

## A festival diary

[James Wright](#) shares his thoughts from his day exploring the Manchester International Film Festival 2018

Wednesday 21 March 2018



Image: Edward A. Palmer

Film festivals are filmmaking heterotopias. For some they are stepping stones to future Awards recognition and distribution, for others they represent something of an end goal in themselves, and for most they are wonderful platforms for people to actually see your film – a process that shows no signs of getting any easier for independent filmmakers. For film fans they are perfect opportunities to see indie films, discover unknown talent, and enjoy the networking opportunities that festivals afford.

Manchester International Film Festival is growing in size and scope and this year featured a workshop with the always fascinating presence in the film industry that is Shia LaBeouf, as well as the debut of the late John Hurt's final film appearance in *Damascus Cover* (dir. Daniel Zelik Berk). Due to time and snow-related restraints, I was only able to visit the festival on one of its four days but I managed to pack in four features, three Q&As, two shorts, and two music videos. A busy day but definitely worth it.

08.00am – I check online and trains across the Pennines are running – hooray!

09:20am – Arrived safely at York Station after a somewhat slippery cycle. According to the departures board, the train is on time – all going to plan thus far.

09:46am – Busy train leaves York, slightly delayed but still very thankful that it is running at all.

11.10am – Train arrives at Manchester Oxford Road. On my way out of the station, a man asks if I know where Deansgate is. I do not so swiftly apologise and walk on into the cold, crisp air of Lancashire.

11.30am – Sipping coffee in a well-known fast-food establishment, I check my e-ticket for the address of the cinema where the Film Festival is being held: ODEON Manchester Great Northern, 235 Deansgate, Manchester M3 4EN. Apparently I do not know where I am going and wonder whether I will ever see the man again.

12.30pm – I finally find the cinema after a surprisingly low number of wrong turns. The festival staff and volunteers are very welcoming and friendly despite their fatigue on Day 3 of the festival. I probably overdo it on the thank-yous in a desperate attempt at encouragement.

1.00pm – Short Film: ***The Dead Man Speaks* (dir. Marcos Mereles, Netherlands)**

A collection of musings of a dead man full of static shots and deadpan narration. The short encourages reflection on life and death and everything in between in an impressive 3 minute runtime. A deserved winner of the Best Experimental Film Award.

– Feature: ***Can't Say Goodbye* (dir. Lino Escalera, Spain) + Q&A**



Image: Lolita Films

Winner of Best Film and Best Foreign Language Film, *Can't Say Goodbye* is a sombre affair as two daughters seek to reconnect with their dying father. Its an exploration of grief, melancholy, and communication and is extremely well-made. There are certain choices of craft which benefit the ending greatly and its unspoken message of valuing family while you can is one that hit the right spot for the festival audience. Escalera was quietly proud of his film and the fact it got a 5 week run in Spanish cinemas was an unexpected joy for him. Hopefully it'll get picked up at another festival further down the line, as this really is a film that deserves to be seen by international audiences.

3.10pm – Short Film: ***Light Plays* (dir. Anne-Marie Bouchard, Canada)**

Another experimental short, using lighting and animation techniques I don't know the name of. A little epilepsy-inducing but still fun and engaging.

– Feature: ***Hippopotamus* (dir. Ed Palmer, UK) + Q&A**



Image: Edward A. Palmer

The directorial debut of young British filmmaker Ed Palmer is an ambitious affair, taking the concept of Stockholm Syndrome and fashioning it into a film that feels fresh and vibrant. Part psychological thriller, part drama, *Hippopotamus* deals with themes of love, trauma, and everything in between. Its power lies chiefly in its story, beautifully unfolding at a pace that grows exponentially. At times it finely walks the line of cliché without transgressing, and the twists and turns of the plot require plenty of digestion as the end credits roll. The craft on show is wonderful and made all the more so by Palmer's lack of budget. The Fincher-inspired opening credits are a thing of beauty, as are various montages throughout the feature. Lead actors Ingvild Deila and Tom Lincoln work really well together; terror and control are portrayed in perfect balance. During the Q&A, it became apparent that audience members were having split opinions, not on the quality of the film (everyone I heard and spoke to loved it) but in terms of their reactions to the plot itself and the arcs of the characters. This is indicative of Palmer's respect for his audience; he is unwilling to spoon-feed narrative and instead chooses to let them decide for themselves. Powerful, unforgettable, and thought-provoking, *Hippopotamus* is a fantastic feature debut and I greatly look

forward to more work from Palmer in the future.

5.00pm – Music Video: ***Sola* (dir. Jonathan Nix, Australia)**

A clever music video that illustrates something of the absurdity of modern technology and humanity's reliance upon it.

– Feature: ***The Sounding* (dir. Catherine Eaton, USA) + Q&A**



Image: Rag and Bone Pictures

A blend of Shakespeare and neuroscience form the backbone for this directorial debut. Director Eaton also stars as Liv, a selective mute who provides a challenge for neurologist Michael (Terry Seares). It is primarily about communication though it goes about conveying this in a thoroughly creative and entertaining way. Eaton won Best Actress at the festival and in the Q&A afterwards she was really keen to encourage actors to write as well. Her co-writer on the film Bryan Delaney even went as far to say that if you ask both an actor and a novelist to write a screenplay, more often than not the actor will initially be better because they have a better understanding of things like the necessity of character motive for even the simplest of actions. Interesting stuff.

7.45pm – Feature: ***The Isle* (dir. Matthew Butler Hart, UK)**



Image: Cleves Media/Fizz and Ginger Films

Atmospheric tale of a mysterious island and the travails of three unexpected guests. *The Isle* is set in the mid-19th century and has vibes of *The Tempest* running right through it. It builds tension really well through smart creative choices and excellent sound design, and the ensemble cast precisely capture the isolation and oddness that the island induces. Winner of Best Cinematography and top marks for the cast who diligently handed out chocolate to every member of the audience before the film.

9.45pm – *The Isle* finishes and sadly I am unable to stay for the Q&A if I want to make the last train home. I cast an apologetic glance towards the cast as I hurriedly zip up my coat and scurry to the exit, though it seems highly unlikely that my gesture could have been interpreted as anything other than disappointment in their film and artistic endeavours.

10.00pm – The train is delayed giving me time for a second and final trip to the fast-food establishment. My first hot meal of the day is welcomed with gratefulness; again, probably overdoing it with the thank-yous at the till.

10:18pm – The train leaves Oxford Road. I find an unoccupied seat and sit down, reflecting on the films

that I saw before slowly drifting asleep. A good day all round.



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