

The Monster Without

Undone wrestlers and zombie savants grace the screen. **By Candace Moore**

Editor's Pick



The Early Works of Cheryl Dunye (First Run Feature):

I am not hyperbolizing when I say that filmmaker Cheryl Dunye's *Stranger Inside* is one of the most underrated lesbian films of all time. Wrenching and riveting, it hit all the right marks without ever being preachy. Those who know Dunye expect nothing less, but the director herself is a bit marginalized. Critics are quick to pigeonhole her (though comparisons to Spike Lee's early work aren't without merit), and she's often been vilified by conservatives and dismissed by mainstream consumers. This new DVD collection is a reminder of why her work is so funny, provocative and inventive, mixing narrative with documentary in a way that's both illuminating and amusing. The six low-budget films reflect on the first chapter of Dunye's oeuvre, offering up a time capsule on lesbian life in the '90s—from dating and vanilla sex to political potlucks and racial constructs.

[Diane Anderson-Minshall]



Rachel Wood is a mess of psychic damage in *The Wrestler*



Susanne Sachsse as Hella Bent in *Otto*

Lesbian couples are important characters in these modern fables about masochistic wrestlers and gay zombies.

The Wrestler (Fox Searchlight Pictures): In Darren Aronofsky's viscerally moving *The Wrestler*, Mickey Rourke rekindles his star as a "broken-down piece of meat" we can't take our eyes off of. Pumped up, arthritic, swollen, massive and humbled by age, Randy "The Ram" Robinson is a wrestling hero way past his sell-by date. To afford pain meds and make the rent on his trailer, "The Ram" stays trapped in a world of body slams and self-mutilation. When heart surgery opens up his chest, creating another thick scar, Randy makes changes. He gives up gigs and reconnects with the daughter he abandoned to glory measured in autographs, heavy metal, strip joints and cocaine. Evan Rachel Wood (*Thirteen*) plays Randy's adult daughter Stephanie—at turns wounded, suspicious and reasonably furious—she's a mess of psychic damage that trumps Randy's physical pain. Whether or not Rourke and Wood had that Lolita-like romance on the set, a near-incestuous chemistry charges the relationship between their ravaged characters on-screen. Stephanie's live-in girlfriend answers the door when Randy comes around, judging his intentions and protectively filtering Randy's access to her lover. Stephanie's lesbian relationship is just another

Q+A

Shamim Sarif and Hanan Kattan

Screenwriter and director Shamim Sarif and producer Hanan Kattan are the lesbian filmmaking power-couple responsible for the two recent cinema gems *I Can't Think Straight* and *The World Unseen*. After 15 years together, the two certainly know how to play to each other's strengths. Not only did Sarif write both scripts and the corresponding novels, she wrote two of the songs for *I Can't Think Straight* and the couple has even established a record label, Enlightenment Records, to produce the soundtracks for both films. And that's not the last we'll be seeing of this duo. There is talk of a potential TV spin-off for *I Can't Think Straight*, and they're working on two other film adaptations. "You can't stand still too long with Hanan around," jokes Sarif. Indeed.

I Can't Think Straight is set in present-day London and *The World Unseen* is set in South Africa during

NIKO TAVERNISE (WRESTLER)

piece of the film's mise-en-scène; her sexuality is not treated as a defining feature of her character. As a whole, the film lacks exposition. We are simply flung into its world. A tour de force, *The Wrestler* deserves the kudos it has won. (www.foxsearchlight.com)

