



Michael Giltz, Contributor [BookFilter](#) creator

New York Film Festival #2: "The Florida Project" and "BPM" Among The Year's Best

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THE FLORIDA PROJECT *** 1/2 out of ****

BPM (BEATS PER MINUTE) *** 1/2 out of ****

The New York Film Festival takes place September 28 through October 15. It's the 55th anniversary of one of the sanest, simplest celebrations of film in the world. NYFF cherry picks the most notable films that have debuted at Cannes and Telluride and elsewhere around the world. They also host world premieres and some big fall hopefuls. It doesn't have the sprawl of Toronto or the manic frenzy of Cannes. It just has a lot of the best, buzziest films that have played the festival circuit all in one place. Here are my thoughts on two more films I caught at press screenings. Spoiler alert: they're two of the best films of the year.

NYFF #1: *The Rider*, *Arthur Miller: Writer*, *The Other Side Of Hope* and *Thelma*

THE FLORIDA PROJECT *** 1/2 out of ****

Director Sean Baker didn't exactly come out of nowhere — he had a few well regarded indie films under his belt along with the offbeat TV show *Greg The Bunny*, for example. But I was blindsided by *Tangerine*, a film shot with non-pros...on an iPhone. Had he caught lightning in a bottle? Was it a glorious fluke? No, it was not as *The Florida Project* triumphantly makes clear. Baker must have some French blood in his ancestry because this film would fit in quite nicely with the New Wave. Again it's peopled mostly with non-actors. This time Baker even focuses on little kids, especially six year old star Brooklynn Kimberly Prince. (And I do mean star; she's got the name and the chops.) Like the French, Baker can take the concerns of kids seriously. His film is deftly assembled from a savvy script, delightful improvisation and a flourish at the finale that I personally didn't quite buy but which was surely earned.

The setting is a strip of low rent hotels on the outskirts of Orlando. They're filled with regulars and the occasional tourist confused by the hotels' names into thinking they're actually booking at the Magic Kingdom. (The main hotel is called Magic Castle and the one next door is dubbed Futureland Inn. Close, but no cigar if you're on your honeymoon and find yourself rooming next to hookers, druggies and a rat pack of kids who

have the run of the place.)

The little moppet Prince plays is Moonee, the ringleader of kids including best pal Scooty (Christopher Rivera) and new best pal Jancey (Valeria Cotto). They run around, begging for change from strangers so they can get ice cream, spitting on cars for fun, peeking and giggling at the old whore sunning herself topless (Times Square fixture Sandy Kane) and mostly driving hotel manager Willem Dafoe nuts. All three kids are delightful, whether trying out curse words, sharing an ice cream cone, scurrying away when they accidentally turn off the power at the entire hotel (they didn't mean to!) and otherwise doing what kids do when you're dirt poor, living in the boonies and trying to fill your day.

The film is visually arresting and alive to their tackily alluring world. (Cinematographer Alexis Zabe is one of the best around, with beautifully shot films like *Duck Season*, *Lake Tahoe* and *Silent Light* to his credit). The editing must have been Olympian since so many scenes are clearly bits of gold discovered amidst lots and lots of improv (kudos here to Baker himself). And just when you start to get a teensy bit worried the movie will run out of steam, *The Florida Project* allows us to understand a little better what their lives are truly like.

The kids are front and center but the adults aren't forgotten. Moonee's mom is train wreck Hallee (Bria Vinaite), a foul-mouthed lost soul who has a lot of personality and very little cash, hustling discount perfume in parking lots or cadging meals from her best friend Ashley (Scooty's mom, played nicely by Mela Murder). Hallee is a pistol — you can see where Moonee gets her terrific personality and how life is going to twist that “attitude” into a negative pretty damn soon.

When was the last time Willem Dafoe played a regular guy? His character Bobby is a vital anchor to the film and while the manager of the hotel he plays isn't a stereotypical “nice guy,” he really *is* a nice guy, just not an obvious or boring one. Dealing with one mini crisis after another, handling the personalities of everyone from actual customers to his boss to furious johns ripped off by their hookers and mostly the kids and tenants who plague his every waking minute, Dafoe is a treat. Like the scenes where Hallee's life inevitably starts to unravel, the brief moments between Dafoe and his son (played by Caleb Landry Jones) are little bursts of heartbreak, letting us glimpse the life that informs this quietly lonely man.

As with Halle and Moonee, we can see how bright Bobby is, how smartly he operates minute to minute with insight and empathy, instinctively knowing the best way to handle the very difficult personalities he must juggle. Just like them, we can't help but think, gee, if this guy only had a chance, he could clearly do a great job at a much nicer hotel. Given a better start, Hallee would be a spitfire at the local country club, not a loser turning to prostitution or petty thievery to stay above water. And Moonee's life wouldn't be over before it even began. The Magic Kingdom is literally just a mile or two away but it might as well be on the moon for these lost souls.

