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The following article was posted on March 6th, 2013, in the New Times - Volume 27, Issue 32

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The movies that matter

The San Luis Obispo International Film Festival returns for its 20th year
 BY ANNA WELTNER

I love this time of year.

I love meeting actors and filmmakers. I love serving on the judges' panel. I love attending parties and eating cheese with film buffs. Like any journalist, I love any chance to wear a lanyard around my neck, knowing afterward I can add it to my prized collection, pretending not to notice how greatly this impresses my peers. I even kind of love standing in line, the palpable anticipation and momentary chaos of the activity seeming to contain a promise that something remarkable is about to happen, because the San Luis Obispo International Film Festival is back, dammit!

Get festive!

The San Luis Obispo International Film Festival kicked off Wednesday, March 6, and runs through Sunday, March 10. For tickets, showtimes, and more information, visit sloiff.org.

But more important still, eclipsing all the lanyards and cheese, are the films. This being a festival—and a chance to experience work from new, unknown, or independent filmmakers—some of this year's films are fantastic. Some are not. But experiencing many different approaches to the craft, forming one's own opinions, and discussing them with other moviegoers is the

great benefit of a festival, and the kind of thing that helps the viewer and the filmmaker think critically about what actually makes a great film successful. And if a selection makes you wonder what the hell is going on inside a filmmaker's head, well, you can usually ask him or her after the screening.

Peruvian writer-director Alonso Mayo's feature debut *The Story of Luke*, an indie starring the wonderfully gifted and sympathetic Lou Taylor Pucci, was one such film, and my attempt to get inside his head is on the next page, as are my impressions of several selections from the documentary and shorts categories, which you are most welcome to disagree with.

The Story of Luke isn't the only film of its category to stand out. Director Kevin Tierney's *French Immersion*, a bilingual comedy set in a language immersion school in a small town in Quebec, is a charming, witty, and often hilarious selection that many will enjoy—though its resolution to the many subplots it keeps going doesn't quite satisfy. Swiss writer-director Peter Luisi's *Boys Are Us*—which follows two Zurich teenagers through the often-cruel world of online dating—employs an extremely bizarre narrative trick that, though ultimately confusing, is nonetheless a compelling experiment.

Yet *The Story of Luke*, which was filmed in Ontario in a town that could just as easily be anywhere in the United States, stands a head above the rest. Unlike many selections, it doesn't promise anything it can't deliver. Instead, it takes an understated premise and a noble central character and patiently builds something of great poignancy and humor.



THE STORY OF LUKE

Lou Taylor Pucci, left, is Luke, an autistic man who learns to live on his own, which involves being yelled at and later befriended by the deranged-seeming Zack (Seth Green, right), in writer-director Alonso Mayo's outstanding narrative feature debut.

Lou Taylor Pucci is Luke, a young autistic man who has been mostly raised by his grandparents. Upon his grandmother's death, and his grandfather Jonas' (a fantastically curmudgeonly Kenneth Welsh) admittance into a convalescent home, Luke decides it's time to find a job so he can live on his own and screw. Yes, he says that, and in the most earnest, heartfelt way possible, chin held high. Luke doesn't quite have the same feeling for context, irony, or the nuances of language most people do. But through Pucci's performance as the guileless main character, and Mayo's extraordinary gift for dialogue, this trait makes for some of the funniest moments in the film. When Luke does find work, he's confronted by Zack (an outstanding Seth Green), another character on the spectrum who, through careful study of "neurotypicals," manages at first not to appear disabled, but rather comically deranged.

In Luke, Pucci and Mayo create an endearing and fully realized character, granting viewers a glimpse into the autistic mind that never sinks into pity or parody. This isn't a film about a disability; it's about a young man with struggles, just like everyone else.

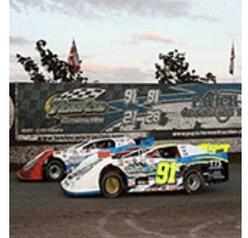
Running time is 95 minutes. See it Friday, March 8, at 7 p.m. at Downtown Cinemas, or Sunday, March 10, at 1 p.m. at La Perla Del Mar.



AND THE AWARD GOES TO...

John Hawkes, so sympathetic in his role as paralyzed journalist and poet Mark O'Brien in *The Sessions*, and so terrifying as cult leader Patrick in *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, will accept the San Luis Obispo International Film Festival's King Vidor Award, presented by James Cromwell, in a red carpet event held at the Fremont Theatre on Sunday, March 9, at 7 p.m.

