

Future Film Festival preview: Documentary shorts

Silvia Rose casts her eye over six impressive short documentaries which look at what it means to be human.

By Silvia Rose

The six short documentaries selected for this year's Future Film Festival all offer snapshots of what it is to be human. Though they differ greatly in subject and style, each of them celebrate the strange, humorous and profound moments in our lives, captured through individuals both ordinary and extraordinary.

Two films focus on the joy there is to be found in the creative process. Hannah Gautrey's *The Wooden House* follows Wesley West, a jaunty, cartoonish character who builds sculptures for advertisements. His house is cluttered with items that others might consider to be junk. For Wesley, however, they are the foundation of his art, the mismatched building blocks of his eccentric creations. In the same way that he uses objects to express his imagination, the playful world in which he lives is the manifestation of his personality: "I have fun every day...I don't really work for a living, I enjoy it", he says. The film feels like our own personal tour, as Wesley proudly takes us through his weird and wonderful constructions, from a robot with a tap as a 'willy', to a musical 'tuner' fish.

Conversely, in Ed Chappell's *Sandyman*, the mood is considerably more serene. The lighting is hazy, the camera movement is slow, the score is drawn-out and haunting. On a beach, we see a man resembling Iggy Pop using a rake to form vast, intricate patterns on the sand. Though he doesn't speak, his quirky personality is portrayed through shots such as a sign which reads: 'I draw on the sand not the dole.' His art echoes the Buddhist practice of sand mandalas which are dismantled upon completion. Using a canvas that is destroyed every day by waves reminds us of the transient nature of our own existence, but that does not detract from its beauty.

Two further films explore the subject of spirituality in original and surprising ways. Despina Christodoulou's severe and stirring documentary *Thick Skin* portrays the act of 'suspension'; being hung by large metal hooks that are pierced through the skin. In the words of the film's main subject, "some people think it's fucked up, some people think it's beautiful." This observation encapsulates the alternative, grungy lifestyle that is being represented. Stylistically, the film uses horror techniques including a build-up of tension through music, and flashes of disturbing imagery, such as a wrestling match with people wearing gimp-like masks. And yet, there is great sensitivity and emotional depth present, as we learn how for some, this bizarre ritual is a means of release, generating 'pure energy' in times of need.

Jan Rekelhof's Copenhagen-set *This Life Is Yours*, meanwhile, uses a more traditional narrative to tell of one man's spiritual discovery. The glossy cinematography and stylish palette mimic central character Isak's starting point: he is immersed in the fast-paced city lifestyle, seduced by consumerism. Unsettling close-ups help capture his deterioration and disillusionment; he ultimately realises that he was trying to fill a "gaping hole". This highly affecting film teaches us that what we are often trying to run away from is the thing we need to face most. Isak's story of redemption is presented with a raw honesty without being sickly sweet.

Another theme explored in the films is the hidden depths of seemingly ordinary environments. Charlotte Dolman's *The Barber's Shop* exposes the true meaning behind such an establishment. We are immersed in the experience of getting a haircut, with close-ups of heads being shaved and the cleansing sound of a running tap. The use of voice-over adds to this naturalistic feel, as young men

discuss what their barber shop 'in the hood' means to them. For many it is a place of safety and community that may otherwise be scarce in an inner-city lifestyle. The film was made by a group of 18 and 19 year-olds from a Young Offender's Institute, and though there are stories of gangs and shootings, there is also hope for a second chance, as one young man tells us how he is studying for a Hairdressing NVQ while in prison.

Finally, there is *Ninety*, an elegant piece by the Northern Stars Documentary Academy. Set in an ordinary, suburban house, snapshots of domesticity are heightened by slow, reflective piano music. Then comes the voice of the elderly woman who lives there, meek and unassuming as she reminisces about rationing and becoming a grandmother. The tone is understated and nostalgic, showing us that everyone has a story, and that there are rich and vivid memories hiding in photo albums. We feel a great empathy towards the film's subject when she says humbly, "I lived life to the best of my ability."

The talent demonstrated in these films is undeniably impressive, their short runtime by no means indicating small scope. They exemplify maturity, stylistic skill and an eye for fascinating characters that can be found in all walks of life. This array of documentaries shows real promise for what is to come in British cinema.

Documentary shorts screen at 3pm in NFT3 on Sun 22 Feb.