

# Northwoods Film Festival 2022

The return of independent cinema

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OF THE LAKELAND TIMES



JAKE SCHEXNAYDRE/LAKELAND TIMES

The Northwoods Film Festival returned to the Minocqua area once again with a great selection of independent films and a slightly bigger turnout of audience members than last year. For this year, festival organizer Bess Donoghue has returned with a new selection of documentary films and comedy/drama features. For this year, the films selected for the lineup are "Writing with Fire," "Small Town Wisconsin," "Citizen Ashe," and "Hannah Ha Ha."

**"Writing with Fire"**  
Directed by Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas, "Writing with Fire" is a documentary produced by Black Ticket Films and it premiered at Sundance in January of 2021. The story follows a woman named Meera, a journalist a part of a female-led newspaper company called the *Khabar Lahariya*, as they make the transition from print to digital journalism. In the midst of this, they begin to cover various issues as gender discrimination and political corruption. They also must handle being female reporters amid India's infamous caste system, since many of these reporters are designated as Dalit ("untouchables" in the caste).

One thing I like about this documentary is how it shows how the reporters grow as people. For example, they are shown learning new skills with their transition to digital journalism, such as video editing. In addition, they are shown having to have a few fun moments with each other to provide some levity. This all provides the opportunity for the audience to properly get to know the team in different ways.

In addition to the footage from the interviews, wide shots are regularly implemented to capture India's land-

scapes. There is also excellent use of natural lighting for conveying the mood of a scene, complimenting the shot composition. Since the reporters record the footage for their reports, the footage will switch from the footage for the documentary to the *Lahariya's* reports. It may seem a little jarring to some, but it is nothing too worrisome.

Overall, "Writing with Fire" is a compelling documentary with a gripping story about women overcoming significant odds to tell the news stories that need to be told. With its gripping story and visual style, it's no wonder why it managed to earn an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature. If this is something that you can gravitate towards, then give it a watch.

**"Small Town Wisconsin"**

This film is a comedy/drama directed by Niels Mueller and written by Jason Naczek. It follows a divorced father named Wayne who finds out that he has lost a custody battle over his son, Tyler. Before he moves away with his mother, Wayne decides to take Tyler on one last road trip to Milwaukee under the pretense of going camping at Crescent Lake.

In terms of the characters, Wayne established as a reckless alcoholic who lives in a barely maintained mobile home and has to deal with his wife, Diedre. Despite these conditions, he still loves his son even if his don't always go his

way. Throughout the story, he undergoes a decent amount of character development, taking small steps to improve himself. As a comedy, the film has plenty of funny moments, ranging from simple one-liners to physical comedy and even a few moments of dark humor. Each joke flows naturally, and each one meets the minimum of getting at least a smirk out of me.

This film is uniquely Wisconsin, showing off all sorts of iconography and even name dropping a few towns like Eagle River and Minocqua. The cinematography also shows off the state's various sights from the countryside to the city of Milwaukee. This is also evident when considering that the director, Niels Mueller, is a Wisconsin native.

When Bess Donoghue interviewed Mueller, he made it clear that even though Wisconsin has no tax credit for filmmaking as of yet, he knew that he wanted to set the film there. He stated, "I really wanted to be able to come home and capture something authentic about our state."

For this film, he had his actors come to Wisconsin a month in advance not only to rehearse, but also for them to experience the culture of this state. This does pay off well, making it feel like they carry the state's traditions while not portraying any inaccurate stereotypes.

"Small Town Wisconsin" is a film that truly captures the spirit of Wisconsin while still telling its own story. The performances, story, and visuals all unify into a neat experience that embodies the spirit of the whole state. If you're feeling such sprit, then hop along for the ride.

**"Citizen Ashe"**

Directed by Rex Miller, "Citizen Ashe" is a documentary about African American tennis player/humanitarian Arthur Ashe. It is dis-

tributed by HBO Max, and it is produced by CNN Films and Dogwoof. This film documents this star tennis player's life, from his childhood to his death in 1993.

In terms of subject matter, the film not only focuses on his tennis career, but it also focuses on the impact of his contributions for equal rights for African Americans. Particularly, it shows how he goes from being silent due to his father's undying respect for authority and actively encouraging discipline to being vocal for this cause. Among other things, it also delves into his AIDS diagnosis, his rivalry with Jimmy Connors.

Aesthetically, the film makes use of archival footage and photos, as well as interviews from his peers. While nothing too fancy on its own, the editing does help these elements flow together well enough. The only thing I would suggest in this case is restoring some of the footage a little further in terms of color grading and color correction to make it more visually appealing.

"Citizen Ashe" documents Arthur's life in various aspects to the best of its ability. Whether or not you're a fan of tennis, this appeal to those who want to see the story of a legend in more ways than one.

