BIG READ: OUR STORIES, OUR LIVES ONLINE FILM FESTIVAL

BY GARRETT BROWN

JUNE 5, 2020
On June 6-7, Seed&Spark will be presenting Big Read: Our Stories, Our Lives (https://www.seedandspark.com/festivals/big-read). This is a block of four short films created by and featuring intersex, trans, GNC, and non-binary individuals.

The making of a short film can be complicated: for a director that is used to the wide canvas of a feature film, the ability to fit a cohesive and concise story into less than a half-hour can be elusive. Many artists, however, can rise to the challenge and allow the restrictions to work for them. These four short films showcase talented individuals, and I’m excited that they get to share their creative voices with the world.

**FULL BEAT (KASE PENA)**

*Full Beat* begins with the definition “Full Beat: when the makeup applied to a person’s face is so powerful and amazing it makes them look truly stunning.” Director *Kase Pena* forgoes words, trusting the actors to utilize movement and facial expressions to communicate. *Juliana Joel* stuns as Bambi, a young trans teen struggling with her transphobic father. Through space, *Joel* uses her character to explore what it means when family forces us into the closet. When literal and figurative space to be yourself becomes a valuable commodity, *Pena* shows that embracing ourselves and our chosen family can be freeing.

**TELL-BY-DATE (SARAH BELL)**

*Brian Michael Smith* stars as Ryan in this comedic short film that showcases the importance of the chosen family. Ryan, a trans man, is struggling with when to tell his son that he’s not his biological father. The film adds humor to heighten some of Ryan anxieties, including one of my favorite Star Wars homages ever. With a gentle touch, *Tell-By-Date* examines how societal expectations of fatherhood and “being a man” can affect our approach to being a family.
**HOW TO MAKE A RAINBOW (RYAN MAXEY)**

Ryan Maxey presents an intimate documentary, showcasing the journey of a mother (Jade Phoenix Martinez) and her daughter (Alaizah Rayne Martinez). Over the course of two years, we are privy to mother and daughter as they play together, celebrate milestones, and discuss conformity to gender roles. The audience is invited to join the duo through low, close up camera angles, allowing us to go along with their changing world. We see the support and love Alaizah gives her mother as she goes through gender-confirming surgery, and the love Jade showers on her daughter on her birthday. As the credits roll, we the viewer understand that the future is wide open, and Alaizah and Jade are ready to make it their own.

**PONYBOI (RIVER GALLO AND SADÉ CLACKEN JOSEPH)**

Ponyboi may take place in a seedy working-class neighborhood in New Jersey, but it feels like the audience steps into an electric dreamland. Ponyboi (River Gallo), an intersex sex worker, walks through a world drenched in neon, with every frame a painting. The cinematography is such a strong point of this film, letting colors flow and melt together. However, Ponyboi doesn’t have the will to go out and explore the world, letting himself be resigned instead of obscurity. After a client shows Ponyboi more love than he’s ever seen in his life, the universe seems to open up: the neon
fades to a warm sunrise, and Ponyboi embraces the wide-open unknown. The embrace of his identity and sense of self opens, and Ponyboi is ready to take up space in the world he deserves. It's an exciting ending and leaves the audience wanting more.

The festival takes place on June & 7 at Seed&Spark. For more information and tickets, click here.

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- River Gallo
- Ryan Maxey
- Sade Clacken Joseph
- Sarah Bell
- Seek&Spark
- Short Film Collection
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Garrett Brown

He/Him or They/Them Garrett loves film, theatre, and believes a public library is the soul of a community. Garrett graduated from Pacific University with a B.A. in Anthropology, with minors in Theatre, and Gender and Sexuality Studies. They perform and create art in Portland, Oregon.
Billions is a show filled with liars, backstabbers, and cheaters. Everyone is basically a monster who only thinks about themselves. But throughout five seasons, the show has also never shied away from displaying the humanity beneath its evil-like characters. Take, Bobby Axelrod (Damian Lewis), for instance. On one hand, Bobby is portrayed as a man who will do literally anything, including crime, to maintain his wealth and power. But on the other hand, Bobby is also a man who will drop everything for his family and the small group of people he really cares about. The same thing can also be said about Bobby’s arch-nemesis Chuck Rhoades (Paul Giamatti), or the other characters — because deep down, they are all still human beings with real feelings, not just pathological monsters.

**DADDY ISSUES**

“Contract”, once again, asks us to look deep at this humanity as the two lead characters are grappling with personal problems. For Bobby, it is childhood trauma, while for Chuck, it is his father’s mortality and the complicated unhealthy relationship between them. The last time we saw Bobby, he bailed on a dinner invitation at his Yonkers childhood home. But the reason is far more
complicated than him being a dick. It’s later revealed that while he was a kid and still living in Yonkers, his father was abusive toward his mother, Laurel (Patti D’Arbanville). And when Bobby was twelve, his father left them for good. That’s why it’s really difficult for Bobby to step his foot back into his old house.

The episode, however, does not drop this information immediately. Rather, every moment leading up to Bobby’s finally acknowledging his issue is built carefully, and with a lot of care. It’s not just the house that triggers Bobby’s trauma though. But it’s also the possibility that his father might have been back in town, and secretly meeting his mother behind Bobby’s back. Bobby suspects this when visiting his mom to go ask for help in dealing with the whole Yonkers fiasco. While there, Bobby notices that the Lexus he gave her has gone missing. Her mom says that she sold her a while ago because it’s too sophisticated for her.

