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New Directors/New Films Brings the New Class
 Old New York, the ghosts of Raleigh, and queer debuts mark an exceptional ND/NF
 by Nathan Lee
 March 25th, 2008 12:00 AM

Once again, New Directors/New Films, "the premiere festival for works that break or recast the cinematic mold," if they do say so themselves, "handpicked" by a team of curators from the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art. There is, as ever, much old hat, plenty of promise, and one or two outright sensations, though in the case of this unusually strong 37th edition, that number climbs up to three or four. My pick of the pick favors a pair of defiantly queer debuts positing genuine new directions/new cinemas.



Family bed! The Jacobs clan (with surrogate son) in *Momma's Man*
 Artists Public Domain

Vive *La France* by Serge Bozon, a heady experiment full of soul that more than delivers on the allegorical chutzpah of its title. On receiving a troubling letter from her husband, a soldier in the First World War, Camille (Sylvie Testud) sets off to find him incognito, chopping her coif and wrapping her boobs to pass as a lad of 17. Deep in a forest landscape rendered with limpid concentration by cinematographer Céline Bozon, she falls in with a clutch of soldiers mobilized to the front. Or so it seems: Strange things are afoot in *La France*—like the spontaneous performance of twee, jangling ballads, rendered on scrap-yard acoustic instruments and sung, from an unabashed female perspective, by the harmonizing grunts. Weirder than the arrival of these inexplicable neo-retro-folk jams is how seamlessly they fit into Bozon's melancholic war fable. Which is to say *La France* invents a curious and confident hybrid mode to accommodate, even reconcile, disparate modes and strategies: war film and musical, elegiac and avant-garde, cerebral and poignant, rigorous and flexible. *This* is something new—and, as yet lacking a distributor, not to be missed.

A messier experiment from Israel, Lior Shamriz's *Japan Japan*, opens in close-up with a jizz-filled condom pulled off a hefty chub. But that wasn't what sent attendees at the press screening headed for the exit—nor even, a bit later on, the streaming video of an XXX all-male bukkake that left a sticky young man looking like he'd just survived the detonation of a mayonnaise factory. Pervy 'mos are par for the course at ND/NF (cf. the revival of Gregg Araki's queercore juvenilia, *The Living End* and *Totally Fucked Up*, in this year's "Classics" sidebar). No, the "problem" with this semi-improvised, post-everything riff on apathetic Tel Aviv hipsterdom is precisely its chief value: a defiant disregard for narrative nicety and tonal consistency. Centered on the iLife ennui of an unfocused, under-employed Israeli (Imri Kahn) who spends his days dreaming of travel, downloading porn, and staring out the window when he isn't gazing at his (or someone else's) navel, *Japan Japan* doesn't tell a

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story so much as essay a condition. OK, so it's somewhat sloppy, jagged around the edges, and, clocking in at barely an hour, not the most disciplined of movies, but the thing's got real vision and vitality.

An altogether more nuanced take on nameless impasse, *Momma's Man* finds Azazel Jacobs, son of legendary avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs, contemplating a filial funk. Set almost entirely in the senior Jacobs's ramshackle Tribeca loft—sine qua non of old-school Manhattan bohemia—the movie hangs out with Azazel surrogate Mickey (Matt Boren) as he delays and delays and delays a flight home to California to rejoin his anxious wife and young daughter. Under the watchful gaze of Mom and Dad (a delightful double tour de force from Ken and Flo Jacobs), Mikey gets his mumblecore on, doodling on a guitar, futzin' with plastic robots, prevaricating, procrastinating, stumbling around in his underwear, unable or unwilling to escape from the indefinable gravity pinning him in place. Delineating this nebulous scenario with superb precision and delicacy, Jacobs turns this micro-observant portrait of his family into a yearning meditation on the burden, and beauty, and bittersweet fade-to-black of the fabled New York underground, holed up in a downtown Xanadu and all but vanished from the land. Or at least banished to Brooklyn.

Long-time New York film critic Godfrey Cheshire contemplates a different, even deeper set of roots in *Moving Midway*. Motivated by his family's decision to relocate its Raleigh plantation away from an onslaught of ugly development, the Yankee son returns to North Carolina to contemplate the legacy—personal, political, and cultural—of this beloved and reviled institution. Tales are told of Civil War exploits, ghosts in the attic, and the benevolent treatment, per the Cheshire elders, of their former slaves at Midway. Cheshire confronts his family's complicity in the most damnable of American legacies with a clear eye and open mind, alert to both the tragedy of African-American degradation and its complex effect on the Southern psyche. He's aided, in a remarkable coup of fate or luck, by an unexpected connection, forged through a letter sent to *The New York Times Book Review*, with one Dr. Robert Hinton, professor of history at NYU and, as it happens, descendant of a Midway slave. Adding his voice to an abundance of rhetorical riches—the Cheshire clan's got that ole Southern charm and craze down pat—Professor Hinton brings invaluable perspective on a house divided and redefined. Tenderhearted, tough-minded, witty, and wise, *Midway* is moving indeed.

Minor pleasures in lesser efforts: The first 30 minutes of *Sleep Dealer*, a try for third-world cyberpunk from director Alex Rivera that translates the situation of Mexican immigrants—rather too bluntly—into speculative sci-fi. The social commitment and circumspect poetry of *Munyurangabo*, a resourceful tale of Rwandan childhood that bespeaks the brightest of futures for filmmaker Lee Isaac Chung. Breakbeats by the beat-down in *Slingshot Hip Hop*, a rousing doc on Palestinian rap from Jackie Reem Salloun. Definitive proof, courtesy of Korean fright flick *Epitaph*, that creepy Asian ghost-girls with long black hair are a Clinton-era horror trope that, like the Clintons themselves, have long outstayed their welcome. The return of Charles Burnett's marvelous 1990 feature, *To Sleep With Anger*, courtesy of ND/NF Classics. And just about everything in *Water Lilies*, an acutely sensitive immersion in the dream life of an introverted angel crushing out on—and getting her heart crushed by—the aloof and pretty star of a synchronized swimming team.

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The Cool School
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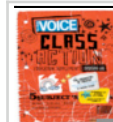
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