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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

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Toronto Film Fest Day 6: Hello, Lapland!

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The Toronto International Film Festival has five more days to go but it feels like things are already winding down. Most of the talent available for interviews are done working by Wednesday, the press screenings dribble down to nothing on Friday and most of the big movies have been seen (by others -- I've shown a gift this year for missing the big films).

The new headquarters for the fest is the Lightbox. It's a five story building (I think) with a number of top-notch cinemas, a second-floor bar/chat area and other nice touches. I hope somewhere in there is an apartment/crash pad reserved for the Reitman family

because director Ivan Reitman and his kin donated \$20 million to the decade-long effort to get this building finished. There's even a Reitman street or square abutting the place, and rightly so. Who knew that when I was going to see *Ghostbusters* three times during its initial run that I was also supporting the arts? Year round, it will be a screening center, with classics like *The Third Man* slated in the weeks to come.

That's all well and good but I'd trade it all for some more electrical outlets. The fest has a very tiny -- VERY tiny -- space set aside for the media, which consists of two small round tables, a few chairs and about six electrical outlets. That for thousands of media attendees. It doesn't help that the local neighborhood isn't quite as funky as last year so there are fewer cafes with wifi. So every available space is taken at the Starbucks next to the hotel and the Chapters bookstore located in the same space as the main venue for press screenings. That bookstore also has virtually NO electrical outlets. I mean it. I went on all three floors peering into every corner and all I found were a few on very centrally located pillars (making them useless for me) and one, just ONE outlet in the Starbucks cafe on the second floor. The cinema also has no useful outlets except one by a pay phone and the wifi from the cafe two floors below doesn't reach up. This makes it very difficult indeed to do any work during the day. But no one else seems

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very worked up about it. Maybe they're all filing on their iPads?

On to the movies, but first...a short.

The Legend of Beaver Dam *** out of ****

It's a pleasure to catch up with this short, which played on the opening night of Midnight Madness. The typically rowdy crowd really wanted to see the main film and even booed in a bored sort of way about having to sit through a short, even though they knew it would be something right up their alley. By the end of the short, they were clapping and cheering. It doesn't reinvent the wheel: this is basically a horror film crossed with *Glee*, with our dweebish little hero picked on by the group leader on a Scout camping trip. All the adult wants to do is scare the kids with a ghost story. Out of nowhere, a maniac attacks, the kid breaks into song and we're off. Wittily done with a solid cast, the real winner here is the script by **Eli Batalion and Jerome Sable** (who also directed). It's silly and scary in just the right balance, topped off by an ending that is surprisingly satisfying. With a calling card like this, these two should have offers to direct a feature film any minute now. Or at least the Halloween episode of *Glee*.

Rabbit Hole ** 1/2 out of ****

I missed the Broadway run of the acclaimed play *Rabbit Hole*, which is a shame. It's always a shame to miss theater but I would also love to compare Nicole Kidman in the feature film with Cynthia Nixon in the play. Both played grieving mothers mourning the accidental death of their four-year-old son. Kidman is married to Aaron Eckhart, who for a change manages to play a decent guy and quite convincingly. The dominating mood is awkwardness. Kidman feels awkward at group therapy, feels awkward around her mother (played by Diane Wiest, who keeps comparing the death of her son -- a 30-year-old heroin addict that od'd to Kidman's little boy running into traffic), feels awkward in the grocery store, around friends, and even in her own home. The heart of the film is Kidman's tentative approach to the high school boy that drove the car that killed her son, a boy who clearly wasn't speeding or drunk -- the child just jumped out into the road and that was it. Miles Teller (the teen) and Kidman are good in their scenes. But surely the whole film and especially those moments should feel wrenching and dangerous and sad, with an almost unbearable tension. The movie is directed nicely by John Cameron Mitchell and the performances all around are solid. But for some reason, it doesn't have that frightening edge to it, where you feel the pain at every moment. I don't quite know why that is, but there you are.

Lapland Odyssey *** out of ****

What a relief. just when I'd given up hope about uncovering some unknown gem, along comes this winning comedy. Set in Finland, where some towns have a 40% unemployment rate, the premise is simple. Our hero is a lovable lunk whose girlfriend is tired of his loser-ish ways. He's been talking for ages about getting a digibox (a cable box that gives access to all sorts of programming) but has done nothing about it. Even when she gives him the money for a 50 Euro box, he can't make it past the bar to the store in time before it closes on a Friday night. Disgusted, she says either he finds a digibox by the next morning at 9 am or she's moving out. Our hero turns to his two friends (a somewhat depressed fellow played by the handsome and compelling Jasper Paakkonen and another one obsessed with a naughty video game) and they head out on the road, three guys with a mission. First, they have to earn

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some money (the 50 Euros is mostly gone) and then they need to find a digibox. Washing cars, trying to serve as a taxi, breaking the ice on an outdoor jacuzzi for an all-female sporting team, crazy Russians with paintball guns: misadventures pile up, as they will. But it's all done with charm and wit and three very likable actors. Writer-director Dome Karukoski delivers it all with polish and flair; as they say in the trade papers, the tech credits are top-notch. The film is very funny at times, but like all the best comedies of this kind, it also has heart and genuine characters, not just nutty situations and over-the-top caricatures. A treat on its own terms, *Lapland Odyssey* also demonstrates Karukoski is a serious talent. If you speak Finnish, this trailer is for you!

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John Carpenter's *The Ward* * 1/2 out of ****

The Ward is such a retro film in concept and style (it's set in 1966, I believe), I sort of went with it longer than I should have. A teenage girl found burning down an abandoned farmhouse is committed to a mental ward where the other inmates are all girls (each one cuter than the next), the nurse is evil and the doctor in charge wants to try some new experimental treatments. None of that matters much when our heroine realizes some sort of ghoulish female haunts the place and wants them all dead. Amber Heard is pretty good as Kristen, though I even heard two guys on the way out complaining about how she ran. She ran like a jogger and no one jogged in 1966, they complained. Indeed, though the film is a period piece, that's easy to forget since the attitudes and manners of the female inmates somehow feel modern, even if technically there's no reason to say that. This is just a spooky, old-fashioned film by director John Carpenter. Its best asset is the cast, including Mamie Gummer, Lyndsy Fonseca, Danielle Panabaker and Jared Harris of *Mad Men* as the doctor. Its ambitions are modest and ultimately unmet, thanks to a howler of an ending that spoils any slight pleasures offered earlier.

Aftershock * 1/2 out of ****

At first I was intrigued. A Chinese film about earthquakes? Would it take on the corruption that resulted in buildings so shoddy that they simply collapsed like pancakes? No, they would not. A resolutely mainstream, rather tepid drama, it politely uses the devastating 1976 earthquake in Tangshan as a backdrop for a family saga. The aftershocks are the emotional damages felt by the survivors: in this case, a mother filled with guilt, a son who lost his arm and a daughter who felt abandoned and unloved and was taken in by a foster family that thought she was an orphan. The situation is wrenching but the presentation is so middle of the road and obvious that very little resonates emotionally. This may be a step forward: China can make dull Oscar bait just as competently as the US. Poor direction but boy, some of the crowd scenes are impressive; you sure can get cheap day players to work your film when your country contains one billion people and counting.

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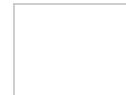
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Never heard of 'Lapland' but I'm interested. Sounds fun.

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