

EAST BAY EXPRESS

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What's New, Pusinky?

Women in prison, zombies, teenage hanky-panky, and Taiwanese accordion players. Frameline32 has it all.

By *Kelly Vance*

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Otto the gay zombie is looking for love in all the wrong places. Freshly risen from his grave beneath a stand of trees in the countryside near Berlin, he's a bit of a mess — dirt-stained clothes, bruised face, hollowed-out eyes, and he stinks. He shuffles along wearily in his black hoodie, occasionally pausing to inspect some roadkill. "It's not easy being undead," Otto opines as he chomps an oversize bunny carcass. When he finally finds a guy he likes, such as porno star/guerrilla leader Fritz Fritze (the Che Guevara of the Undead), our boy gives new meaning to the phrase "face chewing."

Otto, played to the hilt by actor Jey Crisfar, is not exactly a character we've never seen before. The self-indulgent middle third of filmmaker Bruce LaBruce's screwy fantasy *Otto; or Up With Dead People* looks like any student zombie movie — do you have any idea how many student zombie movies are made every year? — and Otto's robotic trip through Berlin's underground is an easy way to satirize artsy pretentiousness while still throwing in a little crowd-pleasing visceral (literally) sex. But veteran Canadian "homo-punk" shockmeister LaBruce (*The Raspberry Reich*, *Super 8½*, music vids) is willing to play the game hard, and *Otto* will no doubt thrill the late-night audience at the Castro on June 27 (11 p.m.), well into the run of Frameline32.

The latest edition of Frameline's annual summer follies, aka the LGBT film festival, more than ever seems ready to look anywhere — a Victorian English lesbian gothic, harmless suburban gay-parent sitcoms, the stressful lives of gay Muslim men in the Middle East, a Filipino lady boy's speckled career, or even Otto the zombie's dead eyes — to discover the golden mean of the LGBT experience on film and video. This year perhaps more than most, because 2008 is the farewell year for Frameline artistic director Michael Lumpkin after 28 years with the organization. Old blood, new blood, it's all the same to Otto. But if Frameline has ever mounted a "typical" festival, this one is it, and rightly so. Building an annual film festival on such a disparate pile of points of view can never have been easy, but at his best Lumpkin made it look that way. He'll be missed.

For his swan song, Lumpkin presents a personally chosen retrospective, a sort of greatest hits series of seven films he debuted in SF over the years, including Gus Van Sant's 1985 teens-on-the-street breakthrough, *Mala Noche*; Pedro Almodóvar's early hit *Law of Desire*, starring Antonio Banderas; the kinky big-studio lesbian sex flick *Bound*, made by the pre-*Matrix* Wachowski Bros.; Canadian director John Greyson's all-male play-within-a-play art film *Lilies*; *Big Eden*, director Thomas Bezucha's thoughtful narrative portrait of gay men in small-town America; the wacky Dutch musical *Yes Nurse! No Nurse!*; and possibly most outrageous of all, *Karmen Geï*, filmmaker Joseph Gaï Ramaka's reshaping of the archetypal *Carmen* scenario to Senegal in West Africa, where the title character, a lusty escapee from a women's prison (buxotic Djeïnaba Diop Gaï), dominates everything — a gang of criminals, her sex objects, the warden, and the film. All seven titles are at the Castro, beginning June 20.

German gay zombies notwithstanding, the remainder of the fest is not all *quatsch*. The stylishly cut and pasted gay male character study *Japan Japan* turns out to be one of the most striking films of the entire festival season. In it, a daydreaming Israeli army dropout named Imri feels out of place in bustling Tel Aviv, so he fantasizes about going to Japan — imagined as a rapid-fire mosaic of porno images cut to a Mideastern beat. It's clear Imri is suffering from "yellow fever." Is he a useless dreamer or a fish out of water? Both. The best thing about writer-director Lior Shamriz' brilliantly antsy rendition of the flat-world blues is his fantastic music track, encompassing Turkish folk tunes, Euro classical vocal,



Just-graduated Czech high school girls take a road trip, experimenting with sex along the way, in *Pusinky (Dolls)*.



An Israeli army dropout has a serious Asian fetish in *Japan Japan*.

J-pop, ABBA, Béla Bartók, Benjamin Britten, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Olivier Messiaen, etc. The second best thing is that Shamriz and his circle of friends, who partly improvised the screenplay and essentially played themselves, were able to shoot the film with a mini-DV camera for 200 euros (the post-production took a bit more). Does Imri make it to Japan? Find out June 24 when *Japan Japan* plays the Castro.