Otto; or, Up With Dead People (Strand Releasing): Bruce LaBruce polishes his playful, neo-Marxist, punk-boy porn to its finest sheen with *Otto*. His first zombie-themed art house feature is a visual and auditory wonder (set to an inspired soundtrack out on Crippled Dick Hot Wax! Records). *Otto* (Jey Crisfar) is a young gay zombie who stumbles seizure-like around Berlin, his green-white eyes awash with light, scooping up roadkill to munch on. *Otto's* demeanor aptly reflects LaBruce's metaphor for the way sensitive types feel under capitalism. He tries to recollect the love he had while he was alive. Answering a casting call found on a flyer, he crosses paths with the radical film maven Medea Yarn (Katharina Klewinghaus), who thinks he has real undead potential and gives him a major role in her movie (within LaBruce's movie). Medea's low-budget *Up With Dead People* imagines a gay zombie uprising featuring anatomically absurd sex and led by the Che Guevara of the living dead. LaBruce mixes grainy black-and-white footage with rich vibrant color, representing Medea's girlfriend Hella Bent (*The Raspberry Reich's* Susanne Sachsse) as a silent film belle who utters endearments through inter-titles and picnics with her honey across celluloid divides. *Otto's* adventures as king of the landfills, reluctant film star and would-be martyr are inflected with an existential ennui fascinating to behold through LaBruce's lens. Occasionally, a stunning rainbow ironically appears behind our beloved zombie prince. (www.strandreleasing.com) ■



apartheid. How does place fit into the framework of your films?

Sarif: I think the sense of place is highly important in films because even though they talk about personal integrity and, you know, figuring

out who you are and these types of things... I always like to have a bigger backdrop that sometimes reflects some of that journey.

Some critics objected to the cultural stereotypes of the families in *I Can't Think Straight*. What do you think of the criticism?

Kattan: To be honest, what Shamim wrote in *I Can't Think Straight* is loosely based on [our] relationship and our families—how they reacted, what we went through. Actually, if anything, Shamim toned it down and not up, because she thought people would think it was too exaggerated.

You've cast Lisa Ray and Sheetal Sheth in two movies now. How did you attract them to the roles?

Sarif: We did a two-for-one deal. [*Laughs*] The process began with *I Can't Think Straight*, and I wasn't looking for looking for Sheetal or Lisa for those roles, initially. In both cases I found a few actresses...[but] when it came down to it they didn't want to do the love scenes. What I like about both [Sheetal or Lisa] is when we had conversations about the movie it was always about the love story, the arc, the motivations of the character. And I don't remember either one of them ever mentioning that it was a love story between two women.

***I Can't Think Straight* is a romantic comedy that dabbles in the more hard-hitting topic of politics. Do you think you struck a balance?**

Sarif: Well, I hope so, because I think they feed into each other in that the cultural background for Tala is a big stumbling block in coming to terms with her sexuality. But

I hope it adds another layer to the film, the politics. So we wanted to kind of bring all of that in and give it that richness, that cultural authenticity, if you like. But yes, at its core it's a love story.

Kattan: But I think also...Palestinians are usually portrayed as the terrorists or in refugee camps. You rarely see the more educated or affluent or well-traveled, well-versed Palestinians, so she wanted to explore that as well as the Indian community, which probably has been explored a bit more in films and books.

Have the events of the last several months made you guys think differently about including the dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in *I Can't Think Straight*?

Sarif: No. If anything, I feel even more strongly that these things need to be out there and discussed and a dialogue needs to be opened. Because I think as we can see, that dialogue is something that is very missing at the moment. [*Rachel Beebe*]

DVD Picks



***The Greatest Silence* (Women Make Movies)**

This powerful documentary by Lisa F. Jackson tells the story of five Congolese rape survivors. The film takes the viewer into the current civil war and how it creates an environment that puts women at risk and explores how rape is used as weapon. The acclaimed film was the winner of the Special Jury Prize: Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival. (www.thegreatestsilence.org) [*Katie Peoples*]



***The Secrets* (Monterey Video)**

Reeling from her mother's recent suicide and chafing at the bit over her orthodox Jewish background, the brainy Naomi avoids marriage by going to study at a women's seminary in Safed, Israel. While there, she meets the beautiful Michelle and the two start breaking rules—religious, cultural, institutional—left and right. A thoughtful, hopeful film, backed by a rollicking soundtrack of Jewish folk music. (www.thesecrets-movie.com) [*Rachel Beebe*]



***Straightlaced* (GroundSpark)**

An educational documentary that challenges gender stereotypes and homophobia by asking a diverse group of high school students to talk about gender expectations and how they influence almost every aspect of their lives—from how they dress to how they act and who they're friends with. This is an honest, eye-opening film that covers a huge range of issues and is sure to be invaluable to educators and parents alike. (www.groundspark.org/straightlaced) [*RB*]