

WILD TALES

Monday, May 18, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Godfrey Cheshire – Ebert.com Rated R 122 Mins.

Multi-story feature films are not the happiest of genres, for reasons that are usually very apparent. For one, having to conclude one story and start another, over and over, interrupts the dream-like flow that most moviegoers expect of features. For another, unevenness is almost built into the form: some stories will be better than others, perhaps especially when several filmmakers are involved.

All of these inherent drawbacks help explain why Argentina's "Wild Tales" comes as such an extraordinary surprise. Perhaps the best multi-story feature this reviewer has ever seen, the Sony Classics release, a nominee for this year's Best Foreign-Language Film Oscar, deserves to become a serious art-house hit in the U.S. thanks to its skill in deftly overcoming the form's usual deficits, for a result that feels as amazingly cohesive as it is relentlessly clever and entertaining.

No doubt the film has something of an advantage in that it comes from one filmmaker, *Damián Szifron* ("The Bottom of the Sea"), and thus reflects a singular vision and sensibility. Beyond that, it must be said that Szifron has remarkable skills as both a director and a storyteller. Each of the six stories here, which average about 20 minutes, is thoroughly enthralling, and all are united by a mordant black humor. Connected thematically in dealing with revenge and retribution, each segment sets up expectations that its successor ingeniously fulfills or surpasses.

The first, pre-credits story, "Pasternak," gets things off to a high-flying start. An attractive young woman—a model, we soon learn—checks in for a flight and hears she won't get frequent flier miles because someone else has paid her ticket. On board the plane, she begins chatting with another passenger and learns they both knew a guy named Pasternak, a boyfriend she dumped years ago. Then another passenger says he was the professor who failed the same guy. Could it be--? Sure enough, the plane is full of people who've shafted Mr. P. And who's that locked in the cockpit?

In "The Rats," revenge is a dish best served with ketchup. When a grumpy man enters an empty roadside restaurant one night, the young waitress recognizes him as a corrupt official who drove her father to suicide. Sure, she'd like to see the world rid of him, but

she's not inclined to do anything about it until the diner's gruff, elderly woman cook urges that it would be as simple as loading the guy's fries and eggs with rat poison. The waitress is morally torn, but there's also a practical question: Once rat poison is past its expiration date, does it become more or less potent?

The element of class conflict grows more pronounced in "Road to Hell," which plays like a more macabre version of Spielberg's "Duel." Riding down a remote highway in his snazzy new sports car, a sleek corporate type passes a slow pickup truck and shouts insults at its grizzled, back-country driver. Naturally, the city slicker has a flat just a few miles down the road, and the first vehicle to appear in his rear-view is the scorned pickup. What ensues is apocalyptic (and droll) enough to tickle Rod Serling.

The film's last three stories are more expansive, complex and sharply edged in social satire. In "Bombita," a demolitions engineer stops to pick up his daughter's birthday cake and comes out to find his car towed – though the space wasn't marked a tow-away zone. In the coming weeks, as his marriage begins to collapse, the enraged citizen seeks justice for his parking woes, and finds himself surrounded by fellow Argentines furious at "fascist" bureaucratic stonewallers. Is it possible his skills with dynamite might turn the engineer into a combination of Frank Capra hero and Che Guevara? In this land, it seems, anything but bureaucratic responsiveness is possible.

Its premise recalling Paolo Virzi's recent "Human Capital," "The Deal" starts out with a rich couple learning their teenage son has run down a pregnant woman the night before. Frantic, the father and his lawyer come up with a scheme to pay his poor gardener a half mil to take the rap. But then the lawyer, who demands a half mil for his services, brings the prosecutor into it, which will cost another mil, plus payoffs for the police... No wonder poor dad tells them all to go to hell, then realizes that his only real out involves something he's in fact very skilled at: negotiation.

It might seem at this point the film couldn't top what's come before, but not to fear: "Till Death Us Do Part" is a corker. While previous tales hinge on enmity or distress, this one starts out with celebration and love. At a fancy wedding reception, the guests are giddy, the bride and groom enveloped in bliss. Until, that is, she discovers he's cheated on her with a woman in the room. At first, she flees to the roof, weeping and suicidal. Then the prospect of vengeance hardens her, and soon he's the one who's groveling and sobbing. The reversals of emotional fortune continue until it seems we've just seen a decade of marital turmoil play out in one convulsive evening.

Any of these tales separated from the whole could surely win prizes at short-film competitions. Together, their collective impact proves the synergistic effect of true artistic vision. With a confident, coolly elegant visual style somewhere between Demme and DePalma, Szifron emerges from "Wild Tales" an international auteur to be reckoned with.

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Monday, June 8, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Mark Feeney - Boston Globe Rated PG 104 Mins.

