



Monday, November 7, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Thom Ernst | Original Cin | Not Rated | 104 Mins.

My Old School starts off with a gimmick. The film's subject, who wishes not to appear in the movie but is willing to provide audio commentary, is played by actor Alan Cumming. He effectively lip-syncs the subject's pre-recorded dialogue.

Cumming reveals a startling example of the kind of talent an extraordinary actor processes. So often, good acting is veiled within the cadence and delivery of the speaker. But Cumming doesn't have a voice in the movie, at least not one that is his.

And yet he masterfully recreates the nuances of the subject's words, from nervous laughter, fitting glances, and faultless delivery.

A gimmick, no matter how mesmerizing nor clever, should not have to carry an entire movie. But before this gimmick has a chance to grow tired, My Old School has hooked on to a story that is at once amusing, magical, and heartbreaking.

My Old School is the story of Brandon Lee. Not the late Brandon Lee of The Crow fame (although he does make an incidental posthumous appearance).

This Brandon Lee is the son of a Canadian female opera singer who died in a car crash. He was sent to live with his grandmother in Bearsden, Scotland, where he was enrolled in the Bearsden Academy, a somewhat prestigious school set in a well-to-do neighbourhood.

If you don't already know the story around Brandon Lee and the scandal he brought to Bearsden Academy, then do yourself a favour and fight the urge to Google his name or that of the Academy. My Old School is more fun when you don't know where it's going.

The film shocks, but in ways that fascinate rather than repulse—although there is one potentially triggering indiscretion during a high school production of South Pacific. Director Jono McLeod frames his movie as though it were a high-school comedy. The opening credits look like the opening credit sequence from Grease 2.

The story does centre on Brandon. But it's filled with various other characters, including a cape-wearing headmaster the students dub Batman, a cantankerous admissions officer, a charming young sex-education teacher, a bullied student and namesake, and an assortment of colourful, witty, and lively classmates.

Watching these children as adults make you wish you too went to Bearsden Academy.

McLeod takes the camera into a classroom (not the classroom as the Academy no longer exists), bringing in now-adult students who were Brandon's classmates. Part of the film is talking heads, and some of it is news footage, most of it animated.

It all works. However, the film's narrative structure requires a certain amount of repetition, once without full knowledge, then again with full knowledge. It's a minor glitch in an otherwise dynamically told tale.

Much can be said about the film's dive into areas of mental health, teenage lifestyles, the school system, privilege, opportunities, and coming of age.

The most important takeaway is the story of second chances. But to make that dive into those areas would reveal too much of what the film has to offer (although the filmmaker's synopsis doesn't keep many secrets).

Still, despite the widespread media sensation, some (my hand is raised) are unaware of the turmoil Brandon Lee caused the town of Bearsden. Even the interviewees who lived the story are caught learning things they never knew.

My Old School is an original, fascinating, and compelling documentary that tacks on a gimmick to better tell its story. Although Cumming's participation can't fairly be called a gimmick if his role makes the film work.

Then again, maybe only an actor of Cumming's skill can turn a gimmick into something essential.



Please join us for the premiere of the virtual Anim8 Student Film Festival featuring the winning entries from After Hours Film Society's 19th annual event of its kind. More than 75 students from 16 countries participated in the competition by submitting animated films with a running time of 8 minutes or less. Film educators and professionals evaluated the entries based on creative approach, technical excellence, and academic level, from middle school through graduate. The top-rated films are showcased in our special virtual program, available at <https://vimeo.com/760137879> beginning Monday, October 31 at 7:00 pm. It will also be accessible on the Student Film Festival page on theafterhoursfilmsociety.com through January 31, 2023. All are welcome to watch and celebrate this new wave of cinema.

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A LOVE SONG

Monday, November 21, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Luke Y. Thompson | AV Club | Not Rated | 83 Mins.

A Love Song opens with images of small, colorful flowers breaking their way out of hard, dried, cracked earth. It's an obvious metaphor: there's beauty under weathered facades, like the face of Faye (Dale Dickey), a lone woman living in a camper against the backdrop of what looks like the Paramount Pictures mountain. Faye catches crawdads in the lake, surviving on them and coffee. She identifies birdcalls. She listens to bluegrass on a crackly, analog radio. She fixes her own binoculars. And she waits. Somebody's going to meet her here, maybe. She won't move until he does, but she has no idea when that might be.

