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- Time Out London
- Today's offer
- Tickets & Offers
- Get listed
- NEW iPad app
- Mobile apps
- Time Out Live
- Time Out blog
- Christmas in London

- Film
- London Film Festival
- TV guide
- Restaurants
- Bars & Pubs
- Hotels
- Alternative London
- Around Town
- Museums & Attractions
- Kids
- Music
- Classical & Opera
- Art
- Theatre
- Comedy
- Cabaret
- Dance
- Books & Poetry
- Clubs
- Alternative Nightlife
- Gay & Lesbian
- Sport & Fitness
- Shopping
- London by area
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- Offers
- Competitions
- Dating
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Reykjavík Film Festival

David Jenkins travels to the Reykjavík Film Festival, where he finds a very drunk Aki Kaurismäki and Japanese men rubbing sperm over each other

The Reykjavík International Film Festival, now in its fourth year, has a charming, small-town vibe that can't be faked. In fact, to wander down the city's ghostly shopping street, Laugavegur, during the afternoon, you'd hardly notice that a film festival is taking place.

Scratch away at the surface, though, and all sorts of bizarre truths come to light, from the wonder of Israeli art-porn to the ramblings of drunk filmmakers.

The films are shown in various tucked-away locations – from a neon-lit multiplex called The Rainbow to a grungy single-screen art house called Tjarnarbió – and directors and actors are more than willing to take the time for a chat in a bar instead of being hastily bundled into the back of a limo. There's a sense of community in the bracing air which makes this a welcome addition to the festival trail.

Arriving a day too late to catch the opening film 'Heima' (a documentary on local post-rock doyens, Sigur Rós), I kicked off the festival with an interesting panorama of work-in-progress which suggests that the current Icelandic film scene is in rude health, with subjects ranging from falconry and autism to rural weddings and local elections. The first new work I caught was a low-fi Israeli effort called 'Japan, Japan' (reportedly made for \$200) from young, Berlin-based director, Lior Shamriz. The opening shot of an erect penis confirmed the rumour that things were going to get explicit but didn't prepare this viewer for a scene involving a large group of Asian men lathering themselves in each other's ejaculate.

However, what at first feels like juvenile punk nihilism soon blossoms into a fresh and tender study of teenage world-weariness, cleverly exploiting its own limitations by featuring songs, images and corporate logos which could never be secured legally. There's scant chance it will ever be released, but here's hoping it has a rich and full following online.

The cheekiness continued as the elder statesman of Icelandic cinema, Fridrik Thor Fridriksson drunkenly regaled me with an anecdote about how he was recently banned from Swedish television. After returning from a fishing trip, he was asked by Swedish reporters to comment on the death of Ingmar Bergman. His reply, 'I'm sorry. I don't watch B-movies.'

Other films of note included Kaori Momoi's 'Faces of a Fig Tree', a day-glo tale of family break-up in Japan that should satisfy fans of Wes Anderson, and Arne Johnson and Shane King's 'Girls Rock', a bubbly documentary on a rock retreat for girls aged eight to 18 in Portland, Oregon with a great riot grrrrl soundtrack.

A brisk stroll to a slightly-out-of-town arts centre called Nordic House led to a retrospective of the great Rainer Werner Fassbinder, where I managed to catch his glorious noir deconstruction from 1970, 'The American Soldier' as well as his later literary adaptation, 'Effi Briest' (1974).

Shown on grubby 16mm prints and submerged in the purr of a single-reel projector propped up at the back of the room (not to mention five-minute breaks between reel changes), it was a suitably unrefined way to experience his work.

Nordic House also hosted a gloriously ramshackle press conference held by Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki who had flown over to receive an award for artistic achievement. Unwilling to give straight answers, he mused on all manner of bizarre subjects, including: his fascination with plastic cigarette-holders, the fact that he only uses music in his films because he isn't very good at dialogue, his abhorrence of the Dogme 95 movement, that cinema died in 1962 (he was unprepared to explain why) and that his inspiration nowadays comes exclusively from wondering why his dog wags its tail.

His guess is as good as mine.



Israeli film, 'Japan, Japan' caused jaws to drop in Reykjavik

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