

# JOURNAL DE BOYD

LUXFILMFEST  
FESTIVAL EDITION

#8

13/3  
2021

## STRANGE OCCURRENCES ON A SATURDAY NIGHT

Several films playing on Saturday at the festival feature odd happenings that require further investigation, including *Disappearance at Clifton Hill*, *Gagarine* and *The Columnist*. One of the things that people — and this very much includes film festival programmers — most like to see in a film is something original or, at least, something unexpected. Several films playing on Saturday afternoon and evening feature elements that surprise and thus delight us.

*Disappearance at Clifton Hill* is a Canadian mystery directed by Albert Shin (*In Her Place*). It's biggest selling point for cinephiles is without a doubt the appearance of fellow Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg in a supporting role as Walter, a podcast host interested in local history and conspiracy theories who is also a diver and a waiter at an alien-themed restaurant. Even just that description of that one supporting character feels like something unexpectedly odd but immediately fascinating. The casting of Cronenberg in the role also completely makes sense (as did his recent appearance as a dry-witted proctologist in Viggo Mortensen's directorial debut, *Falling*).

*Disappearance at Clifton Hill* is, however, centered on Abby (the excellent Tuppence Middleton), a young woman who tries to make sense of a disturbing childhood memory after the death of her mother. To try and figure out what happened when she was younger, she moves back into her mother's dilapidated motel in Niagara Falls, which her sister wants them to sell. But Abby feels like she needs to get to the bottom of the affair before she can sell off the place where she grew up. So she starts investigating the past, which of course puts her on the path of one Walter, who hosts a podcast dedicated to local history.

Shin, who also co-wrote the screenplay, based the story on some of his own childhood memories and indeed the film has a beautifully lived-in quality, as if the mystery of the place extends far beyond the screen. It's an atmospheric film in which Abby rummages around in local history as well as her own memories to try and find the missing piece of the puzzle that will allow her to move on. Except maybe, sometimes the fact that things aren't always fully organized or understandable or logic can offer its own rewards and fascination.

In *Gagarine*, the feature debut from Fanny Liatard and Jérémy Trouilh, the protagonist Youri (Alseni Bathily) is still young, though he's no less willing to fight

for what he believes in. He lives in the Cité Gagarine, a huge housing project in France's Yvry-sur-Seine that will be demolished. It was opened in the 1960s by the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (Youri Gagarine in French) and became a symbol of communist idealism in France. Clearly, those days are very much over, even if the film is closer to the perspective of the somewhat naïve, star-gazing 16-year-old protagonist so politics are more a question of reading-between-the-lines than something that's openly discussed in minute detail.

Indeed, if anything, *Gagarine* plays out like a kind of adolescent dream in which Youri, like his Soviet namesake, wants to be an example for those around him by doing something that no one thinks will be possible. The plan he has to save the Cité is both surprising and poetic. Is it still possible, in 2021, for young people's dreams and poetry to win the day?

The protagonist of our Cinelunatique film *The Columnist* — a sanitized international title, the original Dutch literally translates as the intentionally violent "The Cunt Whore" — is someone who takes an axe to the idea of poetic justice. In Ivo van Aart's satirical horror comedy, the newspaper columnist Femke (Katja Herbers) is so sick of how all the online trolls keep going after her that she decides to find out who they are and literally go after them in real life and make them shut up for good. Initially, her drastic actions seem to lift her creative spirits and get her past her writer's block but one that then does seem to start to take a toll on her personal life.

*The Columnist*, like *Gagarine* and *Disappearance at Clifton Hill*, nails the tricky tonal balance required for the numerous surprises that it has up its sleeve. It's the kind of film in which things happen that seem shocking or outrageous but at the same time logical because we believe who the characters are and the universe in which they live. Perfect fodder for a Saturday night out. **BOYD**

**VAN HOEIJ**