A film like this usually has two options. Either our hapless protagonists will get a glimpse of a modestly better life but end up right back where they started or they'll spiral down even farther. This is a spiraling down sort of movie, though the slip into despair is handled in such a nicely discursive manner, we only become dimly

aware of it along with Moonee. It's all the more effective for how matter of fact the tragedy becomes. Actually, "tragedy" is the wrong word because a tragedy requires characters who have somewhere to fall from, be they a king or even just a salesman on the road with a family to feed. The people in *The Florida Project* can't be doomed because they never really had a chance to begin with.

BPM (BEATS PER MINUTE) *** 1/2 out of ****

Here's how movies usually tackle a Big Social Issue. Whether it's a radiation leak at the local nuclear power plant, a medical topic like AIDS, a contaminated water supply or whatever, we usually begin with the ordinary life of a regular person, like Norma Rae for example. Something happens and they have to face a crisis. They start to tackle the problem and bureaucracy or indifference or prejudice block them everywhere they turn. Slowly, they become "radicalized," the personal becomes political and they fight, not just for themselves but for *justice* and for everyone else who will have to some day deal with whatever it is they are dealing with, be it local businesses that don't provide ramps for wheelchairs or the right to marry the person you love, whatever the color of their skin or their gender. That's the formula.

BPM turns that approach right on its head. This film charts the work of ACT UP Paris and it doesn't have time for a slow build, as friends start to cough and get a mysterious illness and the awareness that a plague is among us drives people to action. No, this film begins with the political and slowly becomes personal. We're plunged right into meetings of the disruptive and deeply effective activist organization that revolutionized patient care around the world. (Doctors actually started to listen to patients and now Big Pharma and major

medical researchers include patient advocates as a matter of course when planning and overseeing medical studies, drug testing and the like.)

We get the perhaps tedious (to them) but fascinating (to us) inner workings of a group built from the ground up with a radical respect for everyone's opinion. (Agree with what someone is saying at a meeting? Snap your fingers!) We enjoy the rush of staged events that are dangerous, tumultuous and let's face it, fun. And slowly, inevitably the political becomes personal as we zero in on the worsening medical condition and eventual death of one of the group's main players, the vibrant and prickly and delightfully queer Sean (Nahuel Perez Biscayart).

Co-written, co-edited and directed by Robin Campillo, *BPM* is gripping, smart and quietly impressive. Campillo co-wrote the screenplays for four very good to great films of the 2000s, all directed by Laurent Cantet — *Time Out*, *Human Resources*, *Heading South* and *The Class*. Now with his second directorial effort, Campillo proves he was paying attention.

How do you tackle AIDS in Paris in the 1990s? One can imagine a hundred, a thousand different ways into this story, even after you decide to focus in on ACT UP. The people who come together to fight society's dismissive lack of concern for their imminent death are quite captivating. (Many were HIV positive and assumed that their days were numbered.) Half way through the film and you are still intrigued by the story behind this or that person at a meeting, a curiosity the film never quite satisfies. (Too many people, too little time.) Only slowly do we realize *BPM* is zeroing in on the budding romance between Sean and newcomer Nathan (Arnaud Valois).

Often, gay films have the inevitable moment where characters share their coming out story. Here, that is sadly supplanted by the "how did you get infected?" story, though Nathan has the twist of *not* being infected due to dumb luck. So many other details feels just right. Again and again, the dance floor where these activists and friends let off steam is perfectly incorporated into their lives. From the frenzy of protest to the release of the dance floor, this is their life. The way even the lighting of a political action slowly segues into the darker hues of a bar and the raised fists in anger become the raised hands in ecstasy over a favorite song is lovingly done.

The film also never shies away from sex and passion and love, how a meeting might indeed spark a romance (what could be more natural?) and how that romance is not going to include longing looks and a peck on the cheek a la *Philadelphia* but — you know — actual *sex*. People fight and bicker and when they need to come together *BPM* doesn't waste a moment on apologies or explanations. They don't have the time to spare. When Sean is getting sicker and sicker, he says to his new boyfriend Nathan, "I'm sorry you had to be the one," and our realization of the painful truth of that, how death has been hovering over Sean and he's known it in his bones is almost too painful to bear.

So much is packed into the film but Campillo makes it look easy. When they stage an action at a local school, the varied responses of students and teachers capture the fear and hatred and hunger for information all around them. One teacher is outraged and scandalized by the intrusion. Another responds in a fashion one

can only describe as so French: but of course these activists can burst into her classroom, hand out pamphlets and condoms and start discussing blow jobs. The teenagers giggle and point at the explicit illustrations on flyers as teenagers will. But when the bell rings, they still jump up to leave, with activists offering more bits of vital info as they rush out and the teacher reminding them about homework due the next day as if it's all in a day's work. Outside, one female student rolls her eyes at the ACT UP members and insists she could never catch their queer disease. Meanwhile, another student just watches from a distance, obviously thrilled and frightened to see gay men at his school and suddenly realizing with a wondrous shock that there's a world of possibility out there, a world of people just like him. And all of this lasts maybe four minutes?

BPM is coolly observant and feverishly angry. It's polished and raw. Hopeful and despairing. Happy and sad. It's flawed. And yes, *BPM* is too long and yet it's not nearly long enough. How could it be anything else?

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