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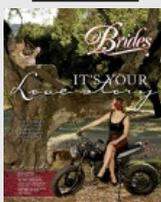
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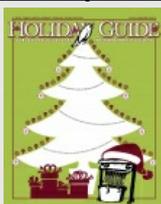
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got involved with a lot of young adults that started going into the workplace, and I think that's where things started to click for me. I saw all these adults that I'd seen growing up, and it was amazing to see them flourish. But then, they started to have, kind of, normal people problems, you know? Like girlfriends, and living by yourself. It was very interesting to see, and I wanted to make a movie about someone who starts asking himself these questions.

NEW TIMES How much of the character of Luke was developed by the actor, Lou Taylor Pucci, and how much was your direction and vision for the character?

MAYO All movies are a collaboration between the performer and the director, and Lou Taylor Pucci was just amazing. He's a great actor. I knew his work from before, so I was thrilled that he came to the project. He got in early, so it actually helped us get the other cast together because they respected him so much. They knew he would do the work, you know. And it was a lot of work. We had a lot of rehearsals. There was a lot of research he did. He met a lot of men and women on the spectrum. He really did his homework. I think about three weeks before we shot, we actually had a full week where we did some research together and rehearsed, and we kind of nailed it, you know. We nailed the right balance. He had to find a way to portray this character—first, to be authentic, you know, we didn't want to make a cartoon. But we also needed to play it light enough. It was a balance. We were quite nervous for a long time until we finally found that.

NEW TIMES That, I think would be a challenge: not making a caricature of the character. He walks a different way; he moves his arms a different way. It can be funny—and it should be funny—but it shouldn't be making fun. I imagine you would just have to work with a lot of different gestures before getting it right.

MAYO There was a lot of trial and error. It's a wide spectrum, so every single individual shows it in a different way. He had to kind of piece together things he'd seen and experienced through a lot of different people and kind of build his own way of doing it.

NEW TIMES Another thing I liked about Luke was the way he dressed himself. I don't know if this was your intention, but his way of dressing and the way he wears his hair, it has this kind of—it's nerdy, but it's almost accidentally hipster.

MAYO We made the observation that he's lived with his grandparents his whole life, and his grandparents are really the ones that raised him and formed him as a person, so he's kind of old-fashioned. He's inherited the clothes that his grandpa probably would have worn at his age. So it is kind of all a little bit retro. But more like *retro* retro. Kind of the '50s and early '60s, that's kind of where those choices came from. In a way, he's like somebody from that past that just walks in 2013, into modernity.



HOME TURF

Ross Whitaker directs this delightful and poignant short about the centuries-old practice of cutting turf in Co. Kerry, Ireland, and the men who keep the tradition alive.

NEW TIMES Some of the supporting actors were a kind of special treat, almost like an inside joke for lovers of cult classics, because you know them best as a certain character—there's Wesley from *The Princess Bride*, Windom Earle from *Twin Peaks*. And yet you use the actors in a very different way, which I think is quite charming.

MAYO I think that's why a lot of them were interested in this, that they're doing something they haven't done before. Like Seth Green, he's done a lot of stuff, but most of it has been comedy. So for him, even though our production is considered a light comedy, it was one of the more dramatic things he'd done.

NEW TIMES As both the writer and director, how do you maintain a critical eye, and the ability to edit yourself, when you're so surrounded by your own work?

MAYO I guess the first thing is, you have to know when to change hats, right? When you're a writer, you've got your writer's hat on, and when you're a director, you've got to throw the writer's hat out, you know? When you're in the editing room, same thing. I have written and directed a lot of stuff before, and the main thing is to surround yourself with great people. I had this great crew who helped me make it happen and made sure I didn't make a fool out of myself. We had a lot of tough choices. It was tough that, in production, for budget reasons, we had to cut a lot of days. We had to cut a bunch of scenes out. It hurts, but at the end of the day you have to keep what's good for the movie. You just have to be brutal with the material to make sure you end up with something that is tight and entertaining. Our first cut, I think, was three hours! Sometimes you have to cut good stuff, just to keep the comedy right. You can't really love your material as much as you love your audience. You have to make sure something's really watchable and cool, and not just stuffed in there because you think it's so precious.

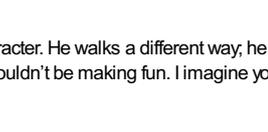
NEW TIMES I was so impressed by the dialogue. Aside from the performances themselves, I thought that was the strongest thing. I'm wondering, how did you get it right? What inspiration did you have to work from?

MAYO For Luke, I've just been around a lot of people with autism. You hear a lot of funny things, because sometimes they just don't have a filter that most people have, where you try to edit yourself before you say it. And that can be very refreshing. I've been around it enough where I started making mental notes of things to use in the movie. For the other characters, they were fun to write because I didn't want to make them very extreme. The challenge for me was, I had my protagonist, Luke, who to me was the hero of the movie, and I wanted to make him the most normal person in the movie, even though he was the one with a disability. So that's where I started. All these other characters, they could be caricatures, you know, they could be more out there. Cindy could be a real bitch, you know. I kind of put all the dysfunction that I could into everyone



BIDDER 70

Documentarians Beth and George Gage capture the story of Tim DeChristopher, a college student turned environmental activist who went to prison for an act of civil disobedience.



