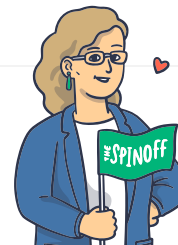


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From sublime to satirical: filmmaker picks in the film festival, part 4



By Guest Post

Guest Writer

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Paris Opera

Who doesn't like a bracingly funny bit of satirical social politics? Who doesn't admire an arts troupe that astounds its audience show after show? With the Film Festival upon us we asked filmmakers to choose a favourite movie from the lineup and also tell us about their own films in the festival. Here's

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the fourth instalment of the series, by Catherine Bisley and Shirley Horrocks.

Catherine Bisley, director of *Untitled Groping Revenge Fairytale*, recommends *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*

I've been a fan of Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos since I saw his brutal and inventive social satire *Dogtooth*. *The Lobster*, his barbed parable on society's obsession with being in a relationship, was also hilarious and disturbing. His new film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, comes to us fresh from being booed at Cannes and I hope it lives up to my expectation of an elegantly executed pitch-black comedy. It's been billed as a modern take on ancient Greek tragedy, which is the messiest and cruelest of tragic forms (Oedipus, Antigone), so brace yourself.

Another deer-related film in the programme intrigues me. *On Body and Soul* has a strangely beautiful premise: a pair of lonesome co-workers at an abattoir discover they share the same dream, in which they wander snowy woods together, as romantically involved deer. Director Ildikó Enyedi won Berlin's Golden Bear for this one.



Untitled Groping Revenge Fairytale

My short film *Untitled Groping Revenge Fairytale* also blends the fantastical and the everyday. The idea for the film, which our tiny crew shot on the inky black streets and in the quiet green forests of the Central Plateau, struck me as I was running my dog along a dull stretch of pavement by Wellington airport. A certain American ass had been caught on a hot mic saying he considered women's bodies to be an all-you-can-grab buffet. Fuelled by some amateur statistical analysis of self-gathered Saturday Night Data, I found myself preoccupied by the absurd—yet seemingly ever-present—feeling that somehow my body was not fully my own.

I wanted to say fuck that. And I wanted to have a good time doing it. In taking something sadly ordinary and making it strange, I hope to give it impact. The premise also gave me an opportunity to cast my very good-looking dog, Nora, and an albino guinea pig called Goodtime Bob.

Untitled Groping Revenge Fairytale screens in New Zealand's Best, a programme of short films: July 29 (all dates are for Auckland screenings; other centres follow).

The Killing of a Sacred Deer: August 1, 3.

On Body and Soul: August 2, 3.

Free Theatre director Shirley Horrocks recommends *The Paris Opera*

I'm looking forward to *The Paris Opera*, Jean-Stephane Bron's frank, behind-the-scenes chronicle of a famous musical institution. It's partly because my own festival film this year, *Free Theatre: The 37-Year Experiment*, is about the history of a unique Christchurch group which also combines theatre and music. Of course, there's a

world of difference between a multi-million-dollar, state-supported company in France and a Kiwi group working on a shoe-string, but the process of making art, with a colourful cast of characters, is always fascinating and dramatic.

When Aucklanders asked what I was working on this year, and I said, “A documentary about Free Theatre,” their usual reply was “What? Who are they?” I’m used to that sort of response because I make documentaries about people in the arts who deserve to be much better known. I named my last documentary, *Tom Who?* because the painter Tom Kreisler had become largely forgotten outside of New Plymouth. I’m delighted that since the release of the film there have been three exhibitions of his work – he’s back on the radar.

We are such an insular country. Free Theatre is known in Christchurch, but though they are arguably the most colourful and controversial theatre company in New Zealand – a hidden treasure which has been creating extraordinary productions for 37 years – they are still a case of “who?” for many Aucklanders and Wellingtonians.

This is my 10th feature documentary to screen at the NZ International Film Festival so it’s a personal milestone. One of the effects of taking fabulous-but-less-well-known artists as my subjects is that mainstream television is no longer interested. I started making documentaries about the arts over 30 years ago, and for the first two decades I was commissioned to make them for television. Then television decided in its wisdom that all it wanted was reality programmes, cooking competitions and celebrities. That meant NZ On Air was not able to

fund my documentaries, so the task of raising the budget became the biggest challenge for me.

Free Theatre: The 37-Year Experiment

The project with Free Theatre started seven years ago when I saw their production *Distraction Camp* (inspired by Jean Genet's play *The Balcony*). I was amazed by the richness: it was very physical and combined music, colour and startling images. It was the most intense drama I'd seen for a long time and I was even more surprised to learn how long the company had been creating productions like this.

I filmed them whenever I could over the next seven years, and finally was able to get a Creative NZ Quick Response Grant and a NZ Film Commission Finishing Grant which enabled me to complete the film for this year's festival. I know I'm not the only local filmmaker who faces problems like this and I hope festival audiences realise how many New Zealand films are labours of love. If we can just get them made, there's an enthusiastic audience, and those films have permanent value as a record of our country.

One reason I related so strongly to Free Theatre is that their history has run parallel to my own film career. There's no cruisy, laid-back lifestyle for anyone who puts creative priorities ahead of commercial ones. Free Theatre has survived censure, court cases, money problems and an earthquake that wrecked their venue. Such pressures have only made them more imaginative and more determined to realise their vision. They

show that working outside the mainstream can be hugely satisfying. The film is not just about Christchurch but relates Free Theatre's activities to the wider history of experiment in the arts in New Zealand.

Free Theatre has always taken an unusually wide-ranging approach to performance, including not only actors but writers, directors, musicians and artists. People appearing in the film include Peter Falkenberg, George Parker, Emma Johnson, Stephanie Johnson, Murray Edmond, Stuart McKenzie, Bill Direen, Nick Frost, Peter Simpson, Gao Ping and Hamish McKeich, with historic footage of Alan Brunton.

I was particularly impressed by Free Theatre's highly original responses to the Christchurch earthquakes. The extraordinary *Canterbury Tales* involved a parade which brought thousands of people into the broken centre of Christchurch to celebrate, with my cameraman and me running through the streets to keep up. The performance of *Earthquake in Chile* had the unlikely starting point of an 18th century morality tale and led the audience through a series of strange but wonderful food events, which had people talking about the food and comradeship they had experienced after the earthquakes.

The company was established by German-born director, Peter Falkenberg, who had taken part in various forms of "free theatre" during the wild European 60s. When he came to Christchurch, to "the end of the world", he found that theatre here still followed a traditional "talking heads" approach. The conservative nature of the local scene made it

an ideal location in which to create an alternative.

The intense Falkenberg is still on hand to provide inspiration three decades later. He's been likened to the legendary film director Rainer Fassbinder, for his ability to energise a creative group of actors. In the words of Stephanie Johnson, the novelist and playwright who was an early member of the group, it was "like a little bit of Berlin in Christchurch". Over the years, as dozens of talented actors, writers, dancers, musicians and artists have passed through its ranks, Free Theatre has not lost its innovative edge and yet it has become deeply rooted in its New Zealand home.

MORE READING

- [Together in the dark: Gaylene Preston on film festival virtuoso Bill Gosden](#)
- [With Auckland cancelled, the rest of NZ needs to save the film festival](#)
- [Doc Edge: Seven documentaries to watch in this year's festival](#)

The Paris Opera: July 27; August 1, 3.

Free Theatre: The 37-Year Experiment: July 26, 28.

*For bookings and more on the festival, visit the [official site](#). Lots of trailers are [here](#). And don't miss *The Spinoff's* [top ten festival film picks](#), plus other filmmaker recommendations [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).*