

BookWars Bookwars Directed by Jason Rosette ...

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Bookwars

**Directed by
Jason Rosette**

In

BookWars, a superb nonfiction film by first-time feature director Jason Rosette, books are more than sources of knowledge. They are merchandise that's appraised, bought and sold. They're also artifacts, sometimes clean and intact but more often damaged, whose condition at the point of sale says plenty about the conscientiousness of the seller. Most of all, they're an addictive substance.

BookWars has its world premiere March 11, 7:30, at the New York Underground Film Festival, which runs March 8-14 at Anthology Film Archives. It occurs to me that when you check out this festival, the experience is not unlike perusing a street bookseller's wares. In both cases you get a mix of old and new themes, titles and styles, and the quality of presentation varies wildly from work to work. On the street, some books are shrink-wrapped and new, freshly purchased at some used bookstore or plucked from a remainder bin or a warehouse garbage pile, while others are dog-eared, broken-spined, underlined, highlighted. At the New York Underground Film Festival, you see the same discrepancy in artistry and production values. Some stuff seems utterly polished and accessible, even lushly produced; other stuff is well-done, but made in a stridently kooky or uncompromisingly obtuse style that's meant to repel casual moviegoers. Other stuff is pure film geek b.s., hewing so close to the cliché of underground filmmaking that it's tough to watch without snickering. (Remember that incomprehensible experimental movie directed by Shelley Long's *Mensa* barmaid on *Cheers*, which ended with stock footage of a mushroom cloud and the credit, "Un Film de Diane Chambers"? The NYUFF usually has at least three equivalents on the schedule.) But no matter what the quality of the individual items, the event has a pleasing gestalt. So much of moviegoing life is bound up in advertising, media hype and other forms of prepackaging; even most arthouses and film festivals succumb to these forces, showing movies that have played a hundred fests already (or are about to). At NYUFF, you can be reasonably sure that you're going to see a lot of stuff you've never heard of before, much less seen, and that this will probably be your only chance to see it, for better or worse. Like items on a street bookseller's table, you can probably ignore a lot of it without worrying that you've impoverished your spirit. But you also want to be alert and open to possibilities—otherwise you might miss something that will make your day, even change your life.

BookWars is an example of the latter: a real find. It'd fit nicely on a double bill with *Wonder Boys*. Both films are about people with a hopeless, perhaps self-destructive love of books and words and both exude an unmistakable aura of authority. The filmmakers clearly know what they're talking about—you sense they're emotionally committed participants, not tourists—and they manage to make a peculiar literary subculture accessible to casual viewers without condescending to the people involved or dumbing anything down. Most significantly, both films convey the sense of a fragile, fascinating world endangered by shifting cultural values. The chatty literati of *Wonder Boys* are creatures of the university system, which until recently shielded them from the hard truths of declining American literacy and the rise of mass-market values in the publishing industry. They're finding out the hard way that they can run but they can't hide, and that very soon, serious literary fiction will be as relevant to the general public as blacksmithing.

In *BookWars*, Giuliani's quality-of-life campaign—which sometimes seems to stem more from a desire to protect big business and control or destroy oddball fringe New Yorkers than to legitimately enhance public safety—decimates the ranks of street booksellers, whose interaction with citizens in America's most literate city once was evidence of a thriving urban life of the mind. Rosette, who started selling books on the street in the mid-90s, is aware that he came in at the end of an era, but he doesn't let that awareness poison the story with bitterness; nor does he lionize himself for having known interesting people and chronicling the beginning of the end of their world. He's just a guy selling books, and he happens to have a camera, a point of view and the storytelling chops to explain what happened and what it means.

The action unfolds mainly in two bookselling hotspots, the Washington Square Park area and on 6th Ave. near the Jefferson Market library. The diverse cast of characters includes Pete, an artist with a loft in downtown Newark who started buying used books to gather collage material and ended up selling them; Thomas from California, a slender, bearded fellow who unexpectedly becomes a fierce community organizer when Giuliani's minions begin their crackdown; and Rick, a young, droll, part-time street magician and friend of Rosette who came into the bookselling game even later than the filmmaker. There are guys from Russia and Poland and Jamaica, young slacker types and men who look old enough to have actually hung out with the Beats. The customer base is just as varied; as is the case with any business, the booksellers make a sizable chunk of revenue off repeat customers, some of whom are charming, others aloof and even belligerent.

