

LA WEEKLY

LA Weekly Review – The Instrument, May 6-12, 2005, p. 82


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-Ron Stringer,
LA Weekly

F I L M

DANCES WITH FILMS

As in past years, the real discoveries in this eighth annual installment of L.A.'s spunkiest semipro film festival tend to be the films that rise above genre pretensions, and even conventional notions of polish and professionalism, into a rawer, more immediate engagement with their subject. Among the docs this year, the standout is Josh Adell and Steve Hicks' *Finding Bryon*, about a pair of (trust-funded?) filmmaker wannabes who follow the trail of a legendarily inept audition tape across the U.S. and into the lives of a not-so-thriving subculture of Appalachian misfits. As a record of cinematic self-discovery, *Finding Bryon* earns a place beside Mark Moskowitz's *Stone Reader* and Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation*. In Tamar Halpern's *Shelf Life*, the strongest of the comedies submitted by the festival for press consideration, sharp direction and intelligent line delivery more than compensate for occasional weaknesses in the writing of this bittersweet tale of a hipster shelver (Betsy Brandt) and a nerd assistant librarian (Joe Smith) who unite in opposition to the tyranny of their uptight supervisor (Elisa Bocanegra). And in *Shattered Sky*, even indefatigable hack Serge Rudnunsky (40-plus low-budget genre pictures and counting) manages, despite reliance on a hokey unifying device and the clumsiest use of a body double ever committed to celluloid, to pull off small miracles of casting and a gritty consistency of tone in his ambitiously achronological yet blood-simplistic tale of a bank heist gone awry. Finally, and damn near unclassifiably, comes Adam Nemett's *The Instrument*, an engaging shaggy-dog story (scripted "under the guidance of Joyce Carol Oates," with a faint nod to the recent *House on Haunted Hill* remake) in which a bunch of CalArts types — played, or so it would seem, by a bunch of Maryland Institute College of Art types — is led by a demiurgical dead professor, through a maze of music and performance puzzles, toward all manner of obscure revelation. Despite the amorphous nature of these largely improvised proceedings, the music, costumes, art direction and personalities-in-formation that contribute to this lively exercise in art and/or gestalt therapy provide a potent draft of vicarious pleasure. (Monica 4-Plex; Fri.-Thurs., May 6-12. See Film & Video Events.)



—Ron Stringer

SHORT RUN