BURZYNSKI: CANCER IS SERIOUS BUSINESS, PART II

In an upcoming world premiere at the Fremont Theatre, director Eric Merola screens his follow-up to his previous documentary about Burzynski's cancer

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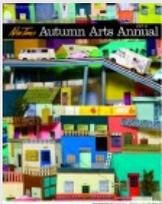
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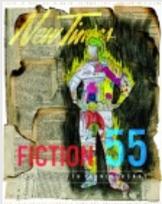
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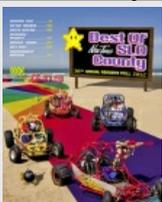
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Best of SLO County 2012



...and she, just from the fact of her... and she, just from the fact of her... around him.

NEW TIMES I actually admired the fact that the Aunt Cindy character, I thought she was just going to be a bitch the whole time, and I was ready to hate her, so when she started to become sympathetic, I was a bit conflicted. I thought that was a mature choice.

MAYO That was kind of the point, that he changes people, just by the fact that he's there.

NEW TIMES This being your first narrative feature, what did you learn from filming *The Story of Luke*?

MAYO A lot of people say that making films is kind of like making babies, you know, you can't even see yourself the way you used to be before, because you've learned so much. It's a lot of learning, it's a lot of people to deal with, it's getting a story arc and everything right. And then getting it out into the world, making sure it finds a good home and people end up seeing it, it's just a lot.

NEW TIMES Did it change your approach to film to study the craft in Lima, as opposed to Los Angeles?

MAYO I don't know. Honestly, I don't know if it matters where you come from. One of the things I got a lot of growing up was just contrast. I grew up in Lima and came here to the U.S. and lived a long time in Kansas, so I kind of went back and forth, and saw a lot of things. I think in general for storytellers it's good to see more than just what's immediately around you, to see different cultures, to see different realities. Back home I was around a lot of poverty, and then I came here, to a set of different problems. I think those things definitely affect who you are, and the type of stories you want to tell.

Bidder 70

Documentarians Beth and George Gage turn their focus on Tim DeChristopher, a Salt Lake City college student who became an activist leader after disrupting a Bureau of Land Management auction, which would have sold 22,000 acres of majestic Utah wilderness, situated near Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, for oil drilling purposes. DeChristopher had planned to attend the auction as an environmental protestor, but in a stroke of inspiration, decided to go as a bidder instead, beating out the competition with a false offer of \$1.8 million, which DeChristopher naturally had no intention of paying. Having thus dismantled the auction with this act of civil disobedience, DeChristopher found himself facing prison time. He also fell into a de facto role as a spokesman for environmental issues, co-founding the activist group Peaceful Uprising, with whom he organized a series of creative protests.

The Gages follow the stocky, serious, yet charismatic economics student from the years from that initial auction in 2008, through nine trial postponements, and up until his incarceration. The prospect of prison always around the corner seems to give DeChristopher a constant sense of urgency, and we see this channeled into his work. We watch as his efforts influence others, and a movement of passionate but fun-loving people evolves from his isolated action. Despite the ever-present pressures, the young DeChristopher rarely appears defeated, and it is only in a few rare moments that the Gages capture him alone, struggling with the uncertainty of his own future.

Amonth after the auction, a new presidential administration had stepped in, and eventually the new Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar, determined the entire auction to have been illegal. Maddeningly, the film still ends with DeChristopher going to prison. Yet as interviews with Peaceful Uprising members and actor-turned-activist Robert Redford show, DeChristopher's actions were not in vain. (73 mins.)

See it Friday, March 8, at 1 p.m. at Downtown Cinemas, or Saturday, March 9 at 11 a.m. at the Palm Theatre.

Home Turf

I accidentally ended up watching *Home Turf* twice, as the first time I found the accents of County Kerry, Ireland, charmingly incomprehensible. After putting on the English subtitles, however, things started to make a little more sense, and my love for this short doc only grew. From director Ross Whitaker and producer Aideen O'Sullivan, the makers of the wonderful *Bye Bye Now*—a short doc about a small Irish town's love affair with an old-fashioned phone booth, which comes to light only after it's slated to be demolished—comes the equally heartfelt *Home Turf*, a film that follows a group of men as they go about the centuries-old tradition of cutting turf by hand. "Turf" here refers to the rich soil found in an ancient bog in North Kerry. The place was once a forest, one man explains, but after the trees were cleared, the timber rotted into the ground. For this reason, when cut into blocks and dried, the turf makes excellent firewood during the biting winters.

