

GIVE ME LIBERTY

Monday, October 21, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargas | New York Times | Not Rated | 110 Mins.

It can be nerve-racking how fast the van in “Give Me Liberty” hurtles through Milwaukee. Most of the time on this wild ride, the driver peers ahead as he white-knuckles it through the gray, wintry streets, past cars, houses, flashing lights. Every so often, he smokes a cigarette or grabs the radio handset, delivering another promise that he’ll break. “I’ll be there soon,” he says to dispatch as his passengers talk, shout and sing. “I should be there in 10.” The van is racing past a familiar reality while a more freewheeling, uncharted world bursts forth inside of it.

You first meet the driver, Vic (a soulful Chris Galust), in a cramped room, where he’s listening closely to a friend smoking in bed, identified only as his Confidant (James Watson), a profoundly disabled man with doe eyes who’s communing with Vic about love and other weighty issues. The Confidant is a philosopher of the heart whose words fill the room, swirling like the smoke from the cigarette that Vic takes from his mouth, tapping the ash before returning it to its perch. There’s no immediate point to the scene; in time, though, it reads like an epigraph and a declaration of intent.

As the Confidant holds forth, the quiet, watchful Vic sits near the edge of the bed. This geometry of bodies — the meditative disabled man and his attentive able-bodied friend — is echoed by the storytelling. Vic offers the most obvious way into “Give Me Liberty” but he isn’t exactly its protagonist. Rather, over the course of the fast-spinning story, he retreats as other characters move to the fore. At times, he becomes more passenger than driver on a narrative journey that includes a gaggle of disruptive elderly mourners, a softhearted boxer (a fantastic Max Stoianov) and a woman, Tracy (a terrific Lauren Spencer, who, like Galust, is a nonprofessional performer).

The story shifts into focus when Vic stops to pick up Tracy, an advocate for people with disabilities who has A.L.S. and uses a motorized wheelchair. (Spencer does as well.) He’s late — he has had a comically rough and raucous morning — and she’s come equipped with a sword, an atmosphere-thickening item that the movie doesn’t belabor. The sword scarcely matters as much as Tracy’s righteous anger; doubtless it isn’t as cutting. Tracy relies on accessibility rides to get around the city and Vic has made her late for an appointment. She’s on her way to help with a meeting for Steve (Steve Wolski), another passenger who soon gets in the van, joining what becomes an often hilariously unruly crowd that ebbs and flows as the story zigs and zags

“Give Me Liberty” is a jolt of a movie, at once kinetic and controlled. It’s an anarchic deadpan comedy that evolves into a romance just around the time the story explodes. It has moments of unembellished realism as well as a fictional story line that runs

through the bedlam. With its contrasting modes and moods, it pushes and pulls you, rocking you back and forth like one of the van’s swaying passengers, creating an agreeable uncertainty. You’re never sure where it’s headed as it careens all over the place, to homes, offices, a center for people with disabilities and then down one more street.

The director Kirill Mikhanovsky is a Russian immigrant whose family landed in Milwaukee after the collapse of the Soviet Union. (One of his jobs was driving medical transport for people with disabilities.) This is only his second feature, although you wouldn’t know it from how seamlessly he navigates the movie’s numerous spinning and almost colliding parts — its people with their different needs, their firm opinions and heartfelt frailties — all while bringing Vic and Tracy closer together at each turn. Working from a screenplay he wrote with Alice Austen (who’s also a producer), Mikhanovsky proves to be a virtuoso of chaos. When he plunges you into the churn it’s as if he were saying, “Isn’t this mess we call life glorious?”

This is tricky terrain, and could have been disastrous, particularly given that the movies have a lousy track record when it comes to stories about people with disabilities. At times, it seems as if Mikhanovsky is willfully working himself into impossible corners, most notably at the center where some of the clients are performing in a talent show. Vic stops there after a van passenger — one of the mourners who are circuitously en route to a funeral (long, funny story) — has a blood-sugar issue, prompting a leisurely detour during the story’s full-throttle rush forward.