On the face of it, *Affinity* resembles a made-for-TV gothic melodrama run through a femme-erotic blender, kind of a lesbian *Dark Shadows*. Or maybe *The Big Bird Cage* reset in gloomy Victorian England. It's certainly ripe with hysterical possibilities. Sexy spookiness develops when a skittish, sexually frustrated young do-gooder named Margaret Prior (Anna Madeley) volunteers to help rehabilitate the inmates of Millbank women's prison in London and falls under the spell of fake spiritualist/genuine hustler Selina Dawes (Zoë Tapper). Selina's fraudulent séances purport to foretell people's deaths, but that's nothing compared to "the forces she is unleashing in me," gasps Margaret. Director Tim Fywell handles the potentially campy material with a straight face and wrings psychological shudders from it, aided by admirable production values and fine character support by Amanda Plummer and Ann Massey, as prune-faced prison matrons. *Affinity*, with a screenplay by Andrew Davies adapted from the novel by Sarah Waters, opens the festival on Thursday, June 19 (7 p.m.) at the Castro.

This year for the first time Frameline is using the Rialto Cinemas Elmwood in Berkeley. The Elmwood hosts eight screenings on four consecutive nights, including two of the fest's most interesting films: Karin Babinská's *Dolls* (June 23) and Zero Chou's *Drifting Flowers* (June 26). A table-full of eighteen-year-old girls is sitting in a restaurant drinking steins of beer, rolling their own cigarettes, and eating liverwurst sandwiches. Welcome to Central Europe. They're also experimenting with sex, so it's understandable when the three Czech high-school graduates' road trip detours into soul-searching and a few rough scrapes en route. *Dolls* is most captivating when it's most brutal. Even the Czech title, *Pusinky*, sounds naughty. Young lesbian identity is also the theme of *Drifting Flowers*, a trilogy of loosely connected vignettes that follows a female accordionist named Diego (aka Chalkie), a lonely eight-year-old girl, and the twilight friendship of two senior citizens. Common denominator: the difficulty of holding on to true love. Taiwanese Chou made the hyperactive *Spider Lilies*, shown at last year's festival. *Drifting Flowers* is subtler, quieter, and sadder, keyed to Diego's lovelorn accordion melodies, of all things. Both films are recommended.

In its eleven days Frameline32 screens some 237 features and shorts from 36 countries. None of them is any more touching than *XXY*, the story of a female-identifying teenage intersex — she's changing from female to male all by herself — named Alex, pushed and pulled by emotional as well as physical stress. Debutante director Lucia Puenzo sets Alex's dilemma in a Uruguayan fishing village where she lives with her sympathetic but equally baffled father. Family friends from Argentina have come to visit for a few days, and her young friend Alvaro unwittingly acts as catalyst. Inés Efron's performance as Alex is remarkable, a bolt of troubled sexual lightning. *XXY*, Frameline32's centerpiece film, shows June 24 at the Castro.

Three more Elmwood films of note: The prep-school literary fantasy *Were the World Mine*, a gay male variation on *The Emperor's Club* or *Dead Poets' Society*, with Wendy Robie (the patch-eyed witch from *Twin Peaks*) as the teacher who inspires closeted schoolboys to come out as faeries for a stage production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Filmmaker Tom Gustafson's energetic homoerotic Shakes-bake contains the ultimate jocko-homo fantasy: the entire rugby team goes queer. It screens June 24. Director Yen Tan's *Ciao* (June 25), on the other hand, is slow as malaria. An Italian man visits Dallas to meet his online pen pal, only to find that the pal recently died, and it's up to the dead pal's living local pal to show the Italian around. All this in hushed, sensitive tones, with no spoken dialogue in the first eight minutes. Then there's James Vasquez's sitcom-ish *Ready? OK!* (June 26), a TV-ready pot of stereotypes about a career-minded single mom, her cheerleading middle-school son, her lazy grown brother, a sinister nun at school, and so forth. Choose *Were the World Mine*.

Worth a look, but no guarantees: *The World Unseen*, director Shamim Sarif's sumptuous lipstick-lesbian romance set in 1950s South Africa, a time and place when "coloureds" were just as restricted as gay women. Cafe proprietor Amina (Sheetal Seth) wears pants — shocking! — and puts the moves on fellow Indian female Miriam (Lisa Ray), despite the best efforts of a racist, sexist cop and Miriam's abusive husband. It plays June 20 and 24 at the Castro.

The warmth of writer-director Stewart Wade's Southern California high-school romantic comedy *Tru Loved* is palpable and appealing, even though everyone is too good-looking to be real. New girl in school Tru (Najarra Townsend) seems to be dating Lodell (Matthew Thompson), but she's only a beard for the closeted gay African-American jock — he's really in love with the school's designated fag. Tru has two gay moms and two gay dads, race is pretty much a non-issue, and even a gay-baiting jock turns out to be

sweet, deep down inside. Sounds like Frameline32's idea of paradise on earth. For complete festival info plus schedule updates, check Frameline.org.