**"Hannah Ha Ha"**

Directed by Jordan Tetewsky, and Joshua Pikovsky, this film premiered at Slamdance Film Festival in 2022 and has since gained positive reception. The story follows a woman who tries to find a stable job after her farming job goes nowhere and finds a job as a cook at a local fast-food restaurant.

The cinematography in this film does have some well-frame shots in terms of symmetrical framing, and the lighting in some scenes does create a sense of melancholic ambience. However, some of the shots

do have a certain zai-ness to them. I'm not sure if this is an intentional stylistic choice, but some of them could be cut out and replaced with clearer shots. The musical score, while minimal, mainly consists of songs playing from Hannah's guitar.

The performances are well-done, particularly with Hannah Lee Thompson as the titular character. She is able to keep her character grounded, yet she is able to communicate her true feelings to the audience. Avram Tetewsky, playing Han-

nah's father, with Hannah having to think about her future and her father having to think about how to spend his retirement days. They both explore this theme in a way that feels emotionally authentic and resonates with the audience.

"Hannah Ha Ha" is a charming feature that has a strong theme about having healthy relationships and spending your time well, coupled with decent cinematography and good performances. If you're looking for something more realistic in tone



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPH  
Images courtesy of IMDB

nah's father, is also able to portray someone who cares about his daughter to make sure she can take care of herself. The other actors do a great job with their roles, but Hannah and Avram Tetewsky have the strongest performances in the whole film.

Because of the film being grounded in reality with its tone, it is also able to explore themes such as knowing what to do with one's time and having good relationships with your peers in a nuanced way. This is mainly seen with Hannah and

but has enough earnestness, then this film is for you.

This year's festival displayed a great selection of films, with just the right balance of truth and fiction to satisfy anyone. Not only that, but it also serves as a nice way for most moviegoers to get out of the MCU every now and then. This festival surely went off without a hitch, and I hope to see a wider variety of independent films to be screened next year.

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# SUGAR BEAN SISTERS

PHOTOS BY KELLY HOLM/LAKELAND TIMES

Five LUHS alumni and students performed under the direction of Vicki Fleming the Nathan Sanders Southern Gothic comedy "Sugar Bean Sisters," on Sunday, Aug. 7, at the Campanile Center for the Arts in Minocqua.



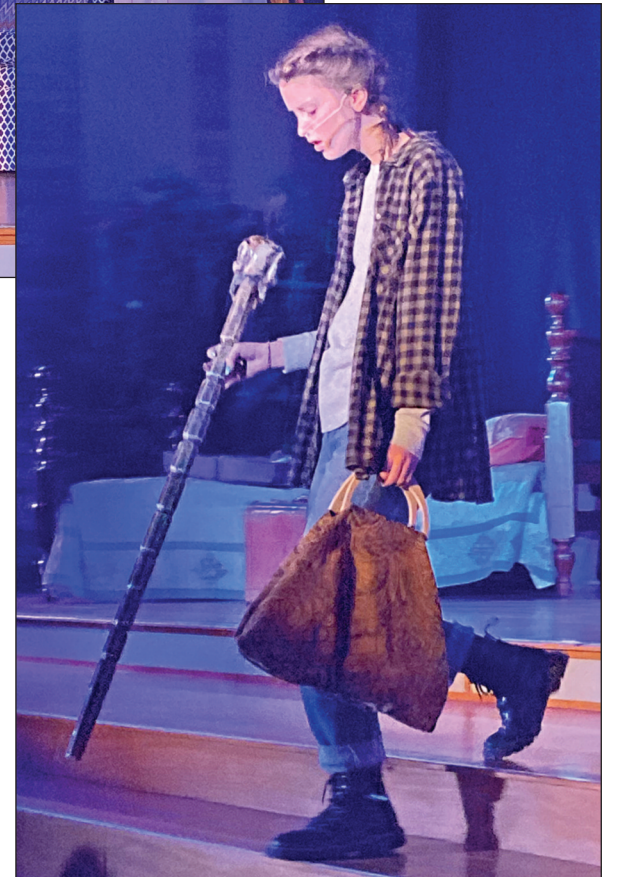
Faye (Grace Dorsey) confronts Videllia Sparks (Sarah Poisson), who has been lying about her true identity.



The Bishop Crumley (Harrison Wheeler) comes to take Willie Mae (Zoey Davis-Jahnke) to her eternal reward.



The Reptile Woman (Ashley Butkus) speaks in rhymes and frequently slams down her staff for emphasis.



Videllia Sparks (Sarah Poisson) and Faye Nettles (Grace Dorsey) prepare a diabolical gift for Willie Mae.



Miss Videllia Sparks (Sarah Poisson) attempts to get flirty with the Bishop Crumley (Harrison Wheeler).



Faye Nettles (Grace Dorsey) urges sister Willie Mae (Zoey Davis-Jahnke) to open her present.

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