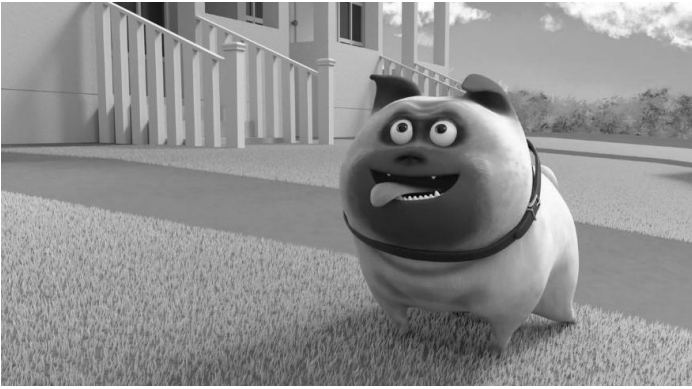
Not a whole lot seems to happen at the center. The candy dispenser is empty, but the room spills over with life. A woman sings “Rock Around the Clock”; a man with an American flag on his jacket belts “Born in the U.S.A.” As Vic and some of the van passengers wander, a few of the mourners use walkers or canes, the movie lingers on the diverse faces of the clientele. Some look attentive while others seem distant; each, the movie underscores, is just a person in the room. And then Vic stops to watch as one man (Gregory Merzlake) draws kaleidoscopic pictures, a rainbow of trees or perhaps Fourth of July fireworks. Similar pictures are in Vic’s apartment, you realize, giving it bursts of color.

In another movie, this suggestion that Vic’s life has been enriched by people with disabilities might easily become fodder for a heroic tale about his difficulties, his triumph, his spirit. Here, Vic is also just a person in the room, as well as a conduit to a world too little seen in the movies. Not everything works as persuasively. There are too many drives around the block and some late, on-the-nose politics. That scarcely matters as Mikhanovsky gathers together the whirring parts and settles on Vic and Tracy’s searching, delicately nuanced relationship. It’s moving and sincere, suffused with tenderness and marked by a quiet that suggests that each has found a safe harbor in the other. That may sound corny; it’s not — it’s irresistible.

In English and Russian, with subtitles.

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anim8

Student Film Festival

Monday, October 21, 5:00 pm

Please join us as we feature the winning entries from the 17th Annual Student Film Festival. Participants were required to submit an animated film with a running time of 8 minutes or less. Over 50 submissions from 10 countries around the world were received and evaluated by our panel of accomplished judges. The festival's top selections will be screened and awards will be distributed at this special program.

ONE CHILD NATION

Monday, November 11, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Michael Phillips | Chicago Tribune | Rated R | 85 Mins.

The superb new documentary "One Child Nation" comes from filmmaker Nanfu Wang, who tells a shadowy, complex story of her family and of China's notorious population control methods implemented in 1979 and perpetuated for 35 years.

Government propaganda slogans, stenciled on countless buildings and walls all across China, hammered home the policy. One we see in the movie states: "Better to shed a river of blood than to birth more than one child." Since revising the policy — two children is the sanctioned norm now, not one — China has necessarily adjusted its internal marketing campaign. One song lyric heard in a pageant sequence in "One Child Nation" puts it this way: "Two children are great/like migratory geese, they will return home every year!"

Wang's idiosyncratic chronicle of a massively deceptive, horrifically cruel program hits very close to home for her. She and her brother grew up in Wang Village in China's Jiangxi Province. Their family was an exception to the general rule, as rural families were allowed two children, spaced five years apart.

After the birth of her own son, U.S.-based Wang returned to China in 2016 with her co-director, Jialing Zhang, who like Wang was born in China under the One-Child Policy. The risks inherent in this project were many. The directors interviewed former human traffickers, various state officials and a variety of village elders who do not like hearing questions from Wang that require revisiting the

past. Wang's grandfather, we learn, fought with his village's leaders to prevent his wife, Wang's grandmother, from forced sterilization. Wang's mother, to this day, remains a believer in how the One-Child Policy rescued China from famine and ruin.



Tunde Wang, ex-village chief, speaks casually, at first, of punishing those who didn't comply with the one-child law by having to "demolish their homes or take their possessions." Huaru Yuan, an important figure in Wang's ancestral village and the woman who delivered co-director Wang herself, estimates that she performed 50,000 abortions and sterilizations in her 25-year career as a midwife. "My hands trembled doing it," she says at one point, "but I had no choice."

There is so much more to this film. Various camera subjects recall the sight of abandoned, "illegal" babies left in baskets on the street or in a shop. Ex-traffickers, exiled investigative journalists, American parents of adopted Chinese babies, now grown, some of whom are eager to learn some verifiable facts about their birth parents: In a very full and riveting 85 minutes, "One Child Nation" assembles a huge story together from many small, crucial pieces.

Wang started out her life a true believer in the state, and her homeland's propaganda. Now, as she concludes, she is living a paradoxical life in America, where a woman's control over her own body remains eternally up for political grabs. Like Josh Oppenheimer's arresting documentaries "The Act of Killing" and "The Look of Silence," which coaxed singular confessions on camera from state-sanctioned purveyors of Indonesian genocide, Wang doggedly questions village officials about what they did on orders from above. Some are plainly devastated; others remain fixed in their notion that the old policy saved a great country from starvation.

