

PRISONS, PUNKS AND DON QUIXOTE

Our critics' guide to the very best of LAFF

BY L.A. WEEKLY FILM CRITICS

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THE COOL SCHOOL (USA) Taking its title from a 1964 *Artforum* article linking the rebellious spirit and bop attitudes of West Coast art to those of West Coast jazz, veteran documentarist Morgan Neville's illustrated history of the painters and sculptors associated with Venice's Ferus Gallery (1957–1967) is at once lively and analytical. Drawing on original and archival footage of the artists (John Altoon, Ed Kienholz, Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, Robert Irwin, et al.) at work and at play, on a polyphonic (and often dissonant) chorus of reminiscing heads, and on critical responses that range from the gaga enthusiasm of Ferus collectors Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell to the competitive carping of New York gallery owner Ivan Karp, Neville cobbles together a dramatic tale of two curators — Walter Hopps and Irving Blum — whose daring, if not entirely synchronized, visions of what the nearsighted Poulson/Yorty-era art market might bear put the city on the road to MOCA, Bergamot Station and last year's big retrospective of Los Angeles art at the Pompidou Center. The proceedings are cheerily abetted by vintage black-and-white photographs by Charles Britten, Jerry McMillan, Bill Claxton, Kienholz and others, and a soundtrack that stretches all the way from the abstract expressions of Charles Mingus to the lighter-and-spacier Link Wray stylings of the original score by composer Dan Crane. (*Mann Festival, Wed., June 27, 7:30 p.m.; Italian Cultural Institute, Thurs., June 28, 2:30 p.m.; Billy Wilder Theater, Sat., June 30, 3 p.m.*) (Ron Stringer)

FIREWORKS WEDNESDAY (Iran) In this superb contemporary drama from Iran, Rouhi (Taraneh Alidoosti), a young woman trying to raise money for her wedding dress, goes to work for the day in the middle-class high-rise apartment of a bickering Tehran couple. The wife, Mojdeh (Hadieh Tehrani, great), is driving herself mad, sure that her husband (Hamid Farrokhnezhad) is having an affair with the beautician across the hall. Rouhi just wants to do her housework and leave, but as the day wears on, she finds herself drawn into Mojdeh's schemes, and by day's end, as servants so often do, knows way too much about this troubled family. This is director Asghar Farhadi's third feature, and it's brilliantly assured, both in the fluidity and unexpected stylishness of the camerawork (by Hossein Jafarian) and in the subtlety with which Farhadi and co-writer Mani Haghighi explore the complexities of modern Iranian life. This is a Tehran that could easily be New York, where a jealous wife freaks out over a strange number on the caller ID, and the structures of class are such that a maid whose empathy has given a disintegrating family a moment's reprieve ends up with nary a tip or a thank-you. (*Italian Cultural Institute, Thurs., June 28, 9:45 p.m.; The Landmark, Sat., June 30, 4:15 p.m.*) (Chuck Wilson)

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HONOR OF THE KNIGHTS (Spain) There are no windmills, only wind — and trees and grass and sunlight extinguishing the dawn — in writer-director Albert Serra's extraordinary, minimalist-naturalist take on the *Don Quixote* story. Shot in DV, with dialogue (what very little there is) spoken in Catalan, Serra's film purports to take inspiration not just from Cervantes, but also from an exhaustive litany of other literary and cinematic sources (including, but not limited to, Bresson, Godard, Ozu and the 12th-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes). It is finally most

affecting, however, as a spare, yet soulful study of two lone figures against an unspoiled landscape — the last refuge, perhaps, from a world that no longer resembles a bygone “Golden Age” of peace and prosperity. There is a funereal air to the film, as the frail, weather-beaten Quixote (Lluís Carbó) trudges forth in the company of the loyal Sancho (Lluís Serrat), pausing periodically to rest, or bask in a gentle stream, or impart some terse morsel of wisdom. “Chivalry is civilization,” he says, to which Serra might add that man is nature and the heavens are the earth. (*Italian Cultural Institute; Sun., June 24, 8:30 p.m., and Fri., June 29, 4:30 p.m.*) (Scott Foundas)

