

Preview: The 46th Chicago International Film Festival, Week One

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 7, 2010 - 2:34pm

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CHICAGO – We’ve been working our way through the schedule for the upcoming 46th Annual Chicago International Film Festival, kicking off tonight with the premiere of “Stone,” starring Edward Norton, Robert De Niro, and Milla Jovovich. While this year’s festival includes a few high-profile films with A-list stars, we’ve dipped below the line, watching screeners of films that might slide below your radar. Here are the highlights of the opening weekend and into the beginning of next week covering October 7th to October 12th, 2010 (and come back next week for the rest).

The best films of the opening act include an amazing Chicago-set documentary about poetry, a small drama starring two potential future stars, a Russian existential piece, an Australian thriller, and two more documentaries about the transformative sociological power of art. The lineup for this year doesn’t immediately pop like last year’s, which unspooled “An Education,” “Hipsters,” “Inferno,” “The Messenger,” “Cropsey,” “Red Cliff,” and “Mother,” among others, in just its first weekend. That was a great year. This year is not a great year, but we need to support the Chicago International Film Festival, especially the amazing first film on the list below.

The top tier of film’s this weekend includes “Louder Than a Bomb,” “Norman,” “Blame,” “How I Ended This Summer,” “Circus Kids,” and “Waste Land.”



Louder Than a Bomb

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Louder Than a Bomb”

