

## BEST OF THE FESTS: FILMQUEST 2017

By Joseph Perry

FilmQuest founder and director Jonathan Martin puts the emphasis on fun for filmgoers and guests alike. He and his staff have seen their fest named one of *MovieMaker Magazine's* 50 Film Festivals Worth the Entry Fee in 2015 and 2017, and this year's edition, which ran from September 8–16 in Provo, Utah, offered a varied genre slate. Most selections were not the usual suspects making the fest rounds; several still had no online information about them. Nevertheless, these films were of the highest caliber, so kudos to Martin and programmers for taking chances on many obscure premieres.

The English-language French chiller **Hostile** won FilmQuest's Cthulhu Trophies for Best Foreign Film and Best Makeup. Writer/director Mathieu Turi's debut rates among the best creature features we've seen in recent memory, thanks to its dramatic weight, absorbing performances, and sure-handed direction. Brittany Ashworth stars as Juliette, a young woman on a deadly mission in a post-apocalyptic world. When her vehicle overturns and her fellow group members leave her to fend for herself, she must battle a terrifying humanoid monster—essayed by renowned creature actor Javier Botet—along with ghosts from her past. Via flashbacks, Turi tells of Juliette's journey from desperate drug addict to the object of wealthy art gallery owner Jack's (Grégory Fitoussi) affection, while gradually revealing how the "normal" world became a wasteland, serving up a tantalizing work that offers poignant moments along with nail-biting scares.

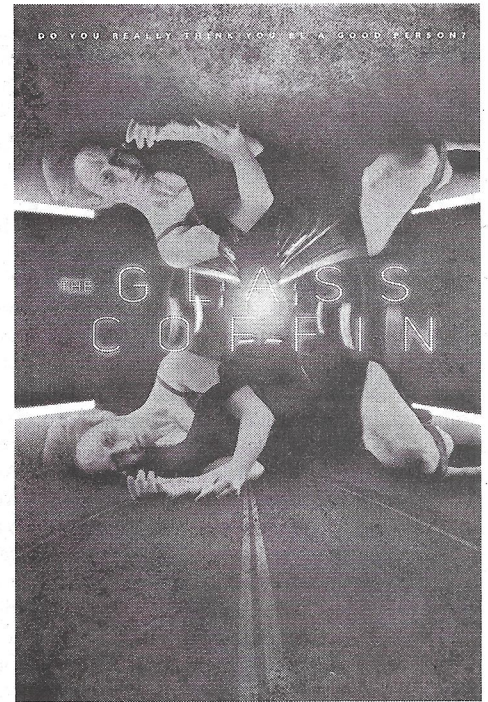
My favorite 2017 FQ entry was the French-language Canadian film **Dead Leaves** (aka **Feuilles Mortes**). Another post-apocalyptic drama, **Dead Leaves** boasts a strong western-movie flavor, shaping up as a mesmerizing, heart-wrenching experience powered by an incredible ensemble cast. Created by Thierry Bouffard, Carnior, and Edouard Tremblay, the film unfolds in Canadian forests during autumn. Rugged, middle-aged Bob (Roy Dupuis, of **Screamers** fame) prefers to wander this wasteland alone, but circumstances bring him into contact with kind and villainous people alike, including Josee (Audrey Rancourt-Lessard, Cthulhu Trophy winner for Best Supporting Actress, Feature), a young woman who wants to be his partner. The chemistry between these two constitutes one of the film's many high points. Other story arcs include a rape revenge thread and violent conflict between a tightly knit group of survivors and a band of murderous criminals. Characters and stories overlap, and the jarring third act is unforgettable in its balance

of bleakness and optimism. The trio behind this outstanding effort has fashioned a handsome film that forgoes the usually showy special-effects trappings, focusing instead on human drama.