JOE STRUMMER: THE FUTURE IS UNWRITTEN (U.K./Ireland) In Julien Temple’s scrapbook remembrance of the Clash front man, punk has become a legend passed on in tales told around the campfire — literally. Shooting at night, Temple sets Strummer’s old bandmates (Topper Headon and Mick Jones; Paul Simonon is absent), lovers, cohorts and friends in front of a crackling blaze like the ones Strummer became famous for presiding over at rock fests, and lets them share their stories. You could be annoyed that no one is identified. Or you could say that Temple is staying true to punk egalitarianism, creating a space where each person has as much right to speak as any other. That sensibility is reflected in the soundtrack as well, where songs from the Clash and Strummer’s final band, the Mescaleros, play alongside music as diverse as Jamaican guitarist Ernest Ranglin and Nina Simone. This is not the place to go for a chronological, explicated biography of Joe Strummer. (That would be Chris Salewicz’s wonderful, recently published *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*.) But Temple succeeds beautifully in evoking Strummer as a cross between a punk journeyman and one of the battered, upright gunmen who populate Sam Peckinpah’s films. The cumulative effect is the cinematic equivalent of “Final Theme,” the music Bob Dylan wrote for Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, which, someone once observed, is equally appropriate for births, weddings, funerals, any place where something grave and awesome is taking place. (*John Anson Ford Amphitheatre, Sat., June 30, 8 p.m.*) (Charles Taylor)

LOVE STORY (U.K.) It’s not much of a surprise when, well into Chris Hall and Mike Kerry’s rockumentary on Love — the seminal L.A. “street band that won’t die” — the group’s street-shaman visionary Arthur Lee is asked a leading question by a voice in a British accent. Indeed, the Brits’ legendary obsession with Lee and Love (which approximates the French’s love of Jerry Lewis — and is only slightly less understandable) are all over this thinking man’s *Behind the Music* episode: from Lee referring to his interviewer as “mate”; to a suited, gray-haired lawmaker kneeling on the grass before Parliament and bowing while incanting Lee’s name; to the chaps in the building behind him actually stopping government to declare Love’s 1967 dark art-folk masterpiece *Forever Changes* as “the greatest album of all time.” The film itself is mercifully not as breathless in its worship. In fact, it excels at tracking down “whereabouts unknown” band members like guitarist Johnny Echols and drummer “Snoopy” Pfisterer, who give opposing viewpoints to Lee’s proclamations, and detailing the nuts-and-bolts creation of many of Love’s best-known tracks, like “7 and 7 Is” and “Alone Again Or,” which demonstrates how thoroughly undemocratic a group that proclaimed itself “the first integrated rock band” actually was. This predictable rock story of self-medicated flameout and late-in-life redemption is constantly undercut by Memory Lane interviews with the live-wire Lee (his last before his death last August), who comes across as a profane mix of Chester Himes, Richard Pryor and Huggy Bear. Required viewing for any serious L.A. music geek. (*Mann Festival, Fri., June 22, 10 p.m.; Majestic Crest, Sun., June 24, noon*) (Matthew Duersten)

PRISON TOWN, USA (USA) The issue of America’s burgeoning prison-industrial complex is often presented as a problem of race (specifically black and Latino) and urban distress. Directors Katie Galloway and Po Kutchins broaden the dialogue considerably in this excellent look at the many ways that one of this country’s sturdiest growth industries affects disenfranchised people and places beyond the usual suspects of the American margin. Susanville, California, is a small farming and mill town whose rural location and downturn in fortune made it a perfect fit for the three prisons it currently hosts. Horrifying statistics are flashed onscreen (“Over the past 25 years, the U.S. has undergone the biggest prison building boom in history”; “By 2050, 50% of our youth will be in prison, on probation or on parole . . .”) and then fleshed out as the filmmakers follow often-excruciating human dramas: a local dairy farmer’s economic battle with the prison; the struggles of two locals to find employment in the town’s only real source of financial security; a heartbreaking, hard-luck family trying to rebuild their lives after the dad is released from prison. It’s a sobering, engrossing film that raises a red flag on a criminal class that is being created for corporate profit. (*Landmark Regent, Sat., June 23, 3 p.m.; The Landmark, Sun., June 24, 9:45 p.m.*) (Ernest Hardy)

TIMES AND WINDS (Turkey) The immensity of the sky, the textures of the earth and the seasonal rhythms of life in a hilly northern Turkish village transform Reha Erdem’s magnificent *Times and Winds* into something far more than an acutely observed episodic tale of three young folks learning life lessons on the cusp of adolescence — though the film is that as well. Three pals — two boys and one girl — chafe at their parents’ and school’s traditional ways, and escape to the vistas and rocky expanses surrounding their homes. It may be that Erdem is suggesting that some sense of freedom from the suffocating brand of Islamism these kids are enduring can be found in a pantheist frame of mind. What is for certain is how, regardless of Erdem’s own views on religion, unexpected events in the scenario suddenly reposition the film as a humanist-pastoral epic in the tradition of Pudovkin. (*Billy Wilder Theater, Fri., June 22, 3:30 p.m.; The Landmark, Sun., June 24, 7:15 p.m.*) (Robert Koehler)