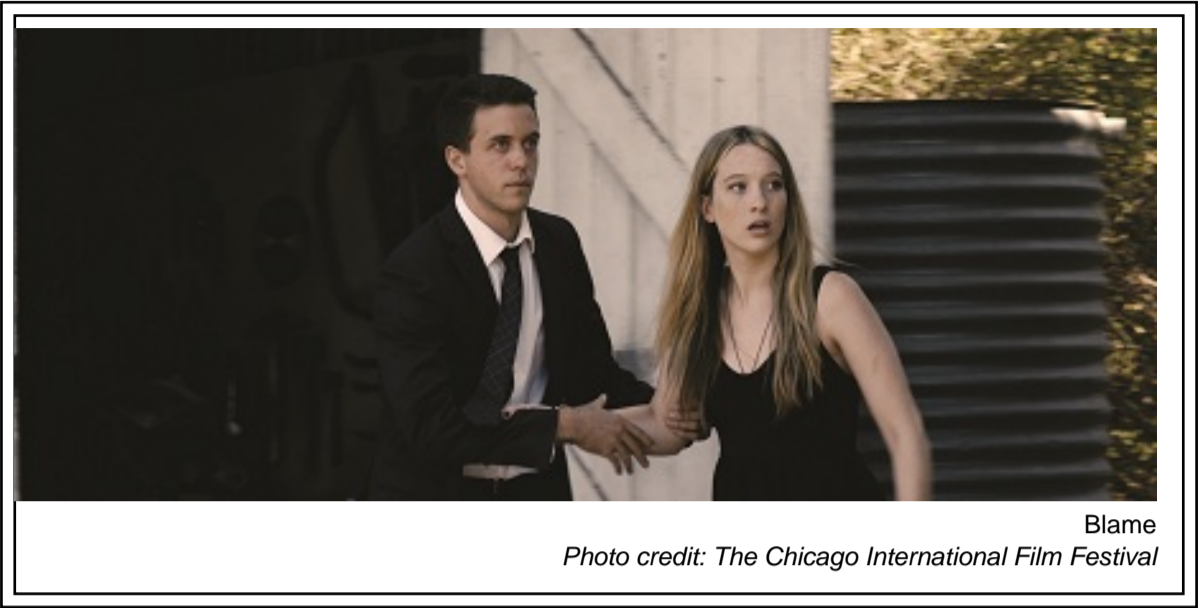
October 11th, 6pm

October 16th, 1:30pm

October 18th, 3:30pm

It seems artistically appropriate that the best film in the first week of the Chicago International Film Festival happens to be about some extremely talented young men and women from our very city. Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel’s “Louder Than a Bomb” tells the story of four teams of Chicago high school poets competing in a local poetry slam competition. While that may not sound like the material of great non-fiction filmmaking, I can’t imagine anyone attending “Louder Than a Bomb” and not walking away moved in ways that they couldn’t have imagined going into the theater. This powerful documentary not only reaffirms the importance of artistic endeavors as an outlet for the youth of this country but reminds one that the next incredible talent could come from any social or economic class. And there’s more than one talent to watch in “Louder Than a Bomb.” Very few films can honestly be called inspirational but “Louder Than a Bomb” could change people’s perceptions of the power of poetry. The directors capture a variety of styles — some more lyrical, some closer to rap, some almost like preachers — in competition but never turn the piece into one about winning. As the kids keep saying, “The point is not the points, the point is the poetry.” And the film never loses sight of the amazing, moving poetry. You will not soon forget the talented young men and women of “Louder Than a Bomb.” With everything we’ve seen at the fest and everything still to play, it’s the one film that we most want to see again, just to be in that theater when the audience experiences its genius. Expect applause.

Directors Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel along with Louder Than a Bomb poets will be in attendance at all three screenings. Go get tickets before it sells out.



“Blame”

October 8th, 8:45pm
October 9th, 5:00pm
October 17th, 9:45pm

From Chicago poets to Australian nitwits, you couldn’t find two films much more diverse than “Louder Than a Bomb” and “Blame,” but isn’t that what festivals are all about — variety? “Blame” opens with its strongest scenes as a man comes home to find four masked people in dress clothes in his house. They grab him, bind him, and feed him pills to kill him. It’s a startling sequence that hints at a taut thriller to come. “Blame” doesn’t quite fulfill the promise of those early scenes, becoming almost a black comedy of errors or revelations, but director Michael Henry keeps the proceedings moving at a pace that justifies a look for thriller fans. It’s quickly revealed that the reason that the murderers were so well-dressed is because they were coming from the funeral of a friend who happened to have been sleeping with her teacher before she killed herself. The teacher is the victim, of course. When the plan to enact revenge doesn’t go quite so smoothly, “Blame” presents its characters with an interesting dilemma: As more and more is learned about what really happened in the life of their friend, who really is to blame? And what are the consequences of doing so?

Director Michael Henry will be in attendance on the 8th and 9th.



“How I Ended This Summer”

October 10th, 5:40pm
October 12th, 3:30pm
October 17th, 12:30pm

This Russian existentialist drama runs two hours and features about twenty minutes of dialogue but produces more tension that most of the wordy thrillers that you’ll see at the multiplex this season. A young man and an old man, already at odds due to natural generational differences, are the only inhabitants of a remote Russian station. In their desolate corner of the world, there are more bears than people per square mile. After a number of testy encounters, the younger man receives a transmission that the wife and child of the older man have been killed in an accident. How does someone convey such a tragic message? Well, for too long, he doesn’t. “How I Ended This Summer” becomes a thriller of knowledge: When will he tell him? How will he react when he does? The film sometimes lingers a bit too long on the shots of its desolate landscape but two very strong central performances and the director’s skill at building tension through silence make it a worthwhile entry in this year’s fest.





Norman

*Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival***“Norman”**

October 8th, 3:30pm

October 17th, 6:00pm

October 19th, 6:30pm

Dan Byrd (“Cougar Town”), Richard Jenkins (“The Visitor”), Emily VanCamp (“Brothers & Sisters”), and Adam Goldberg (“(Untitled)”) star in one of the few non-gala presentations at this year’s festival that features recognizable stars. Byrd plays a tragically depressed young man with very few friends and a father (Jenkins) who is dying of cancer. After losing his mother a few years earlier and now faced with a father who refuses any more painful treatment, Norman feels like an honestly suicidal character until he meets a new student (VanCamp) who takes an interest in him. After a particularly bad day with his father, Norman makes the mistake of telling a friend that it is HE who is dying of cancer. Quickly, the story has gone around the school and everyone who abused Norman now pities the last three months that he has to live. The strength of “Norman” is in how seriously it takes its concept. There’s an honest edge to the film in that one feels like when Norman’s house of cards collapses and his secret is revealed, he could finally take his own life. It’s not played for comedy. Jenkins is always great but Byrd and VanCamp are the future stars here. They’re both great. Some of “Norman” gets a bit too melodramatic and it’s a bit inconsistent, but see it for these two great young actors.