Or, to adjust the grammar a bit, what will turn out to have happened. This movie is a memory piece, after all (with a sequel in the works), set at a time of I.R.A. bombings and ascendant Thatcherism. It's also a coming-of-age story, implying a backward-looking perspective of maturity. The grain of the film shrouds the action in a delicate caul of nostalgia, communicating an ache that Julie can't yet feel but that we can see forming inside her. This is one of the saddest movies you can imagine, and it's an absolute joy to watch.



Fiddler

A Miracle of Miracles

Monday, November 18, 7:30

Reviewed by Allen Johnson | SF Chronicle | Rated PG | 91 Mins.

When Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is of Puerto Rican descent, got married in 2010 to his wife, Vanessa, who is Dominican, he and his new in-laws surprised her with a song he had rehearsed and choreographed. The song was not Latin or Hispanic in origin, but Jewish: "To Life," from "Fiddler on the Roof."



"There was no other song in the canon that was about the relationship between a father-in-law and his new son," Miranda explains in the new documentary "Fiddler: A Miracle of Miracles," which opens Friday, Aug. 30.

Max Lewkowicz's documentary is an in-depth look at the origins of the Broadway musical, which became the first to surpass 3,000 performances, but it's not just a trip down memory lane. What makes it brilliant is that it demonstrates how universal this distinctly Jewish musical has become, how it has been embraced by many cultures and how it is still influential today.

Consider that since its Broadway debut, the musical has played every day — for 55-plus years — somewhere on Earth. Footage in the documentary includes a high school production by a largely African American and Latino cast.

Original writer Joseph Stein recalls accompanying a traveling cast to Japan for performances and a theater manager asked him, "Do people understand this in America? It's so Japanese."

But of course, the story is very much Jewish. Stein, lyricist Sheldon Harnick and composer Jerry Bock based the story on the works of Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916). The story is set in

1905 Czarist Russia and revolves around Jewish milkman Tevye and his five daughters, all at or approaching marrying age.

It is an allegory about preserving tradition and cultural values in a world of sweeping change. While Dad is stuck in the old ways, his daughters embrace a new generation.

"Fiddler" has great archival footage of the original Tevye, Zero Mostel, and choreographer Jerome Robbins; interviews with the writers, producer Hal Prince and a few Broadway cast members; actors and crew members from the 1971 film, including the cinematic Tevye (the great Israeli actor Topol); and performers from recent revivals.

Adding perspective are fans such as Miranda, filmmaker Gurinder Chadha (whose British-Indian hit female sports movie "Bend It Like Beckham" was practically a loose remake of "Fiddler"), author Fran Lebowitz and composer Stephen Sondheim.

That "Fiddler" became a success is actually pretty amazing, considering its origins. A pre-Broadway tryout run in Detroit was a disaster, and Robbins and team revamped the play. Robbins, who had named names under pressure from the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s, feuded with Mostel, who had been blacklisted for refusing to name names.

Upon its debut, the New York Times gave it a tepid review and Variety proclaimed there were "no memorable songs." Of course, now "If I Were a Rich Man" is famous worldwide (there have been many covers, including by the Temptations), and "Matchmaker," "Tradition" and "To Life" ("L'Chaim") are universal classics.



Ultimately, "Fiddler in the Roof" endures because nearly every culture on Earth has gone through upheaval, and it's happening today. Learning how to emerge intact is an ongoing process.

"The world is changing faster than we understand," observes Miranda. "We look to our traditions to guide us, and sometimes they fail us."

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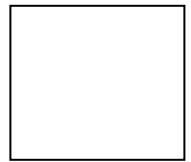
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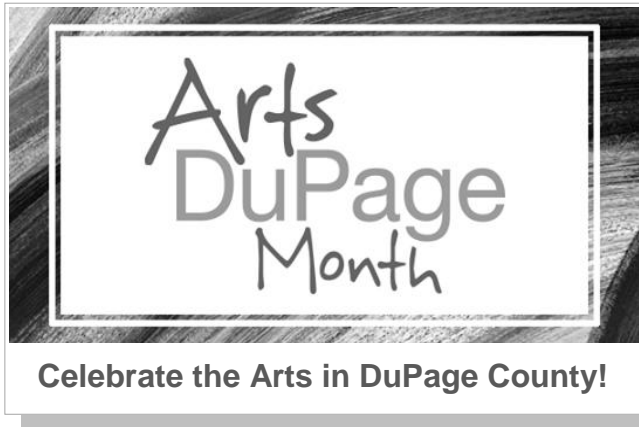
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Adam Graham, Detroit News

Monday, November 11 at 7:30 pm



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Pete Hammond, Deadline Hollywood

Monday, November 18 at 7:30 pm