For a while, writer-director Max Walker-Silverman revels in the minimalism of her routine. It's a simple life, interrupted occasionally by oddballs from other campsites, including the young girl leading four cowboy-hatted men to dig up her grandfather because his burial spot no longer boasts a scenic view. If Walker-Silverman wanted this to be his Nomadland, a scenic look at the harshness and beauty of life without walls, he could probably succeed in that direction—but he has something else in mind, as the title suggests.

Needless to say, Dickey and Studi are a few decades older and covered with a few more wrinkles than the young and flawless objets d'amour of so many Hollywood love stories. Time brings a degree of gravitas by default, yet both play their initial interactions like charmingly awkward teens, dancing around the real subject matter at hand with small talk. They play guitar. They fill ice cream cones using a pocket knife. Slowly, the years and the layers pull back, as they, and we, see the ageless souls beneath the worn visages.

Walker-Silverman himself is considerably younger than his stars, but was inspired by classic love songs that referred to older loves. However, he doesn't make the mistake of putting older love stories on a pedestal, either; for Faye and Lito, their courtship can be as awkward as for their younger counterparts, with as many potential rewards. Neither views this as potentially their last rodeo, though we know it could be. Then again, nobody knows how long they have, and the world is changing. A throwaway line about how the lake has been slowly drying up over the years both signifies the possible doom of climate change, and the inevitable "drying up" of our lives as we get further into them.

It's a minor disappointment to discover there's a 14-year gap between Dickey and Studi's actual ages, since Faye and Lito are presumably close to the same age. A Love Song certainly seems to upend Hollywood romance cliches, but seems to reinforce one about gender-based age gaps in casting. And yet their pairing works, at least in small part because the elder Studi has had a career of playing action heroes and villains in great physical shape, and the younger Dickey one of hard-living characters who have been beaten down by the world.

Studi has also made such a career playing variations of "The Stoic Indian" that it's a delight to see him cast for what he can play instead of who he is. He's probably one of the last actors who comes to mind to play awkward, but he does so skillfully. Likewise, the dentally challenged Dickey is rarely called upon to play beauty, but she lets you see it. Most working actors, of course, are more complex than their usual types, but it's a joy to see these two veterans actually get to show it.

Alfonso Herrera Salcedo's cinematography feels like the third star of the film—anyone can point a camera at two great character actors with memorable faces, but Salcedo's compositions and eye on the natural surroundings make whimsical art scenes with bare essentials. The campsite does a lot of the art direction heavy-lifting, but due credit to production designer Juliana Barreto Barreto for that camper interior, with its off-yellow tones and wood panels looking like the visually manifested odor of secondhand smoke and the '80s.



Studi won an honorary Oscar in 2019; it's suitably ironic that only now he gets the kind of role that could score him a nomination for real. Dickey, who has an Independent Spirit award for Winter's Bone, ought to have a real shot at leading nominations this time—in some scenes, she remains so still that only her eyes do the work, telling a silent story of years past. On the surface, there's little more simple than a story of two people trying to make a connection. On an emotional level, however, few things are more complicated. Like life, A Love Song offers no easy conclusions—just simple realizations. In expert hands, that's enough.

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FUNNY PAGES

Monday, December 5, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Vincent Mancini | Uproxx | Not Rated | 86 Mins.

A lot of movies are funny, but very few are funny on a cellular level. Few announce themselves as something different from the very first frames. Even most good comedies are mostly built from familiar situations and people, but *Funny Pages* is that rare breed; bewildering and strange before its characters even begin speaking and projecting its inherent twistedness with every aspect of its construction. Owen Kline's directorial debut, produced by the Safdie Brothers (*Uncut Gems*, *Good Times*), is an esoteric masterpiece, a woolly comedy of the bizarre oozing with rewatch potential.

Daniel Zolghadri plays our main character, Robert, a sort of Holden Caulfield by way of R. Crumb, determined to live out his dream of being a romantic, reclusive, dangerous cult cartoonist, in spite, or to spite his banal, upper-middle-class parents. In the first scene, he's being showered with praise by his eccentric art teacher, who urges Robert to go further, to get weirder, to subvert more expectations with his vulgar, perverse little drawings.



Ah, those drawings, depicted lovingly in the otherwise grimy, grainy, fluorescent-lit scene. They nearly steal the show, managing to be cute despite depicting full penetration and squinting little buttholes, and laugh out loud hilarious to a frame (the twisted brilliance of Johnny Ryan, who drew them). Mr. Katano, a large lumpy slob who demands Robert caricature him in all his misshapen glory, is played by an actor named "Stephen Adly Guirgis," a name that, like most aspects of *Funny Pages*, is self-evidently and almost inexplicably hilarious.