Like a good, long, thorough magazine article, *BookWars* has a controlled, mesmerizing tone and an eye for small, telling details. Contrary to irresponsible stories published in various New York newspapers and magazines, Rosette informs us that most street booksellers don't steal their books; they get most of their wares from yard and estate sales in the city and surrounding suburbs, as well as from remainder bins and trash heaps. They fix up the more battered volumes using the standard bookseller's tool kit (tape, Elmer's Glue, rubbing alcohol, razor blades) and add little psychologically effective touches to make certain books seem more special (plastic slipcovers, for example). The books are stored in the sellers' homes or in storage lockers (very few booksellers are homeless), and the storage unit of choice is a cardboard banana box, usually Del Monte (nobody knows why; it's just tradition).

The booksellers are fascinating

underground characters—little Joe Goulds—but Rosette doesn't suggest that they're all wonderful, highly functioning people who'd fit in any place if given the chance. On the contrary, some of them seem cranky, unreasonable, even mentally disturbed; at the very least, we sense that most of them would never be as driven and together in another profession as they are in this one. Where books are concerned, they seem to feel criticisms and slights more deeply than most citizens.

Because we're given a bit of time to know the booksellers, the encroachment on their lifestyle by cops, bureaucrats and college administrators (NYU installed huge sidewalk planters to make it harder to set up tables) seems an outrageous overreaction to people who, in the greater scheme of social ills, could not rationally be considered a serious problem. Rosette astutely shows us how Giuliani's forces gradually turned up the heat, ticketing the sellers for not having proper documentation, instituting curfews, even subtly drawing and redrawing lines on the curb so that the space booksellers could occupy was reduced over time. The film metaphorically links Giuliani's meticulous persecution of street booksellers to the fate of a toad in one of Pete the artist's terrariums. The puny amphibian mysteriously took ill and died, and Pete later discovered from reading a natural history book that the animal probably cacked from infestation after a fly laid maggot eggs in its stomach. Late in the film, as the city closes in, Rosette's narration brings this chilling image home. "What is this thing that seeks to regiment, control, organize and commodify everything in its path, this thing that cleans the streets, this devouring worm that eats cities from the inside out?" he asks.

Though Rosette is the main character in *BookWars* and our guide through its world, he doesn't aggrandize himself or put his own feelings front and center. He's content to serve as an engaged yet slightly distanced narrator. His pitch-perfect sense of what shots to show us and how long to fix them onscreen, coupled with his sharp choice of music and his relaxed yet elegant narration (his Ohio-accented tenor speaking voice suggests Lou Reed's vocals) hints at a potentially fearsome combination of literary ambition and film sense. In its own laid-back, no-big-deal way, this is a wonderful movie.

Though *BookWars* made the biggest impression of the NYUFF titles I previewed, there's other stuff on the bill that's interesting for one reason or another.

Slava Tsukerman's 1982 punk-heroin-alien favorite *Liquid Sky* gets a screening March 10 at 11 p.m., with the director in attendance; if you haven't seen it and you're a fan of incomprehensible New York cult classics, check it out, and don't be afraid to get bombed first.

Chris Wilcha's *The Target Shoots First* (March 9, 7:30 p.m.), a first-person documentary feature about life at mail-order juggernaut Columbia House during the grunge era, is entertaining for general audiences and probably indispensable for anyone who's interested in nutzoid indulgences of the music industry—though Wilcha, unlike Rosette, sometimes presumes too much interest in what he's thinking and feeling and not enough in the specific mechanics of his world. *Untitled #29.95*, a documentary about the history of experimental video that precedes *The Target Shoots First*, won't tell video aficionados anything they

didn't already know, and the pretentious style (dissonant soundtrack noise, pixilated closeups of video screens that are supposed to emphasize the tv-ness of tv) will bore the crap out of newbies.

James Fotopoulos' *Migrating*

Forms (March 11, 4 p.m.) is billed in the program as "the downbeat, stripped-down tale of a worn-out man and a slatternly woman engaging in a tense, tawdry affair beneath the all-seeing gaze of the man's silent cat."

But the film I saw looked a lot like a rather dull film-school variant of David Lynch's *Eraserhead* with static compositions, a nearly silent soundtrack, unsubtle intimations of disease and decay and supposedly mesmerizing shots that go on about 10 times as long as they should and contain a 10th as much expressive energy as their creator seems to think.

