

Acropolis Cinema and
Now Instant Image Hall present



July 2, 2019 ~ 8:00pm ~ Now Instant Image Hall

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

***Palaces of Pity* | *Palácios de Pena* (Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt, Portugal, 2011, 58 min.**

Seven years before their breakthrough feature *Diamantino*, Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt co-directed this radically stylized, era- and genre-scrambling amalgam of coming-of-age melodrama, medieval pageant, and political allegory. Two teenage sisters cope with the death of their beloved grandmother, their long-standing rivalry, and their inheritance of an immense castle with a shadowy Fascist past. An exhilarating whodunnit laden with awe-inspiring landscapes, surrealist flourishes, and stirring, unexpected juxtapositions of image and sound, *Palaces of Pity* is denser with aesthetic, historical, and political ideas than innumerable films twice its length.

***The Island Is Enchanted With You* | *La isla está encantada con ustedes* (Daniel Schmidt and Alexander Carver, USA/Switzerland/Australia/Puerto Rico, 2014, 35 min.)**

This enigmatic series of tableaux, exploring colonial legacies, the massacre of Puerto Rico's indigenous Taíno people, and the insatiability of the libido, among other subjects, is a sensual and cerebral feast, rapturously interweaving elements of softcore, period films, music videos, and computer animation. (FLC)

Boys to Men by James N. Kienitz Wilkins

The following article was originally published by the Brooklyn Rail, February 3, 2016

The boys' room, where it all began. After class, they'd gather between the sinks and the stalls in a sordid teen pisshole turned echo chamber of ideas—four friends harmonizing in a perfect acoustical environment, inventing that singular sound which would catapult them to greatness and riches beyond their wildest dreams: mellifluous contemporary fusion riding on four vocal leads. First known as *Unique Attraction*. Soon to be you-know-who.

Minus the music, money, and melanin, I cannot imagine a more useful anecdote to describe the filmmaking quartet of Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty, and Alexander Carver. Lately, they have been hard to separate from their collective identity, a veritable boy band now formalized by a group retrospective, *Friends with Benefits: An Anthology of Four New American Filmmakers*, at the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

Like a section of graffiti scratched above a urinal, their history is open to interpretation: what came first, who contributed what, where to begin. As a fellow filmmaker and orbiting friend of each, I've been able to take a privileged yet slightly distanced position, forensically analyzing their markings up close, then taking a step back to hear their *a cappella*, clearer than ever, daring me to distinguish each contribution to a rapidly growing playlist.

On Bended Knee

The creative marriage of Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt produced *Palácios de Pena* (2011), which is undoubtedly their number-one hit single. While predated by a good number of shorts and recently eclipsed by feature-length endeavors, this 58-minute smorgasbord is like the master decoder ring to the anthology, offering not so much an enlightening take on

postcolonialism as an inspired remix of juicy urges, intellectual whims, sexual realizations, and appropriated vibes, ranging from Pasolini's *Salò* (1976) to a pitch-perfect incorporation of Al-phaville's hit ballad and video, "Forever Young" (1984). On full reveal here is Abrantes and Schmidt's signature (and financially prudent) technique of replacing dialogue with hushed and creepy dubbing, paired with scenes of beautiful-beyond-belief locations preserved in a golden 16mm that strategically belies their low production budgets, suggesting all is not as it sounds or seems.

A Song for Mama

But wait, did the CD skip a track? Jumping back in time, it was in the *chambre des garçons* of the French post-graduate film school, Le Fresnoy, that Abrantes met Benjamin Crotty, an American living in Paris. In "Slow Learners," a section of their early work, they reveal an embryonic taste for special effects and technical feats, especially in their co-directed films, *Visionary Iraq* (2009), and *Liberdade* (2011), the latter which plays a bit too much like a film school thesis meant to impress Mom and Dad. My favorite is *Visionary Iraq*, with its exchange of conventional grandeur for an unnerving, set-based melodrama offering plenty of glimpses into things to come (Abrantes's clenched, muscly ass is like the fifth Beate in this anthology). It is an early document of an experimental process coming to life.

Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)

The Unity of All Things (2013), by Schmidt and Alexander Carver, is like a sudden modal shift in the preestablished scales of collaboration. Carver, a visual artist, was hiding in the shadows but not absent, having first met Abrantes in their early days in the washroom of the Cooper Union School of Art. I suspect Carver's intellectual quiverings, combined with Schmidt's laid-back and increasingly confident filmmaking and sound design, is what gives *The Unity of All Things* such an unusual, contrapuntal energy. It is a folding and discursive tale—least of all about the construction of a particle accelerator—that flails to make sense of the world (and itself), while being the most lyrical of the films offered here.

Four Seasons of Loneliness

Crotty's *Fort Buchanan* (2014) is the driest and secretly funniest film. It's also the only film where homosexuality is a simple fact rather than a problem or joke. Although *Fort Buchanan* was also shot in chunky fragments like *Palácios de Pena*, it is a more unified whole authored by a single mind, despite running a mere seven minutes longer, earning it a week-long theatrical run at Lincoln Center.

I get the sense that Crotty's influence upon the group dynamic is a taste for linear stories. While his work seems to be playing with camp, TV genres, and Hollywood tropes, there's hard evidence suggesting all the play is a pretty serious interest, and will result in surprising future endeavors. Still, *Fort Buchanan* is an incredibly *French* movie, with the requisite sexiness and *cinéma vérité* stylings, offset by the deep nerdiness of its misfits characters (a crew led by a sad-sap cuckold trying to stay relevant to his bored Army husband), which lends the film a truly weird emotional impact.

Water Runs Dry

Schmidt and Carver's *La Isla está Encantada con Ustedes* (2015) and Abrantes's *Ennui Ennui* (2013) are the unusual digital deliveries, filmed in high-end HD. The absence of 16mm film is startling, particularly since all the other films exploit how 16mm looks simultaneously old and new. For better or worse, using 16mm in a digital age has become a special effect that suggests the possibility of the canonical by confusing origins, implying a mystical and elite access

to a past revised with the filmmaker in it. Regardless of the shift in medium of these “films,” (to be fair: *La Isla está Encantada con Ustedes* was originally conceived as a two-channel installation), the subject matter remains familiar, almost to the point of self-parody. The recurring melody is yet again a tale of foreign policy with a colonialist-cum-filmmaker-proxy (emphasis on “cum”) having a fun/hard-time in an exotic location pointedly defined by its struggle with these issues. Sometimes adding an adaptation or philosophical text to the mix, the result is a sort of auto-politics freed up for hijinks—an approach I can’t help but assume is a European flair for having your cake and eating it too. I don’t know how to trace the origins of this approach, but the ripples are very active in recent work by contemporaries such as Ben Rivers, Miguel Gomes, and others.

Relax Your Mind

Abrantes’s newest work is a return to form while offering fresh attempts at self-analysis. *Taprobana* (2014) is a scatological adventure about the poet, Camões, commissioned by the film festival, CPH:DOX, in a forced collaboration run off the rails and gone blissfully bananas. As I understand it, Abrantes found himself stranded in Sri Lanka minus the promised collaborator, his friend without benefits, becoming in reality the type of protagonist he so often depicts: a cultural mercenary seizing control to do what he does best.

In an entirely different way, Abrantes creates a version of himself and his unconscious in *Freud und Friends* (2015) that is as hilarious as it is gratingly obnoxious. He is a dedicated provocateur, and it makes sense that this unclassifiable flippancy grew out of the restrictions of another commission: the IndieLisboa film festival asking for a portrait of Lisbon, Portugal. Part of what makes the comedy effective is that Abrantes is actually one of the least neurotic people I know, and his willingness to create such a putrid, idiotic performance lampooning his ethnic heritage seems very honest, openly acknowledging the narcissism and fearlessness which has defined his work to date.

Better Half

Indeed, the identity of these boys is the key to their flow. A globe-trotting nature is what defines their voice. They are “New American” filmmakers who basically don’t work or majorly exhibit in the USA, and even when they do, are at its furthest borders, engaging in far-flung artistic and political histories, and importantly, sources of funding, almost negating their American backgrounds. It has been a fruitful approach, and very likely, necessary. Not only would their work hardly be possible in the dandruffy climate of our bad faith American Indie film environment with its moral/financial incentives, it is *not* possible, given their continued energy to make impossibly ambitious work, despite what record executives call “crossover appeal.” ♦

Coming Soon to Acropolis:

-Travis Wilkerson performs *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* (Travis Wilkerson, 2017)—July 23 at the Velaslavasay Panorama



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