Think of "The Wrecking Crew" as "20 Feet From Stardom" (2013) for instrumentalists, or a West Coast version of "Standing in the Shadows of Motown" (2002). There's a similar shared joy among the participants, a similar sense of discovery for the viewer, and, of course, a killer soundtrack.

Denny Tedesco's lively and loving documentary takes its title from the name collectively applied to the group of two to three dozen Los Angeles studio musicians who dominated rock and pop recordings there during the 1960s and early '70s.



Although you probably don't recognize the names of Hal Blaine or Earl Palmer, both drummers are in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. You almost certainly recognize many of the recordings they and their fellow musicians played on — hits by the Beach Boys, Frank Sinatra, the Tijuana Brass, the Byrds, the Association, Elvis Presley, Wayne Newton, Dean Martin, the Mamas and the Papas. The list goes on (and on).

These sidemen also provided the lath, studs, and plaster for Phil Spector's Wall of Sound. Sidemen and sidewoman, that is: Carol Kaye has been called the most recorded bassist in history. That irresistible bass line on Sonny and Cher's "The Beat Goes On"? She came up with it. She also came up with the little bass figure that opens Glen Campbell's recording of "Wichita Lineman." He started out in the Wrecking Crew. Campbell was an ace session guitarist before someone noticed he could sing a bit, too.

You name it, and the Wrecking Crew played it, including commercials and movie and television work. Saxophonist Plas Johnson supplied the glorious skulk of the tenor saxophone solo on "The Pink Panther Theme." The twangy guitar part on the "Bonanza" opening music came courtesy of Tommy Tedesco.

Tommy was Denny's father, hence the family feeling that suffuses "The Wrecking Crew." Some of the most enjoyable bits in this highly enjoyable film come when Blaine, Kaye, Johnson, and Tedesco senior sit around a table and talk about old times. It's the conversational equivalent of a jam session. Numerous other Wrecking Crew players are heard from individually.

That four-way confab provides the movie with its spine. Denny Tedesco surrounds it with home movies his mother shot, populuxe graphics (very LA of that era, of course), and period photographs, as well as vintage video and audio of rehearsals, TV performances, and the occasional stage show. It's a tie for most memorable footage (which isn't the same as best) between Nancy Sinatra stomping her way through "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" on TV and Blaine's solo while backing her up at Caesars Palace. If his drum kit were any bigger it would be in another ZIP code.

The Monkees' Peter Tork, who admits that he resented not playing on the band's recordings, concedes that it was the right decision: The Wrecking Crew players were so much more talented than he and his bandmates were. Monkees drummer Mickey Dolenz, looking quite spiffy in a white panama hat, agrees.

Tork and Dolenz are among the many talking heads singing the Wrecking Crew's praises: Dick Clark, Cher, Herb Alpert, Jimmy Webb, Brian Wilson, Nancy Sinatra. Even Frank Zappa shows up. Kaye played on the Mothers of Invention's "Freak Out!" and "Absolutely Free" LPs.

Both Clark and Zappa are dead now, as are Earl Palmer, Tommy Tedesco, and several others in the Wrecking Crew. If the viewer gets a sense of time lag, there's a reason. Denny Tedesco completed the documentary in 2008. He's shown it at festivals since, but it's otherwise been stuck in music-clearance limbo. Entertainment conglomerates weren't willing to budge on royalties. Finally, Tedesco was able to work out reasonable licensing fees for the more than 100 songs heard in the documentary.

It's worth staying through the final credits to see them all listed. It's also worth sticking around to hear Blaine tell a pretty funny trombonist joke and see the final words that appear on screen: "No musicians were harmed in the making this film and no drum machines were ever used." The beat really does go on.

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WHITE GOD

Monday, June 22, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis - NYT Not Rated 121 Mins.

The hand that feeds — and also brutalizes — is righteously bitten in “White God,” a Hungarian revenge fantasy that’s like nothing you’ve seen on screen before. The story is as simple as a parable, a campfire story, a children’s book: A faithful animal, separated from its loving owner, endures, suffers, struggles and resists while trying to transcend its brutal fate. The director, Kornel Mundruczo, has said that he was partly inspired by J. M. Coetzee’s devastating novel “Disgrace,” but the movie also invokes haunting animal classics like “Black Beauty” and “The Call of the Wild.”

Like Buck, the four-legged hero of “The Call of the Wild,” the dog protagonist in “White God,” Hagen — played with full-bodied expressivity by the canine siblings Bodie and Luke — is a mixed breed. For his closest companion, a solemn-faced 13-year-old named Lili (Zsafia Psotta), Hagen’s ancestry isn’t an issue, but it is one for those state officials who tax dogs that aren’t purebreds. Lili’s father, Daniel (Sandor Zsoter), who has custody of her for a few months, has no interest in paying the tax or keeping the dog, which is how Hagen ends up on the streets of Budapest, initially alone, then in the hands of a cruel master and then with a pack.