Knowing that something’s not right, Bobby then orders his personal fixer Hall (Terry Kinney) to go find the truth. And turns out, his suspicion is not wrong. His father is indeed back in town, and the Lexus Bobby gave to her mom is now his father’s. Bobby has a plan in dealing with all of these, and painful as it is to revisit his trauma, or hurts other people he cares about in the process of, putting this plan into action is a step that Bobby needs if he wants to finally free of the pain.

The mechanic of Bobby’s plan is secondary to the emotional catharsis that he achieves at the end of the episode. He makes sure that his mom will never be in touch with his father again, or else he’ll cut her off for good. He also purchases his old home back and gives the family who currently lives in there enough money to get a new house in a better neighborhood. Then to put a cherry on top, Bobby manages to find out where his dad now lives, and destroys the Lexus in front of his eyes.

It’s refreshing to see this side of Bobby. Because for once, he does something not for the sake of his wealth and power, but rather for something that is far more personal. What is even fascinating, aside from Lewis’ heartbreaking performance, is how the episode manages to show us that Bobby’s childhood trauma is the reason why he is the way he is right now, and how the pain that comes from it can also perpetuate the cycle of abuse itself.
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Chuck is facing a different kind of daddy issue. While he is busy trying to prevent Bobby and Axe Capital in getting the bank license, his dad Chuck Rhoades, Sr. (Jeffrey DeMunn), in the show’s most *The Godfather* moment yet, is having kidney failure. Chuck later finds out that because of his father’s age and history of alcohol abuse, he won’t be a priority at the transplant list. Terrified that he’ll die sooner than he expects, Senior then asks Chuck to use his power as NYAG to put him at the transplant list.

What’s interesting about this is not the dynamic between Chuck and his father, but rather how this request puts Chuck in a very tough spot. On one hand, Chuck promises to never abuse his power again for personal gain. But on the other hand, we know that Chuck will do anything for his father even though their relationship is far from healthy. What Chuck’s decision is, and how it’ll affect his dynamic with Chuck, Sr. is still up in the air, but it’ll be interesting to see it unfolds.

**A GAME OF TRUST**

While Bobby and Chuck are busy dealing with family problems, back in Axe Capital HQ, things get heated up as Wendy (Maggie Siff) and Taylor (Asia Kate Dillon) are officially opening their new impact fund Taylor Mason Carbon. The old employee of Mase Cap, especially Lauren (Jade Eshete) and Winston (Will Roland), disagree with Taylor’s decision of bringing Wendy into the new venture, saying that she is not someone to trust. And they are absolutely right to think so since Wendy’s number one allegiance will always be to Axe Capital.

But instead of listening to her employees’ concerns, Taylor decides to increase Wendy’s share by 40%. It sounds risky and dumb at first. But actually it’s a brilliant move. By giving Wendy more share, Taylor manages to put more responsibility to her, thus if Wendy ever messes with Taylor Mason Carbon, she’ll have a lot to lose. This delicate position where Wendy is now will no doubt play a huge part in her dynamic with Bobby going forward, especially if she’ll ever be caught in a crossfire between Taylor and Bobby, as is often the case with her.

Chuck is also playing a tricky game of trust in this episode. Before he has to deal with his father, Chuck and his brilliant assistant Kate Sacker (Condola Rashad) approach Leah Calder (Wendie Malick), the official who would legalize Bobby’s banking application. Chuck wants Leah to stall the process so that he’ll have more time to entrap Bobby. Though Leah refuses at first, she, in the end, says yes to Chuck’s request after he offers to help her get her family’s ring back from his son’s ex-fiancée.

Chuck then calls Jackie Connerty (Michael Raymond-James), the brother of Chuck’s protegee-turned-enemy Brian Connerty (Toby Leonard Moore), who’s now in prison. He wants Jackie to help him crack a safe where the ring is kept, and as an exchange, he will not be arrested for a theft he committed some times ago. Plus, Brian will be relocated to a much better prison. Jackie agrees to do what Chuck asks him to do as long as he pays Brian a visit, which ends up in him getting punched in the face. No big deal.
In the end, Chuck gets his wish of preventing Bobby from getting the license come true, even after Bobby manages to expose the local community bank from racist and homophobic acts. The consequences of Chuck’s “illegal” approach remain to be seen, but it won’t be surprising if it will be a boomerang to him in the end, especially considering how Jackie is someone who Chuck clearly cannot trust.

**FINAL THOUGHT**

Much like the previous four episodes, “Contract” is an episode full of thrills, fun, and phenomenal performances. The only difference is, it moves a little slower, with not much progress aside from Bobby dealing with his childhood trauma. But by giving us more poignant moments, Billions shows so much progress when it comes to how it portrays the characters. And that’s still a win for me.

*What do you think of Taylor’s move? Let us know in the comments!* 

All five episodes of Billions season five are available to stream on Showtime App.

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Reyzando Nawara is a passionate Indonesian based film and TV enthusiast who enjoys to write and discuss about cinema or anything TV-related. Big fan of Mia Hansen-Løve, Alex Ross Perry, and Noah Baumbach.