

29 October, 2020 | By - Mark Saldana

Austin Film Festival 2020 Review: FUGITIVE DREAMS



By Mark Saldana

Rating: 4 (Out of 4 Stars)

It has been a while since I have seen an indie art film that has blown me away like this one. I continued my virtual festival with a screener for *Fugitive Dreams*, a film that comes across as the love child of Andrei Tarkovsky and Jim Jarmusch. Shot in black and white, with a few scenes in vibrant impressionistic technicolor, this movie absolutely captivated me with its expressive artistry in the presentation and with the

tremendous performances by the talented cast. This is the kind of film born and bred in film school by filmmakers obviously inspired by the legendary auteurs of the past. It is a beautiful and moving experience that has turned out to be my favorite film of the festival so far.

Written and directed by Jason Neulander, the movie follows two drifters named Mary and John and their journey together as they run away from their tumultuous pasts. Mary (April Mathis) is a sad and desperate woman who is about to give it all up. That is until John (Robbie Tann) accidentally interrupts her suicide attempt. As Mary tries to run away from this awkward moment, John feels compelled to follow her and watch over her. The two jump a train bound for anywhere where they soon encounter drifters Israfel (Scott Shepherd) and Providence (O-Lan Jones) who obviously have problems of their own. As Mary and John continue to travel, their personal demons threaten to destroy them, but they soon discover that their new, though shaky, friendship may be all that they need to keep on keeping on.

Neulander's *Fugitive Dreams* is one of those films that comes along only so often. It is a true piece of art film that is certainly a tough sell to mass audiences, but is an absolute diamond in the rough. The writing and direction matched with the gorgeous and haunting cinematography by Peter Simonite make this film one for the ages. Based on the play by Caridad Svich, this movie does not at all look or feel like the typical play adaptation. Neulander uses the solid foundation laid by Svich and launches it into a whole new dimension. Often times, films based on plays fall short in the translation. Neulander, on the other hand, makes the film version a unique experience of its own.

Helping to bring this work of art to life are actors April Mathis and Robbie Tann who both perform tremendously here. Mathis portrays Mary beautifully with as a tough on the exterior, but hurting on the inside sensibility full of dimension and range. Mary has been a survivor, but is at a point where she is considering whether or not continued survival is even worth all of the pain she has endured. As John, Robbie Tann has a more dreamy optimism to his outlook on life, but it is a quality to which he is desperately clinging. He instead projects a more glorified memory of his past trauma, but as his story progresses, it becomes more apparent that his journey is not as joyful as he claims to remember. The film also features outstanding work by Scott Shepherd, O-Lan Jones, and David Patrick Kelly.

For sure this is a film that I must strongly encourage festival viewers to experience before the fest's conclusion. And I do sincerely hope that this beautiful movie gets the attention it genuinely deserves by mass audiences. I have not seen any other films by Justin Neulander, but I can guarantee that he has my attention from now on.

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