Every actor in *Funny Pages* is basically the visual equivalent of the sonic qualities of "Stephen Adly Guirgis," human sight gags, dadaist celebrations of mother nature and all the ways she can be magical and capricious and inspired. *Funny Pages'* achievement in unconventional casting choices may never be equaled. My friend

Matt, who I brought to the screening with me, said every person in *Funny Pages* sort of looks like a grown-up Garbage Pail kid. There's some truth to that, though I suspect Kline partly achieves this effect by opening with a montage of hilarious and semi-cruel caricatures. Such that, from that point on, you begin to envision every character you encounter in *Funny Pages* as their own inevitable visual parody, your brain filling the gaps on its own like an acid trip. It's a brilliant and twisted trick that makes the audience complicit in Robert's cruelty.

Yet also, maybe this cast of characters just looks more like a collection of R. Crumb drawings come to life than any cast ever has before. But it's also more than that; they're not just kooky for kooky's sake, or deliberately gross, which has been done (see: *The Greasy Strangler*). These characters are both odd and odd looking in a way that seems to define a place.

The same way *Napoleon Dynamite* could only have been made with and by Mormons from Idaho, *Funny Pages* is a collection of types only found in the arcades and comic book shops of the suburbs of the tri-state area. And only filmmakers as authentically from that milieu as Owen Kline and the Safdies could depict these characters in this much detail and palpable veracity. I imagine this world it will be intimate for those who know it and impossibly exotic for those who don't. I grew up in California, whose residents mostly seem milk-fed and focus-grouped by comparison, and the first time I encountered the particular types produced in Northern New Jersey and Long Island when I was in my twenties I thought I was in a Dali painting.

Robert, who seems determined to upset his conventional parents (who are well-meaning but intense in a way that you get at least an inkling why Robert finds them intolerable — played brilliantly by veterans Maria Dizzia and Ron Rifkin) chooses to seek his imagined life of grit and artistic danger in the exotic, far off land of Trenton, New Jersey. Which is always intoned with a mixture of awe and fear by Robert's comic book store cohorts. "Trenton?? Trenton."

Robert rents a cheap room in a sweaty basement next to a clanking water heater, populated by a handful of other oddballs, with shades of the six-and-a-half-floor from *Being John Malkovich*. *Funny Pages* is constantly riding the line between the banal and the absurd, always with a seasoned eye for the grotesque.

He soon meets Wallace, played by Michael Maher, one of Hollywood's great weird guys who deserves legitimate Oscar consideration here. Robert is fascinated by Wallace, because Wallace used to work for Image Comics. He's also a tortured personality, broken by the industry and mostly prickly towards everyone. Eventually, Robert comes to be torn between Wallace, a cruel, broken genius he partly idolizes but who treats Robert like dirt, and his high school best friend Miles, a pimply outcast with a Prince Valiant haircut (played by Miles Emanuel, who Owen Kline met when Emanuel showed up to a video store where Kline worked, to rent Ingmar Bergman's *Hour Of The Wolf* with his babysitter when Emanuel was 11). Robert mostly treats Miles with the same dismissive contempt with which Wallace treats Robert.

It all comes to a head eventually, if not to a conclusion. And that's okay, because *Funny Pages* is less an epic story than a lovingly crafted, exquisitely detailed portrait of a particular place and people, full of scenes that are largely ludicrous and impossible to forget. It's an 87-minute lark, the kind of movie you want to frame and hang on the wall, the ultimate conversation piece.

Please join us for our thought provoking post screening discussions!



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—Serena Seghedoni, *Loud and Clear*

Monday, November 7 at 7:30 pm

"Miraculously radiant. A cinematic rhapsody
told in whispers of truth."

—Carlos Aguilar, *The Wrap*

Monday, November 21 at 7:30 pm

A title card for the film 'A Love Song' with the text 'A LOVE SONG' in a large, serif font, set against a light background with a subtle shadow effect.

A title card for the film 'Funny Pages' with the text 'FUNNY PAGES' in a large, bold, blocky font, set against a light background with a subtle shadow effect.

"A deliciously dark coming-of-age comedy."

—Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*

Monday, December 5 at 7:30 pm