Cutting turf has long been a chance for the men of Co. Kerry to get together, enjoying the physical exertion, the fresh air, and most of all, the craic. But as modern technology has made this tradition largely obsolete, the men in the film are among the last who still choose to go about it the hard way. Whitaker portrays their labors, and the rustic countryside, from a series of beautiful and unexpected angles—the handiwork of cinematographer Alex Sapienza— juxtaposed with voiceovers of the men speaking lovingly about the bog. On the horizon, a backhoe zooms back and forth, doing a day's work in a fraction of the time, and the group occasionally stops their work to shake their heads at "the machine." In one frame, the film seems to capture the bond between the men, the quiet satisfaction in their work, their unspoken acknowledgement of their own mortality, and their defiance in the face of a changing world. (14 mins.)

See it Thursday, March 5, at 4 p.m. at Downtown Cinemas (screens with the feature-length documentary *Book Club*) or Saturday, March 9, at 10 a.m. at the Avila Beach Community Center (with *Shorts Program No. 3*).

Burzynski: Cancer is Serious Business, Part II

Dr. Stanislaw Burzynski has been curing cancer for several decades. In the '60s, the Polish-born medical doctor, who holds a PhD in biochemistry, discovered a group of peptides in the human body. After moving to Houston, Texas, in the '70s, Burzynski continued his research, discovering that people with cancer also had a lack of peptides in their bodies. Theorizing that replenishing these peptides might help control their disease, he learned to synthesize them, calling them Antineoplastons. But trouble began when Burzynski, after founding The Burzynski Research Institute, Inc., entered the FDA's clinical trial process, hoping to get his Antineoplastons approved for the market.

Director Eric Merola's film *Burzynski: Cancer is Serious Business, Part II*—which sees its world premiere in San Luis Obispo on Sunday, March 10—is a follow-up to his 2011 documentary *Burzynski*. Part II is a comprehensive and painstaking look at Burzynski's astonishing medical breakthrough and all the complicated reasons why, despite many success stories, his methods are still seen as controversial and have yet to be FDA-approved.

A subject like Antineoplastons is a complicated one to bring to a general audience. However, explaining how Burzynski's treatment works proves far easier than explaining why the FDA continues to reject it, despite deeming it safe. Just as hard to understand is the Internet smear campaign that's apparently emerged to confuse the public about the treatment, label Burzynski a quack, and harass patients for undergoing Antineoplaston therapy.

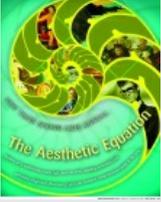
Merola wisely waits until the documentary is well underway, after the issues and the players involved have been introduced, before showing us this ugly angle. A group calling themselves "The Skeptics" even go so far as to claim that the doctor maintains a cult-like sway over his patients, whom they say he exploits for financial gain. "Skeptic" bloggers make it their mission to spread misinformation, the film asserts, while trying to pass themselves off as concerned citizens. Others create fake websites and Twitter accounts. It's enough to make one extremely paranoid. When a documentary points to the existence of a conspiracy of such magnitude, it's hard to know whom to believe. What if the whole Antineoplaston thing is a hoax? What if?

ERIC BURZYNSKI, TURNER
chronicling the unbelievable
story of the Texas doctor who
became the subject of
controversy after discovering a
potential cure for cancer.

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Spring Arts 2012



But the testimony of so many oncologists, surgeons, and neurosurgeons negates that possibility. In Japan, Dr. Hideaki Tsuda of Kurume Medical University, where Antineoplastons have been independently tested for 27 years, makes a particularly strong case for their efficacy. When Merola turns his lens on several now-cured cancer patients and their baffled doctors, who watch their tumors shrink to nothing, one can't help but believe. (Since Burzynski's treatment is not covered by any insurance plans, patients undergo Antineoplaston therapy with the consent of their doctors and pay for it out of pocket.) Although the high price of treatment is one of the skeptics' main critiques, records show that the Burzynski Research Institute is only breaking even, and hasn't earned a profit since its founding.

Particularly compelling is the story of Laura Hymas, a young mother from England who was cured of brain cancer after participating in the FDA's clinical trial of Burzynski's Antineoplaston therapy. Hymas' story lends this highly fact-driven documentary a great deal of heart.

Merola has done his homework, and the results are devastating. And just when you think you can't take any more, a shocking turn of events at the very end of the film will leave viewers in disbelief. (115 mins.)

See the world premiere Sunday, March 10, at 2 p.m. at the Fremont Theatre.

Arts Editor Anna Weltner can be reached at aweltner@newtimesslo.com.

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