The Spanish horror thriller **The Glass Coffin** (aka **Le Ataud de Cristal**) (MVD Visual) captured the Cthulhu Trophies for Best Feature Film and Best Actress, Feature, for Paola Bontempi's riveting turn as Amanda. Amanda is a renowned actor on her way to a ceremony to receive a lifetime achievement award when a terrifying electronically distorted voice tells her all she needs to do is follow its instructions and she'll be fine. Naturally, what the voice's owner has in mind is increasingly disturbing and dangerous. Director Haritz Zubillaga, who co-wrote with Aitor Enrrez, delivers a taut, sharp-looking shocker set mostly inside a limousine. Zubillaga uses tight shots and vivid color changes to make his setting feel claustrophobic and dizzying. Bontempi is in what seems like nearly every frame. Despite her intense performance, I was ultimately put off by the film's **Saw**-like torture and humiliation approach, one that reaches its nadir in a rape scene included for sheer shock value.

Speaking of shock value, the Norwegian effort **Vidar the Vampire** (aka **VampyrVidar**) descended to even lower depths. Co-director and co-writer Thomas Aske Berg (with Fredrik Walde-land) stars as Vidar Harr, a thirtysomething farmer who lives an isolated existence with his overbearing, staunchly Christian mother. When he seeks change from a higher power, he is reborn as the titular bloodsucker. This dark comedy tackles religion (Brikt Skrettingland portrays Jesus Christ as a hard-partying libertine), psychology, and other social topics with a broad approach. The humor missed its mark with me, though Berg won the Cthulhu Trophy for Best Actor, Feature.

Diego Hallivis copped the Cthulhu Trophy for Best Director, Feature, for his time-travel tale **Curvature**. This dramatic sci-fi film relates the story of Helen Phillips (an impressive Lyndsy Fonseca), an engineer whose physicist husband Wells (Noah Bean) recently committed suicide. Before his untimely demise, he had been working on a time machine with Thomas (Glenn Morshower), with whom he'd co-founded Curvature Research. Thomas asks Helen for her permission to continue with the experiment, which she grants. Soon after, Helen awakes one morning in a confused state and receives a phone call from a mysterious woman telling her she needs to leave the house before a certain man outside spots her. Hallivis does an admirable job helming the intermittent action set pieces, including a car chase. Writer Brian (**Some Kind of Hate**) De Leeuw goes the cliché route too often, though, culminating in a reveal most viewers will guess early on. Fonseca's Helen spends most of her time in a daze, which doesn't allow the actress much room to stretch. Hallivis deserves credit for lending the film a stylish look and for keeping the movie entertaining despite the script's shortcomings.



FilmQuest had some absorbing documentaries on tap, including Cthulhu Trophy for Best Documentary winner **Cassette: A Documentary Mixtape**, a fun look at a technology that has found new life among young retro-culture aficionados and those who've never considered it obsolete. Co-directors/co-writers Zachary Taylor and Georg Petzold capture the passion of cassette lovers, from established rock stars like Henry Rollins and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, to old-school NYC rap and hip-hop DJs and followers, to current musical acts who find their material sells better on cassette than CD or digital downloads, to cultural historians who focus on found recordings. Interestingly, Lou Ottens, the man credited with inventing the cassette tape (though he humbly states that he was merely part of a team at Philips that created the technology), doesn't share that nostalgia and can't understand the fascination with a technology that is long past its heyday. The filmmakers employ a mixtape style, bouncing back and forth between subjects, with mixed results.

Brad Abrahams' documentary **Love and Saucers** focuses on 72-year-old David Huggins, an outsider artist who obsessively paints pictures about the contact with extraterrestrials he's allegedly had since childhood. Huggins' story goes a bit further than the usual contactee case, though; he claims he lost his virginity to an alien woman at 17 and that he has fathered several alien-human hybrids with her. Abrahams adopts an observational approach, allowing Huggins to relate his stories without judgment. The director also interviews several people in Huggins' social orbit, including neighbors, his boss at a deli, other alleged contactees, and his son. **Love and Saucers** is a thought-provoking documentary about a captivating subject. If this year's offerings are any indication, the next FilmQuest should be an equally exciting affair. ♂