Director Jonathan Segal will be attendance on the 17th.



Waste Land

*Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival***“Waste Land”**

October 10th, 4:30pm

October 11th, 8:40pm

The second-best documentary of opening weekend comes to the fest courtesy of one of our best current documentarians, Lucy Walker

(“Blindsight,” “Countdown to Zero”). So much of a film like “Waste Land” is finding an amazing subject and Walker finds several in her story of Vic Muniz, the most famous Brazilian artist. Vik spent years making art from organic matter, often using food and other products in his installations. Walker teamed with him just as he was beginning his most ambitious project, a series of portraits centering around the world’s biggest landfill, which happens to be just outside Rio. All of the trash of this major city trickles to this landfill that’s populated by hundreds of trash pickers who go through it looking for recyclable materials. The people that Muniz found at the landfill are fascinating; a variety of personalities many with different reasons for doing what they do. Using them as his subject matter, Muniz created an immensely popular series of portraits, giving all of the money back to the trash pickers. The power of “Waste Land” is two-fold since not only is Muniz using art to shed light into a dark corner of the world but so is Walker with her film. Consistently entertaining and thoroughly fascinating, “Waste Land” is a great documentary.

Director Lucy Walker will be in attendance on October 10th.



Circus Kids

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Circus Kids”

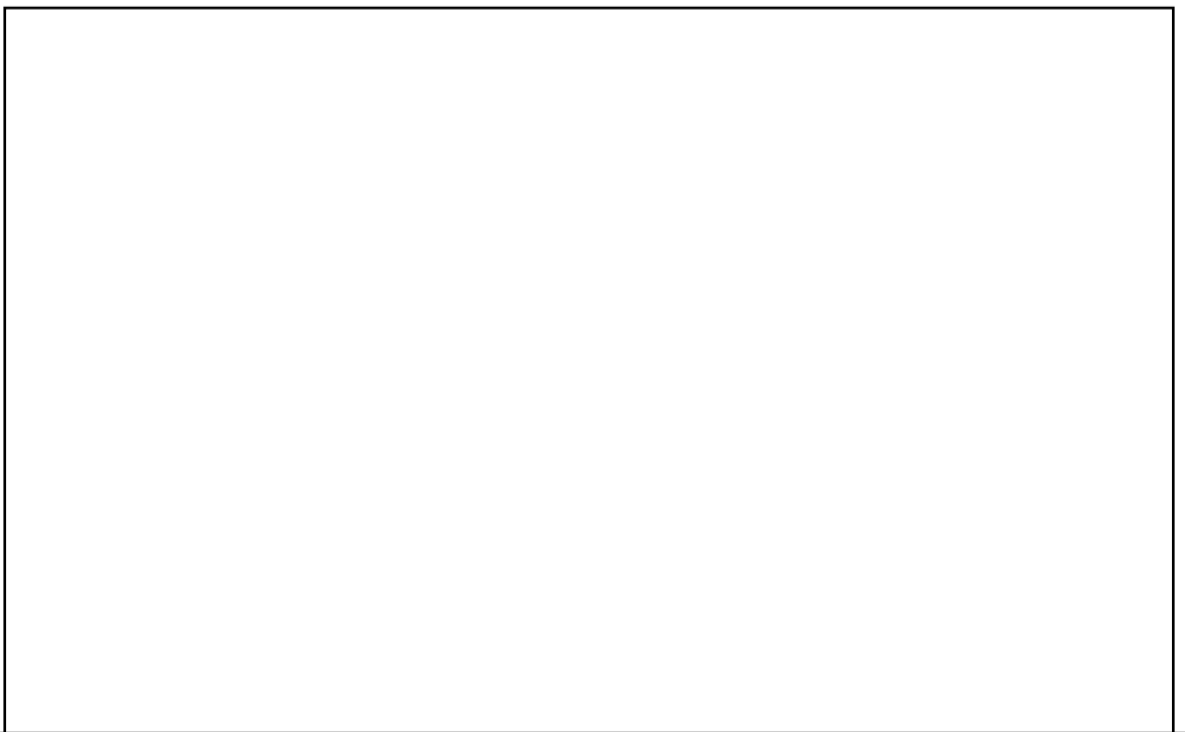
October 9th, 3pm
October 10th, 1:30pm

“Louder Than a Bomb” and “Circus Kids” could actually make an interesting double feature in that both stress the importance of creativity in our youth. It’s a theme that documentarians have been exploring for decades but it can never be overemphasized. The angle that Alexandra Lipsitz (“Air Guitar Nation”) takes with “Circus Kids” is interesting because it illustrates the international importance of performance. She follows a St. Louis group of young circus performers known as the Arches on a remarkable trip to the Middle East where they partner with another group of child performers that happens to be made up of both Jews and Arabs. There are, naturally, a number of differences and a significant language barrier, but the passion of these kids to perform overcomes any problems they may have. The idea that we are all more similar than we are different, especially in the realm of creative passion, is certainly not a new one, but Lipsitz’s film has a light, easy-going style that should make it a very popular film at this year’s fest.

Director Alexandra Lipsitz and the Circus Harmony’s St. Louis Arches will be in attendance at both screenings.

Check out page two for more week one highlights.