That pack in all its barking, panting, tail-wagging glory is the big payoff in “White God,” which features 250 or so dogs that were trained for the movie, not a computer-generated pooch among them. Mr. Mundruczo has said that his movie was shot using the American film industry’s guidelines on the use of animal performers. That’s not entirely reassuring given the abuses that nonetheless occur during productions, as a ghastly 2013 exposé in *The Hollywood Reporter* affirmed. Still, viewers concerned about the welfare of the dogs, especially in some of the tougher scenes, should pay close attention to the cunning editing and camera angles as well as all those happy tails. Mr. Mundruczo has also produced, smartly, a reassuring behind-the-scenes video that’s available on YouTube.



All this won’t make viewers out of people who believe that animals should never be used, period. Those who don’t care how we treat animals may wonder what any of this has to do with a movie, much less a review. Yet it is our bonds with other animals, our obligations and our sympathies, that make “White God” more than a gimmick movie. These are questions, Mr. Mundruczo suggests, that also extend to creatures that we, godlike, designate as meat, not pets, to borrow a formulation from Michael Moore’s “Roger & Me.” What are nonhuman animals to us? In Mr. Coetzee’s “Disgrace,” a character who helps out at a shelter in which animals are

euthanized says of dogs, “They do us the honor of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things.” In “White God,” the dogs respond with their own kill policy.

In classic narrative fashion, Mr. Mundruczo works the setup like a burlesque fan dancer, teasing out the reveal bit by bit. He introduces Lili and Hagen together while they’re sharing the frame and playing a quietly portentous game of tug-of-war. Lili’s mother has gone off on a lengthy trip with her husband, leaving the girl with her father, who Lili demonstrably doesn’t much like. Mr. Mundruczo at first seems to share Lili’s aversion; at the very least, he knows how to stack the story decks: Daniel isn’t just a dour, unsmiling sad sack, he’s also a fallen man who now works as a slaughterhouse inspector. You first meet him in an antiseptic room in which, after workers gut and skin a dead cow, he plunges a gauge in the innards, declaring it fit for consumption.



Unblinkingly gory, this evisceration foreshadows other violence to come. It’s a tough but critical scene because, while Mr. Mundruczo has a sharp sense of humor, evident especially in his use of horror-movie tropes, “White God” isn’t a comedy or a Disney-like anthropomorphized romp. The camera gets down on all fours, metaphorically, and shares Hagen’s point of view, showing you what the world looks like around our knees. Yet Hagen isn’t a wee human in a fuzzy costume; he doesn’t have a digital mouth, talk to other animals or share his thoughts. The radicalness of the movie is that it asserts he doesn’t need to be like a person for you to be on his side. He is a dog, and that’s all he needs to be.

Hagen and Lili are separated not long after moving in with Daniel. Once they’re divided, the story divides too, forming parallel narrative tracks. For much of the movie, Mr. Mundruczo switches back and forth between Hagen and Lili as they look for each other, underlining their similarities, friendships, close calls, minor triumphs and anxious, searching, long runs down unfriendly streets. Hagen finds a pal (a scene-nibbling Jack Russell terrier named Marlene); Lili flirts with a boy who plays in her orchestra. Both Hagen and Lili are soon forced on a tight leash. She has to deal with her tyrannical father and a similarly patriarchal orchestra leader; Hagen, meanwhile faces far worse after he’s sold by a vagrant first to a dealer and then a vicious trainer.

The brutality of the training, which culminates with an ugly fight that’s a frenzy of slamming bodies, ominous growls and bloodied muzzles, isn’t for the weak of heart. But these scenes represent movie sleight of hand at its finest, as do the sequences of Hagen making like Jason Bourne while escaping pound workers, hurtling down alleys, darting around corners, racing across terraces and even bursting through an apartment window into the lap of its understandably surprised inhabitant. In time, Hagen stops running from his oppressors and instead — flanked by a glorious mutt army in a series of soaring, astonishingly choreographed scenes — heads straight at the humans who have done him and his friends lethally, morally, wrong. After years of domination, nature is biting back.

In Hungarian with English subtitles.



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WILD TALES

"Delicious, Outrageous and Hilarious."

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Monday, May 18 at 7:30 pm

"A wonderful, touching film about the
unsung stars of so many records that
you carry in your heart."

Elvis Costello



WHITE GOD

"A rabid relation to Hitchcock's 'The Birds.'"

The Guardian

Monday, June 22 at 7:30 pm