

## Queer Film Festival Reviews | Room Magazine



Reviewed by  
Jocelyn Tennant

Welcome to *Room's* coverage of the 2016 Vancouver Queer Film Festival! We will be updating this space regularly as we add new reviews of festival films.

### Fire Song



Director Adam Garnet Jones makes a huge impact with his first feature, about a closeted high school student on a northern Ontario Anishinaabe reserve. The young actors in the film shine in their performances, and the cinematography stunningly captures both the rough edges of the reserve and the beautiful landscape that surrounds it.

*Fire Song* is not an easy film. When the screening finished I could see quite a few in the audience struggling to compose themselves. It does not shy away from its depictions of suicide, sexual assault, and violence, but this often-brutal rendering of life on a reserve is an important addition to Two Spirit cinema.

## **Where Are You Going, Habibi? (Wo Willst Du Hin, Habibi?)**



*Where Are You Going, Habibi?* is a fun and heartwarming exploration of the often thin line that divides platonic and romantic love, and how an unlikely friendship can have an enormous impact on both people involved. Cem Alkan gives a quiet, warm performance as Ibrahim, a young German-born Turkish man who has yet been unable to come out to his parents, and his chemistry with his co-star Martin Walde is palpable.

The secondary plot of this film is important as well—the conflict between the children of immigrants and the differing values of their more traditional parents is one that has become almost universal all over the world. One of the lighter films of this year’s program, I would heartily recommend *Where Are You Going, Habibi?* for a rom-com with some soul.

## **Miles**



The pacing of *Miles* threw me somewhat—it never quite seemed to settle into a conflict long enough for the tension to build, and because of that I was never totally convinced of the stakes. The central obstacle resolves itself between two scenes, which made the ending feel too easy and lacking in emotional resonance. Had there been more sustained conflict, and perhaps a few more emotionally charged scenes for the title character, I think I would have been more engrossed in this story.

It's a fun film, though sometimes feels caught between two demographics in that the plotting and tone seem to suggest a younger audience but some of the subject matter might be deemed inappropriate.

The cast is strong, and the story has heart, but adult audiences might find it a bit harder to engage with this film

## **North Mountain**



*North Mountain* is billed as “*Brokeback Mountain* meets *Rambo*,” which is a description I would have to agree with. While this film lacks some of the qualities that made the others so iconic, it does succeed in fulfilling what you might expect from that particular mash up.

I had some trouble with aspects of *North Mountain*—it’s clear that the film is a freshman effort from director Bretten Hannam, which reveals itself most significantly in the sound editing and in the writing—but ultimately I have to commend it for its commitment to representing the Two-Spirit community. There is no heavy explanation done for the benefit of the audience, no educational moments. These are simply two characters, caught both in love and in a bloody conflict with a New York crime lord.

## **Southwest of Salem**



Fans of Netflix's *Making a Murderer* will enjoy this justice-gone-awry documentary about four Latina lesbians wrongly convicted of the sexual assault of two young girls. The "San Antonio Four" were caught in the crosshairs of institutionalized homophobia and the tail end of the satanic scare, which left them without the chance of a fair trial. The film deftly weaves the voices of the four women together to explain the context of the conviction and the impact it has had on their lives to date.

*Southwest of Salem* is gripping, personal, and a call to action for those concerned about the miscarriage of justice that seem to run rampant in the United States legal system.

**AWOL**



I was unsurprised to discover that *AWOL* is an expanded version of director Deb Shoval's 2010 short film of the same name, as at just eighty-two minutes the film feels exceptionally brief. That isn't to say that *AWOL* is without merit—the performances by both Lola Kirke and Breeda Wool are powerful, and the story itself felt fresh to me in its portrayal of rural American poverty.

I was taken out of the film a few times by some poor sound editing—mostly in instances where a character would be some distance from the camera but still sound as though they were next to it, or a particularly cringe-worthy moment when some re-recorded dialogue didn't quite match an actor's movements. While I generally liked the sparse music choices, I found the music incredibly manipulative during a key sequence in which Kirke's character collects money from various family members.

The last ten minutes or so of the film feel very rushed, and it ends on an ambiguous note. I tend to be supportive of stories that end abruptly but in this case I think the story needed another narrative beat for both the characters and the overall arc.

*AWOL* plays again Wednesday, August 17, 4:30p.m. at International Village.

## **Gayby Baby**



Maya Newell's directorial debut is a heartwarming portrait of four Australian "gaybies" (children of same sex couples) and their families. The kids are hilarious, intelligent, and kind, and while the four households are vastly different there is an abundance of love evident in every frame. Newell's approach is intimate, and she is able to capture the children in private moments of reflection that feel very true.

What I appreciated most about the film was that every child had a narrative that existed outside of their parents' sexuality, while still highlighting their unique challenges as "gaybies" in a country where their very existence is political. Ultimately, they are children with personal dramas like any other child, and it is in underlining this point that the film so heartily succeeds.

## **First Girl I Loved**



*First Girl I Loved* is a coming-of-age drama that is anchored in its method of storytelling and its youthful voice. Karem Sanga's script portrays its teenaged protagonists with authenticity, which helps to ground the sometimes nebulous plotting. In particular, the rhythm of Anne (Dylan Gelula) and Sasha's (Brianna Hildebrand) budding relationship feels refreshingly true to their ages.

The film also utilizes a non-linear structure, which plays an especially important role in the portrayal of Cliff—Anne's male best friend (played by Mateo Arias), whose reaction to her coming out is less than desired. The controlled rate of revelation allows us to build sympathy for Cliff, which deepens the complexity of his role in Anne's story and ultimately the film as a whole.

Without the devices employed, *First Girl I Loved* does falter a bit in its plotting, and Gelula's performance in particular was sometimes overwrought. It felt as though a dramatic beat was missing from the final sequence, and I left the theatre slightly dissatisfied but otherwise entertained by this sensitive portrayal of young love, jealousy, and struggle with identity.

### **Summertime (La Belle Saison)**





*Summertime (La Belle Saison)* is a quiet, light-filled love story that succeeds more in its subtlety than its broad strokes. Set against the backdrop of 1970s France, the film takes us from sleepy Limousin to politically charged Paris and back again. It is in Paris that Delphine and Carole meet, bonding over their work in the burgeoning Women's Lib movement. There is a heat and an easiness in the way Cécile De France and Iz'ia Higelin share the screen, which imbues the film with a sense of authenticity that is difficult to ignore. However, the plot sometimes borders on expected, and a few moments of extreme convenience left me desiring more conflict. In spite of this, though, *Summertime* is worth a little suspension of disbelief for the richly shot pastoral landscapes, engaging performances, and complex love story.

*Summertime plays again Wednesday, August 17, 6:30p.m. at International Village*

More information available on the [Vancouver Queer Film Festival website](#).

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