There are a few notable films at this year’s festival that either weren’t screened for critics or that this critic simply couldn’t attend and we wouldn’t want to exclude them for that reason. So, here’s another four that may deserve your attention but we can’t say for sure with official synopses from the Chicago Film Festival. If we had the time and money, we’d check these out.





Tamara Drewe

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Tamara Drewe”

October 8th, 7pm

When Tamara Drewe sashays back to the bucolic village of her youth, life for the locals is thrown upside down. Tamara—once an ugly duckling—has been transformed into a devastating beauty (with help from plastic surgery). As infatuations, jealousies, love affairs, and career ambitions collide among the inhabitants of the neighboring farmsteads, Tamara sets a contemporary comedy of manners into play using the oldest trick in the book—sex appeal.

Note: HollywoodChicago.com writer Patrick McDonald did see “Tamara Drewe” and will be publishing an interview with director Stephen Frears next week. Don’t miss it.



Certified Copy

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Certified Copy”

October 9th, 6pm

October 11th, 6:15pm

A gallery owner (Juliette Binoche, named Best Actress at Cannes) invites an accomplished author (William Shimell) on a drive with her to a picturesque Italian town. Their banter about the difference between artistic originals and copies is filled with flirtation, but the nature of their relationship becomes ambiguous when an honest misunderstanding leads to them feigning a marriage. Iranian visionary Abbas Kiarostami directs this meditation on authenticity and artifice.



Black Swan

*Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival***“Black Swan”**

October 12th, 8pm

This psychological thriller set in the world of New York City ballet stars Natalie Portman as Nina, a dancer in a ballet company who finds herself locked in a web of competitive intrigue with a new rival (Mila Kunis). Black Swan takes a thrilling and at times terrifying journey through the psyche of a young ballerina whose starring role as the duplicitous swan queen turns out to be a part for which she becomes frighteningly perfect.

“Black Swan” is sold out but we'd be remiss if we ignored it completely.



Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives

*Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival***“Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives”**

October 10th, 3pm

October 15th, 6:30pm

As his failing kidneys bring him face to face with mortality, Uncle Boonmee retires to the countryside to spend his last days there, reconnecting with family-alive, dead, and reborn. Winner of the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival, this visionary yet playful film is an enchanting blend of heady spiritual imagery and tender human drama that confronts the largest of questions-what happens to us after we die?

Come back on October 13th, 2010 for a look at week two and stay tuned to HollywoodChicago.com for consistent CIFF coverage, including red carpet photos of Ed Norton from tonight's premiere, and interviews with Norton, Danny Boyle, Stephen Frears, and more.

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