Deborah Stratman's

The Blvd (March 12, 6:15 p.m.) isn't as rich, subtle or varied a look at a subculture as *BookWars*, but it's just as much fun and much more conventionally exciting. It's a portrait of street drag racing in Chicago, choked with detail and chock-full of anecdotes by veteran racers (and family members, and bettors). Stratman's film mythologizes the hot-rod obsession even as it recalls some of the saddest early Springsteen songs, about guys who race to get away from straight society but end up spinning their wheels in eternal adolescence.

Among notable shorts: Jeff

Krulik's *Obsessed with Jews* (shown as part of "That's Undertainment," a short-film compilation that screens March 11 at 9:15 p.m.) is an amusing and alarming look at a Washington, DC, accountant who has allowed ethnic pride to become a self-feeding obsession, amassing a collection of more than 7000 items bearing images of famous Jews. *Swingers' Serenade* (shown as part of "Fist of the Monkey Gods" on March 11 at 4:30 p.m.) sounds hilarious on paper—it's a modern reconstruction of a sex film script first published in a do-it-yourself 1960s moviemaking magazine—but the filmmakers kill the joke by camping things up too much. Stan Brakhage meets Bruce Weber in *Recital* (show in "Vision Quest" on March 11 at 6:15 p.m.), an incomprehensible yet mesmerizing film: a young, beautiful boy in a blond wig fights with his buddies and picks apart a blood-juicy pomegranate while an adult man's voice drones on about trusting instincts and taking chances, suggesting either a chickenhawk fantasy or the kid's inevitable maturation and loss of innocence.

The film most likely to

inspire helpless, baffled laughter is *Frozen Hot*, which is either the most original feature film comedy since *Being John Malkovich* or the most hopelessly fucked-up (perhaps both). Writer-director Charles Brosseau/Fisher stars in this Hollywood satire as St. John the Baptist (yes, really), a low-rent Hollywood film producer who dresses like Billy Jack and maybe thinks he *is* Billy Jack.

St. John, an obscure actor-filmmaker

from the 70s, is undergoing a deposition in a lawsuit to prevent the looting of a "Hindu/Gay/Nazi" millionaire's estate. The lawyer is a charismatic black woman named Miss Ross (brilliantly played by Ella Joyce of the Fox comedy *Roc*). As she discusses the case with St. John, "Frozen Hot" randomly intercuts footage from a real-life exploitation documentary called *The Great Hollywood Rape/Slaughter* (directed by Brosseau/Fisher in 1971)

with St. John's fantasies of enjoying a supercool vanilla-chocolate 70s fling with the attorney, who has inexplicably transformed herself into "Cocoa Mubutu Fox," a hot-to-trot blaxploitation heroine who's part empowered ass-kicker, part fantasy whore. Both the archival footage and the current stuff is shot in 70s exploitation style, with distanced medium shots and muffled sound, and backed by an exquisite coke-lines-on-a-glass-tabletop jazz-pop soundtrack. You could call it a stunning work of playful, postmodern synthesis—if it were possible to tell which effects are intentional and which are the by-product of an obscure 70s moviemaker doing things the only way he knows how. It's not possible, and that's what makes it fun.

The obvious invocation here is Quentin Tarantino, who turned the white Gen-X film nerd's worship of drive-in fare into critically lauded blockbuster pop art. But let's be honest: *Pulp Fiction*, as much as I adore it, is essentially playacting—a filmmaker and his actors playing mix-and-match with disreputable film genres and acting styles. *Frozen Hot* isn't as voluptuously directed and gracefully written, but it's the real deal—a movie-out-of-time, created by a guy who's actually of the era and still feels its woozy, wide-lapeled vibes. In a fantasy sequence where St. John "auditions" Miss Ross for a movie, she fakes tarty seductiveness and then oozes contempt for the white man, which only turns both of them on all the more. "I bet you want Cocoa Mubutu Fox's thick chocolate lips around your little pink dick, don't you, Mister Charlie?" she demands. "I bet you want to dive right into Cocoa's big fuckable ass, don't you, Mister Charlie, y'old white honky motherfucker?" Somehow she makes it sound endearing. Their passionate, unexpectedly intellectualized affair suggests *Last Tango in Paris* starring Billy Jack and Foxy Brown. Tarantino should see this film, but I halfway hope he won't; he might end up masturbating joyously in the aisle.

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