

True/False puts the 'festive' in film festival



A scene from the documentary "Starless Dreams." (True/False Film Festival)



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Each year, on a freely lubricated Saturday night during the True/False film festival, several hundred moviegoers settle in at the Blue Note on Ninth Street, a onetime vaudeville-house-turned-music-venue-turned-temporary-screening emporium.

They're there to be messed with. They're there for a so-called documentary game show called "Gimme Truth!"

Many True/False regulars, some of whom remember how unassuming the annual documentary festival seemed when it began in 2004, consider the live show their favorite mind scramble in a four-day event devoted, according to its nonprofit organizational mission statement, to "a permeable, in-between land," one that is "bounded by fiction and nonfiction."

Hosted by leisure-suited comedian Johnny St. John, Saturday's "Gimme Truth!" featured three of the 2016 festival's visiting directors as guest judges: "Cameraperson" director Kristen Johnson; "Music of Strangers" director Morgan Neville; and "Life, Animated" director Roger Ross Williams. The panelists and the audience watched 10 two-minute documentary films, on topics ranging from a man who licks paintings when no one's looking ("The Art Handler") to the tale of an off-campus rental unit containing, barely, 23 students ("College House").

Some of the films were pranks; others were telling the truth, or thereabouts. The judges judged incorrectly as often as correctly. Emcee St. John capped the evening with the "Gimme Truth!" theme song, for which he wrote lyrics best suited to fans of "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In": "Give me Buzzi/Give me Ruth/Give me, give me, give me, give me truth."

So, Cannes it isn't.

Does this sound like part of a major international film festival?

No, and yes. With its 13th edition in the rearview mirror, True/False is a well-established and seriously popular festival, one of America's regional favorites, selling 45,000 tickets last year (figures weren't yet available for the 2016 edition). Columbia loves it, and shows its love. The city has a population of just under 117,000 according to the last census, and it is a land of roaming [University of Missouri](#) tiger mascots where you can find really good biscuits around every corner.

For four days and nights each March, True/False presents nonfiction cinema from around the world. Much of it cuts through traditional descriptions of documentary filmmaking.

Based on the work I saw over three days of True/False's 35-feature lineup, it's clear co-founders Paul Sturtz and David Wilson and their programming staff favor a provocative if occasionally indulgent dialectic between filmmakers and their subjects. A lot of it's terrific. But there is a limit to how much and in what ways a movie truly needs its maker in there, calling attention to the string-pulling, turning the examination procedure on the one with the camera.

One such limit was reached near the end of Thursday's screening of the Sundance Film Festival favorite "[Weiner](#)." The documentary by Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg is a slick, breezy account of disgraced congressman Anthony Weiner and his New York City mayoral candidacy. Weiner was the guy who took underwear selfies and sexted up a storm behind the back of his infinitely savvier wife, Hillary Clinton adviser and staffer Huma Abedin.

The moment in question finds Weiner in the back of a limo, riding into a sobering political future block by block. The unseen but not-unheard Kriegman once again engages his beaten-down subject in conversation the subject clearly doesn't want. There's a relationship there, a collegial friendship

preceding the documentary project, but it has been a long campaign. Weiner stops him with a question.

"Doesn't the fly-on-the-wall concept," he asks with a weary smile, depend on "the concept of not being seen or heard?" At True/False Thursday that line got a huge laugh, partly because many in the audience were likely surprised to find themselves siding with Weiner on that score.

Or maybe it was just me. Some of the most technically accomplished work ("Author: The JT LeRoy Story," on the subject of a particularly juicy literary fraud) shed more heat than light on matters of identity and the manufactured image. But the work overall was very strong.

My favorites from this year's True/False include the powerfully moving "Starless Dreams," Iranian director Mehrdad Oskouei's haunting portrait of young women sharing temporary quarters in a Tehran detention center. Another was "Those Who Jump," a tense, teeming depiction of African migrants living on Morocco's Mount Gurugu overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, trying to make their way into Spain and the rest of Europe across a well-fenced border.

Both films make a simple, powerful emotional connection, "Starless Dreams" especially. In that film we hear (but do not see) Oskouei conversing with his subjects, in a low murmur. "Those Who Jump" goes much further into the realm of first-person docu-essay. Abou Bakar Sidibe (listed as co-director) was given a camera by co-directors Moritz Siebert and Estephan Wagner, who asked him to capture his experience and that of his fellow undocumented immigrants.

Each day at True/False proved the increasing malleability of the nonfiction genre. On a different planet than "Starless Dreams," but no less assured, Chicago filmmaker and multimedia artist Deborah Stratman's 60-minute vision "The Illinois Parables" ditched conventional narrative for a striking poetic meditation on various Illinois histories, from the U.S. government's "resettlement" of the Cherokee in the early 19th century to the deadly 1925 tri-state tornado. Stratman works intuitively with extreme precision; she's a wizard with sound. Her film is a beautiful riddle of an achievement.

"The Illinois Parables" will make its Chicago premiere April 14 at the Gene Siskel Film Center and is likely to play Northwestern University's Block Cinema later this spring.

With every festival there's the screening that got away. Mine was a short film titled "Concerned Student 1950," added late to the schedule and particularly vital to the Columbia audience. The 30-minute doc deals with the late 2015 African-American student protests, responding to a slew of recent racial incidents on the Mizzou campus. A campus petition, and the threat of a football team boycott, led to the resignation of the university systems president and the chancellor.

Student filmmakers Varun Bajaj, Adam Dietrich and Kellan Marvin, studying at Mizzou's Murray Center for Documentary Journalism, were granted rare media access (while other journalists were prevented

from covering the protests). The weekend screening got the attention of, among others, filmmaker Spike Lee, reportedly negotiating with the makers of "Concerned Student 1950" to use some of their footage for an upcoming project.

Many factors account for the rise and the flavor of True/False. It began on a budget of \$60,000. Now, in its 13th year and backed by high-profile sponsors (HBO and Vimeo), the nonprofit festival operates on a \$1.3 million budget, which does not include what festival officials estimate to be \$640,000 in donations and sponsorships.

Here's another factor tied to that \$640,000 figure: True/False offers free rides to a growing list of visiting journalists and critics, from airfare to lodging to Visa gift cards. (I respectfully declined.) It's a notable degree of graft, or generosity, depending on your outlook. Indiewire's Sam Adams wrote about two years ago in a piece headlined: "The Freeing Power of True/False's Free Ride."

Part of the appeal is purely social and conversational. At True/False, there are few publicists and virtually no impediments to a quick interview, or a beer, with a visiting director or an overseas guest. The coverage tends to be gushy because the place, the vibe, is friendly.

Patronage ethics aside, here's what other festivals, both smaller and larger, can learn from True/False: It's fun. It's a community blowout. The festival mission statement argues for a "transformative, rambunctious, ecstatic experience." In the vicinity of all eight True/False screening venues, including the gorgeously restored Missouri Theatre, the musicians, the food trucks and the ongoing search for populist nonfiction filmmaking's possibilities blend in a fluid and engaging way.

Our own multiplex-bound Chicago International Film Festival seems boxy and square by comparison, in more ways than one.

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