cinema was most heartening in a year that lacked lustre. A non-narrative documentary that's closer to experimental art cinema and defies conventional description, *Leviathan* is a lot like being chased into an alley and given a refreshing kicking. It simply has to be experienced.

The most satisfying film of the festival however proved, fittingly, to be Scottish; director Jeanie Finlay's *The Great Hip Hop Hoax* which mixed found footage, animation, and interview to spin the bittersweet tale of ill-fated hip hop duo Silibil 'n' Brains, two West Coast rappers who swapped sunny California for grimy London, and in 2004 were briefly poised on the brink of superstardom with the likes of Muse and Busted (seriously!). Except they weren't really from the West Coast. They were from the East Coast. Of Scotland, Dundee to be precise. Rejected by the London music biz as 'the rapping Proclaimers', best buds Billy Boyd and Gavin Bain reinvented themselves as fake Californians in an attempt to blag a record deal and almost made it before blowing it all on drink, drugs, and shattered friendships. Just like a real band. Tragic, funny, and ultimately uplifting *The Great Hip Hop Hoax* is a wonderful little film that deserves to be seen by as wide an audience as possible.

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Silibil n' Brains from *The Great Hip Hop Hoax*. Photographer: Goetz Werner [www.hiphophoax.com](http://www.hiphophoax.com)