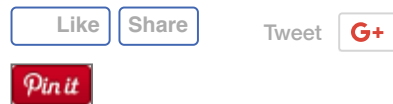




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Toronto wrap-up

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Sep 15, 2014



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Among the many reality-based features at this year's TIFF the major standout was *Foxcatcher* by Bennett Miller (soon to appear at the New York Film Festival). Drawn from a sensational true crime story, this mesmerizing film (which won Best Director for Miller at Cannes) engages on so many levels, it practically reinvents the reality-based genre. *Foxcatcher* delves into the disturbing story of wrestling champions Mark and Dave Schultz (Channing Tatum and Mark Ruffalo) and their fateful encounter with billionaire wrestling enthusiast John du Pont (Steve Carell, cast against type), heir to the vast chemical fortune.

After taking home the gold at the 1984 Olympics, wrestler Mark Schultz (Channing Tatum) leads a drab life of training routines and solitary evenings in his shabby digs surrounded by wrestling medals. No endorsements for this champ. Mark's world opens up when he's invited by megabucks John du Pont (Steve Carell) to join the US team preparing for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul and train at Foxcatcher, Du Pont's estate near Valley Forge. Du Pont also wants Mark's beloved brother Dave (Mark Ruffalo) on board as a trainer but Dave refuses to uproot his family.

Mark moves to a sleek chalet on du Pont's sprawling estate, its rolling hills, polished interiors, and spanking new wrestling center forming a pointed contrast to his old life. The only catch: Du Pont, who fancies himself a trainer, is a loon. A point of no return is reached when he calls his protégé "an ungrateful ape" and never seeks to apologize. After he coaxes Mark's brother Dave into joining "Team Foxcatcher," the stage is set for disaster.

The three men are each meticulously drawn. Channing Tatum's hunkiness serves him well; he looks brutalized and almost simian, with a forward thrust jaw and wrestler's gait, pulling off the wrestling matches with authority. He sits on inarticulate rage like a keg of dynamite ready to explode. The

main center of sympathy is Ruffalo as Dave, a family man and all round good guy who's struggled to reach a rung in the middle class, props up his brother, and wants the best for everyone.

But the film belongs to Steve Carell in a transformative turn as Du Pont, his every moment on screen racheting up a sense of dread. The dead eyes and bloodless smile, along with peculiar pauses in his speech, suggest derangement held in check. That he comes on like a father figure to Mark is beyond grotesque. Du Pont is also an ornithologist – with his prosthetic beak he resembles an eagle sighting his prey – and self-styled patriot, who weirdly conflates Team Foxcatcher with America's potential for greatness. With acidic irony, Carell's sicko is set against footage from promos made by the Du Pont family to celebrate its illustrious history.

Foxcatcher builds its ominous mood through deliberate pacing and stretched silences. Scenes swathed in gray mist are shot from behind the looming black head of a statue; foxes look like jackals. Miller brilliantly meshes social critique with a B horror movie. So why didn't the Schultz brothers spot Dupont's craziness and run? Maybe, given their lack of social exposure, they just wrote it off as a rich man's eccentricity. Does Miller see Dupont's villainous one-percenter as emblematic of his caste? I don't think the director wants to go there quite; that would be too on the nose. Certainly, though, *Foxcatcher* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of limitless cash allied with arrogance and delusion.

In *The Riot Club*, Lone Scherfig (*An Education*) mines viewers' apparent fascination with the British upper crust, yet another hallmark of this fest. Inspired by David Cameron's real-life Bullingdon Club, *Riot* corrals a bevy of pretty lads who seem to do nothing at Oxford but pull rank, shoot, drive around drunk, and barf (shades of *Brideshead Revisited*). Scherfig gives us a kind of posh porn; the cast she's assembled could be the Brit version of Calvin Klein underwear models.

An underdeveloped plot involves the recruitment into the club of newbie Miles (Max Irons), a monied but basically decent chap, who's only too flattered to sign on. His affair with a working class girl is doomed, no surprise, from the start. The thuggish club members talk obnoxiously of "girls for now and girls for later" and let drop that after college "we're going to be behind some very big desks."

Riot culminates in a set piece in which the lads hold a black-tie dinner in an inn, bond over their disgust for the poor, and trash the room. The ringleader is sent down from Oxford but it's clear he and his entitled cronies can get away with anything. That *Riot* intends to indict these scions of the ruling class is to its credit. But in Scherfig's hands the execution is cartoonish and over the top, and betrays an outsider's view.

99 Homes by Rahmin Barani also delivers a stinging social critique. I admired this politically conscious filmmaker in the underrated *At Any Price*, which displays a compassion for the little guy struggling to survive in an America which does little to aid him. Sadly, despite its superb cast, the impact of *99 Homes* is blunted by an overly predictable plot.

Set amid the US housing-market meltdown of the last decade, *99* focuses on a family that has become one of the many casualties of a culture of relentless consumption and economic overextension. With employment opportunities drying up after the US economy's implosion, construction worker Dennis Nash (Andrew Garfield) has fallen disastrously behind in his mortgage payments. Evicted from the house by local realtor Rick Carver (Michael Shannon) — a slick, hard-nosed operator who has found a lucrative calling in these lean times as an axeman for the banks — Dennis finds temporary housing in a motel while he desperately scrambles to keep even this roof over his family's heads. All too predictably, Dennis gets roped into Carver's shady operation as a construction worker, after Carver promises to help him reclaim his family home. From that point, to the detriment of the film, you can all too easily connect the dots.

Garfield — another Brit playing, along with Tom Hardy, a blue collar American — has never been better as a decent soul struggling to deal in a world where the little guy's loss is the big guy's gain. Michael Shannon digs deep to expose the visceral need to succeed underlying Carver's manic drive. Though the two actors play brilliantly off each other, it's not enough to save this film from its overly didactic premise.

Despite the grousing around Toronto about the lack of a “slam dunk” for the Awards, to my mind this year's TIFF has been a banner fest. And I have yet to see Noah Baumbach's latest, the German *Labyrinth of Lies* just picked up by SPC, and Swedish winner *Force Majeure*. Above all, perhaps, 2014 has been the year of reality-based films; the quality biopic with crossover appeal to a large public; and a year that raised the art of screen acting to new heights.

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