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SCREENING ROOM

Moving journeys

Three upcoming festivals put the focus on Polish, alternative and Asian cinema.

By Robert Abele , Special to The Times
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The eighth edition of the Polish Film Festival in Los Angeles has a lineup that seems focused on bleak and bruising yet illuminative character studies. Writer-director Dorota Kedzierzawska's **"I Am"** is a cleareyed portrait — albeit through grime-colored glasses — of a homeless orphanage escapee referred to as Mongrel (Piotr Jagielski) who is hardly a Dickensian waif: He forages, broods, plays imaginatively, solves problems, develops an internal morality and even nourishes a need for companionship by starting a tender friendship with a tomboyish rich girl. Adults seem little more than flaky or cruel obstacles in Kedzierzawska's unsentimental drama on the miracles of childhood resilience.

Slawomir Fabicki's brutal **"Retrieval,"** meanwhile, takes a 19-year-old boxer's idealistic notions of responsibility and effectively dispatches him with a few swift jabs. Surrounded by the threat of poverty in his dying working-class town, young Wojtek (Antoni Pawlicki) signs up as a gangster's debt enforcer to help provide for his immigrant single-mother girlfriend. Wojtek's staking his future on a violent compromise is the kind of bet with long odds, and although the film is at times too enamored with crime tropes, "Retrieval" has an undeniably palm-sweaty momentum regarding jaws closing on trapped lives.

Pan-Asian cinema

Next Thursday sees the kickoff of the VC Filmfest, spotlighting pan-Asian movies in all their cinema-happy vigor.

The offerings include a Japanese attempt at "Full Monty" underdog drama; **"Hula Girls,"** in which Hawaiian dance rejuvenates a mining town; the Vietnamese martial arts film **"The Rebel,"** which paints the 1920s battle between the colonial resistance and government turncoats in spin kicks and knife play; and a wicked slice of high-art peekaboo in **"Viva,"** L.A.-based half-Japanese filmmaker Anna Biller's feminist take on '70s sexploitation.

One of the festival's more wildly entertaining and pointed films is the South Korean box-office smash **"King and the Clown,"** director Lee Jun-ik's 16th century costume drama that pits two nomadic street satirists — one a shaggy-haired grouch, the other a delicate female impersonator — against the tyrannical king they bawdily, and dangerously, mock. Before the plot gets too sexually tortuous and densely tragic, it's an exhilaratingly trenchant story about proximity to power and the lot of society's truth-tellers, not to mention the fraught implications when a mentally unhinged ruler utters the phrase, "Let's play."

In a different vein, there's **"The Cats of Mirikitani,"** Linda Hattendorf's documentary chronicling her careful nudging of eccentric, bitingly funny 80-year-old New York street artist Jimmy Mirikitani — who sells his cat drawings to passersby — to re-engage with a world he's skeptical of. It's not a simple journey: Mirikitani also draws renderings of the internment camp he was forced into during World War II, and Hattendorf takes pains to show not just the nurturing power of art, but also the emotional scars of a man's youthful dreams cut short.

Silver Lake festival

The 2007 Silver Lake Film Festival also starts next Thursday, promising another mishmash of provocative, political and artistically expansive films and events, including sections highlighting conspiracy films, new Indian cinema, erotica and live music.

Of the movies in competition, one highlight is the documentary **"Red Without Blue"** from filmmakers Brooke Sebold, Benita Sills and Todd Sills. A winner at this year's Slamdance Film Festival, it sensitively tells the story of Montana-raised twins Mark and Alex Farley, whose emotionally fraught closeness has weathered everything from divorce to child abuse (from outside the family) to drug use to forced separation and eventually one twin's coming out as gay and the other's decision to change gender. Although the Farleys' trials have the makings of a soap opera envisioned by David Cronenberg, there's a quietly emotional hush to "Red Without Blue" that keeps tabloid prurience at bay and finds mystery and painful beauty in the unshakeable bonds of family.

Among the narrative features up for the festival's awards are the Australian sex-dance-death quirk ball **"The Book of Revelation,"** about the psychological aftermath of a male dancer's kidnapping, chaining and rape by three hooded women. Uneven in the extreme,

it's the kind of overcooked entrée one imagines Paul Verhoeven, Zalman King or Jane Campion watching and thinking, "How would I fix this?"

And then there's the two-dimensional puppets-and-dioramas feature "**Dante's Inferno**," a scabrously comic updating of the venerated journey through hell — voiced by Dermot Mulroney (as a snarky, city-dwelling modern Dante) and James Cromwell (as Virgil) — that names names (politicians, celebrities and corporations), damns the apparatus of our modern world and ultimately feels like the unholy offspring of Mike Judge and R. Crumb.

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Screenings

Polish Film Festival

"I Am": 7 p.m. Monday

"Retrieval": 9 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Laemmle's Sunset 5, 8000 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood

Info: www.polishfilmla.org

VC Filmfest 2007

"The Cats of Mirikitani": 4 p.m. May 5 (DGA)

"King and the Clown": 9:30 p.m. May 5 (DGA)

"Viva": 9 p.m. May 6 (DGA)

"Hula Girls": 7 p.m. May 9 (Sunset 5)

Where: Directors Guild of America, 7920 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood; Laemmle's Sunset 5, 8000 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood

Info: (213) 680-4462, Ext. 68; www.vconline.org

Silver Lake Film Festival

"Dante's Inferno": 7:15 p.m. May 5, 7 p.m. May 7 (Los Feliz)

"Red Without Blue": 3:45 p.m. May 6 (Los Feliz), 8:15 p.m. May 9 (LAGLC)

"The Book of Revelation": 6 p.m. May 6, 9:45 p.m. May 7 (Los Feliz)

Where: Los Feliz 3, 1822 N. Vermont Ave.; Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center, 1125 N. McCadden Place

Info: (323) 953-8340, www.silverlakefilmfestival.org

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