

JOURNAL DE BOYD

LUXFILMFEST
FESTIVAL EDITION

#3

5/3
2021

ON (PART 2) DOCU-FICTION (PART 2) DOCU-FICTION (PART 2) DOCU-FICTION (PART 2) DOCU-FICTION (PART 2)

The trend of blurring documentary and fictional elements can be seen in quite a few of the films we've programmed this year, including *Nadia, Butterfly* (from Canada) and *The Wolves* (from Mexico).

After yesterday's dive into two American out-of-competition films, *Nomadland* and *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets*, let's take a wider look at docu-fiction trends from the North American continent.

Nadia, Butterfly is a Canadian film from Quebec filmmaker Pascal Plante (his first film, *Fake Tattoos*, is also worth checking out). Himself a former competitive swimmer, Plante follows the titular character during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which she has announced will be her last Olympic Games. The director's background plus the background of his lead actress, Katerine Savare, who was actually an Olympic swimmer just like Nadia, inform the film's sense of down-to-earth authenticity, which is further reinforced by Plante's sober style and the clear decision to stay away from the clichés of Hollywood sports movies. Of course Nadia would like to win a medal but there is no redemption story and while the film spends a fair amount of time in the pool, the actual competitions are mostly observed from the rather unspectacular sidelines.

What *Nadia, Butterfly* is really about is the protagonist's decision to stop her athletic career after the games and how this influences how she feels about the games themselves and how she plays the game. Maybe there's a German word for nostalgia for something that isn't over yet but Nadia is certainly feeling some of that as she tries to not think about the fact that every thing that she's doing is something she is doing for the last time. This knowledge shouldn't affect her performance but of course she's only human.

What makes the film even more unique is its setting, as the pandemic caused the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to be put on hold, so Plante's careful recreation — or rather, pre-creation — of the Games is now a kind of eerie representation of an event that hasn't happened (yet). For all its attention to documentary detail drawn from his own and Savare's experience as well as, one presumes, a lot of research, the film's carefully crafted backdrop was finally upstaged by a pandemic that accidentally turned an as-close-as-possible-to-reality recreation of a planned event into an unforeseen fictional happening that hasn't occurred in 2020 at all. It doesn't happen often, but sometimes, life can transform something made with a

documentary-like attention to detail into the wildest of fictions. As Nadia will learn; expect the unexpected even when you think you know what's coming.

From the opposite side of the continent comes the Mexican independent drama *The Wolves (Los Lobos)* from director Samuel Kishi Leopo, which is part of our fiction competition. Set mainly inside a run-down, near-empty apartment in a suburb of Albuquerque, it looks at two young Mexican boys whose mother has just arrived from Mexico with them and who has to leave them to their own devices every day because she has to go to work. Because they are small — the eldest is just eight years old — and they don't speak any English or know anyone in Albuquerque, Lucia, their mother, instructs them to stay indoors at all times and leaves a tape with them on which she has recorded all the house rules.

The beauty of *The Wolves* is that it takes an issue — Mexican immigrants in the U.S. — and pushes far beyond the headlines or the sometimes sensational tales about how they do (or don't) make it across the border. All that is a *fait accompli* here and the question becomes more quotidian and more penetrating: How, in very practical terms, does a single mother survive with two small boys and the jobs she has to do to keep afloat?

The film's production design is gritty without being cartoonish or clichéd and Leopo's smartest move is that he finds a smart fictional allegory for how the kids are coping with their mother's absences and the fact they can never leave the house and need to do everything on their own every day at least until dinnertime. It is this balance of the magic of fiction and the levelheaded documentary approach to real problems that makes *The Wolves* such a treat. We've seen a combination of fiction and documentary elements in many films this year but here's a film that explicitly suggests that a little dollop of the magic of fiction makes us understand complex realities better than a more straightforward, documentary-like approach would. **BOYD VAN HOEIJ**