

## Tarr Bela: I Used to Be a Filmmaker

★★★

(2013) 85 min. DVD: \$99.95; public libraries; \$350; colleges & universities. The Cinema Guild. PPR. ISBN: 0-7815-1472-X.

The works of Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr (who is referred to with the Hungarian protocol of putting the surname first) will never be mistaken for multiplex fare: his seven-hour-plus epic *Sátántangó* (1994) and the emotionally devastating *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) demand a degree of patience lacking in many filmgoers, while his popularity in the United States has been limited to aficionados of challenging art house films. For those unfamiliar with Tarr's work, French director Jean-Marc Lamoure's documentary centering on the production of Tarr's final film before retirement, *The Turin Horse* (2011), offers a fine introduction to the artist and his approach to cinema. In stark contrast to the bleakness and severity of his films, Tarr comes across as a charming individual who reigns over the set like a pleasant regent (insisting on a "feudal system" where democracy does not take root). Despite his authoritarian proclamations, Tarr carefully orchestrates the cast and crew in a clever manner that winds up empowering his assembled talent to their fullest as they collaborate in bringing his vision for *The Turin Horse* to life. The film also gives attention to Tarr's wife and co-director/editor Ágnes Hranitzky, whose input has often been underplayed in critical appreciation of Tarr's work. A solid behind-the-scenes documentary that may encourage viewers to seek out Tarr's canon, this is recommended. Aud: C, P. (P. Hall)

## This May Be the Last Time ★★★

(2014) 93 min. DVD: \$24.99. BOND/360 (avail. from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

Director Sterlin Harjo's *This May Be the Last Time* serves two purposes: to document Native American spiritual songs, and to revisit his grandfather's mysterious disappearance. Although he attempts to tie the two together, they work best as separate narrative strands. In 1962, Oklahoma authorities found the wreckage of Pete Harjo's car, but no sign of his body. While searching for Pete, his relatives sang songs. Now, Harjo sets out to learn more about these enduring hymns. During the Trail of Tears march in the 1800s, Harjo's ancestors sang songs in which Christian and Native imagery converged. Harjo interviews several Oklahoma citizens, who not only explain how the songs fit into their lives, but also often sing a capella renditions. Says Joy Harjo (no apparent relation), "A song appears when it's needed." Wotko Long sang to himself while serving in Vietnam. In the midst of the horrors he witnessed, the songs brought him comfort. Harjo's grandfather, who fought in World War II, shared an interest in music, but instead of singing in a church, he played standup bass in a swing band. Jessie,

his widow, remembers that he was well liked in the community. She was particularly fond of a Native adaptation of the Negro spiritual "This May Be the Last Time," which would gain fame from cover versions by the Staple Singers and the Rolling Stones. Hugh Foley, a radio show host, has been attending a Native church for years. Inspired by the connection between Native American, Negro, and Scottish spirituals, he has been working on a book about Muscogee Creek hymns. As he puts it, they represent "the first American music." An interesting music documentary with a personal touch, this is recommended. Aud: C, P. (K. Fennessy)

## The Wandering Muse ★★★

(2015) 94 min. DVD: \$79; public libraries & high schools; \$249 w/PPR; colleges & universities. Seventh Art Releasing.

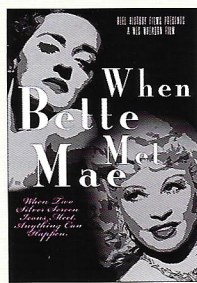
The iconic Jewish phrase ("the wandering Jew") that inspired the title of Tamás Wormser's documentary seems appropriate for a film that draws a kaleidoscopic portrait of peripatetic Jewish musicians who fuse past traditions with modern styles to create something vital and contemporary. Shot over a period of some seven years, the documentary features numerous narrative threads, from a pair of Argentinean pals who play klezmer music with some added tango touches, to a Montreal performer who mixes cantor prayer with jazz and hip-hop, to a portrait of Ugandan villagers who mingle Hebrew chant with African drums. Other segments feature an American from Detroit who unearthed protest songs hailing from Russia and Germany in the early 20th century, and a Moroccan woman in Tangiers who sings a haunting Judeo-Spanish melody from the Sephardic tradition. Wormser's film perhaps mimics the title too much in that it's rather lackadaisically structured, meandering from subject to subject and place

to place, while the musicians themselves are only sketchily portrayed. But the range of music is impressive, and the performances are treated with deserving respect, resulting in a rich tapestry of the myriad ways in which performing artists are expressing their Jewish identity musically in the modern world. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

## Women Aren't Funny ★★1/2

(2016) 83 min. DVD: \$59.95 (\$250 w/PPR from [edu.passionriver.com](http://edu.passionriver.com)). Passion River (avail. from most distributors).

In her rambling documentary, Bonnie McFarlane hits the road to ask her peers if they think that women are funny. McFarlane has a stake in the answers, since she herself works as a standup comedian, often as an opening act for her husband, Rich Vos. She met Vos when she appeared on *Last Comic Standing*, where he served as a judge. McFarlane starts by citing statements from Jerry Lewis and Christopher Hitchens to the effect that comedy favors the male of the species (McFarlane's attempt to interview Hitchens, who died in 2011, suggests that she spent years on this project). Joan Rivers and Chelsea Peretti find such dismissals ridiculous, but not all of the male speakers agree, since Artie Lange and Patrice O'Neal find men funnier, while acknowledging that looks are less of a factor in male comic success. Speakers of both genders note that male comedians outnumber women so extensively that it's hard to take negative comparisons too seriously. There are insightful interviews here with Susie Essman, Colin Quinn, and others, but the film itself looks like a home movie (shaky camerawork, under-lit nightclub scenes, etc.), and is bogged down with too much extraneous material about McFarlane's life and career. McFarlane attempts to spice things up by speaking in the third person and posing as a half-nude



## When Bette Met Mae ★★★

(2016) 63 min. DVD: \$14.95. MVD Entertainment Group (avail. from most distributors).

In 1973, movie icons Bette Davis and Mae West met for the first time at a private party in West Hollywood. Wes Wheadon, a bartender at the event, had the good instinct to tape record the conversation between the film legends on a cheap cassette recorder (the recording was later restored to acceptable—if not pristine—audio quality). Wheadon directs *When Bette Met Mae*, an amusing film in which lookalike actors playing Davis, West, and their respective escorts mime to the old tape. Davis, not surprisingly, dominated the conversation in recalling her various career and romantic misadventures in a grandly dramatic style fueled by more than a few sips of alcohol (at one point, Wheadon was ordered by the party's host to water down Davis's drinks). West, who never drank alcohol (much to Davis's surprise) offered a straightforward but cogent recollection of her taboo-busting endeavors on Broadway and her efforts to retain screen credit for her Hollywood output. Along the way, the film takes breaks to provide background information and classic clips of both women, most notably Davis teaching Jack Paar and Jonathan Winters how to imitate her iconic cigarette-smoking style. Fans of both stars will enjoy this distinctive and entertaining celebration of old Hollywood. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (P. Hall)