

Interview: Collin Souter, Short Film Programmer for the 2017 Chicago Critics Film Festival

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CHICAGO – In all film festivals, the real hidden talent can often be found in the Short Films Program. This is the beginning for many great filmmakers, and it is up to the film reporters and programmers to unearth these creative jewels. Film Critic and Writer Collin Souter is the Short Films Programmer for the Chicago Critics Film Festival (CCFF), and the fest will be presenting two separate programs on May 13th and 14th, 2017, during the run of the festival, which takes place from May 12th through May 18th at Chicago's Music Box Theatre (details below).

Collin Souter has been reviewing films for 17 years in and around the scene in Chicago... he has a weekly radio gig on WGN 720AM for the Nick Digilio show, and a monthly one on WHPK 88.5FM. He has written for eFilmcritic.com, and has a monthly column at RogerEbert.com called "Short Films in Focus." He is also a filmmaker of note himself, through Multihead Productions. HollywoodChicago.com reached out to Collin Souter to preview the Shorts Programs in the Chicago Critics Film Festival, and to find out what the process is for finding these films.



Short Film 'Fry Day,' Directed by Laura Moss, at the CCFF 'Shorts Program 1'

Photo credit: Chicago Critics's Film Festival

HollywoodChicago.com: You facilitated two shorts programs in the fest. What distinguishes them thematically, or is it just in the way you put them together?

Collin Souter: If they can be distinguished thematically, it's a bonus, but that's rarely possible. Both programs are designed to cross a variety of genres, techniques and tones... while still feeling like a whole experience that doesn't jerk the audience around too much.

You couldn't follow a hilarious comedy with a devastating drama, you have to make your way slowly from one extreme to the other, and that's the tricky part. Going from comedy to animation to foreign to experimental to drama, all in the span of 90 minutes, and then having it feel like a natural flow – that's the challenge every year.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your interaction with the short film, what do you think makes it a unique art form, in contrast of course to feature length films or any other media?

Souter: A short film can start with a simple concept and just remain with that concept throughout its running time... and for a lot of the concepts I've seen, shorter is better. There's a short in one of our programs called 'Hopptornet (10 Meter Tower),' about random people working up the nerve to jump from a diving board. For 15 minutes, it's fun, but it shouldn't be longer than that, or it would wear out its welcome.

So, while the time constricts the filmmaker, the format allows a simple idea to become a reality, and creates an interesting and engaging narrative that you wouldn't see in a feature. The fun part about programming short films is that I have no idea what kind of concept or story I'm going to see when I hit play. I never read anything about them before I watch them.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have to turn over some rocks to find critic-worthy short films. Where is the most unusual place you found a film, and what was the circumstance?

Souter: I wish I could say I had a great story of discovery here, but it's a pretty standard process. The most unusual circumstance was probably before CCFF was a reality, I saw a short film by Chicago filmmaker Ryan Oliver called 'Air Conditions.' It was a special screening hosted by WGN host and colleague Nick Digilio, who is Oliver's friend. It probably wouldn't have been on my radar if I hadn't gone that night, but it ended up being the very first film programmed for the very first Chicago Critics Film Festival, just because I remembered it and how good it was. The CCFF had no features yet, but we had that one short film, and then a couple more. Then a couple of years later, Oliver's follow-up film 'Restoration' was the centerpiece of a midnight shorts program, which did very well for the festival.

HollywoodChicago.com: Cinema taste is subjective, of course. How do you feel your taste has modified or changed since focusing on the short film?



Collin Souter, Short Film Programmer for the CCFF
Photo credit: Multihead Productions

Souter: I'm not sure my taste has changed much since doing this, since I've been a film critic for about 17 years. I've always enjoyed short films, ever since I saw Steven Wright's 'The Appointments of Dennis Jennings' in the late 1980s. The IFC Channel used to show shorts between features, and I remember discovering 'The Junky's Christmas' on there and loving it. I'm just glad short films getting more of a platform, especially at Oscar time when more people make a point of seeing them, with theaters and online sites actually exhibiting them.

HollywoodChicago.com: Several prominent filmmakers began with a short film as a calling card. Do you have an example of a filmmaker that began with a short, and how did that short get them attention?

Souter: There are tons, but Trey Edward Shultz comes instantly to mind because I kind of still kick myself for not programming the short film version of 'Krisha,' which eventually became a feature film. The short is almost a shot-for-shot tryout for what eventually became the longer feature – it literally had the same cast, shot list and editing. But a lot of shorts are like that, they help to fundraise for the eventual feature.

When I first watched 'Krisha,' I was amazed at the technique, but the film left me with that feeling of 'what am I supposed to get out of this?' And I couldn't think of a good way to put it into a program without thinking the audience would have the same feeling... for example, you couldn't open with it, it can't be in the middle and you wouldn't want to end with it. So while I knew there was a great talent behind the camera – as well as the cast – I just felt that it didn't work as a short film. It was missing something that would have made it feel whole. And then I saw the feature film, and it delivered on the promises of the short and was an amazing film. It was number six on my TOP TEN list.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, do you think there is a particular short film or one of the programs that represents what the Chicago Film Critics Association [facilitating agency of the CCFF] and their "Chicago School" of film criticism represents?

Souter: Well, the CFCA is made up of a variety of different individuals with varying tastes and backgrounds, so I wouldn't say that one film represents a philosophy of ours. Although I will say that this year has a wildly eclectic group of films, and for the first time ever it's hard for me to pick which of the two programs I like more. I loved 'Tough' and 'Mare Nostrum,' and Mark Borchardt ['American Movie'] has a new short film called 'The Dundee Project'... that one is a lot of fun. Mark will attend the screening, as will director Laura Moss, representing her excellent short, 'Fry Day.'

Every year, I program at least one short that I might not fully understand, but I know someone will and it'll be amazing on the big screen. 'Nutag - Homeland' is that film this year. So to answer your question, you could say maybe the overall programs themselves – and the range of films within them – has a commonality with the diversity of voices within our group.

The Chicago Critics Film Festival presents "Shorts Program 1" on Saturday, May 13th, 2017 (1pm), and "Shorts Program 2" on Sunday, May 14th (2:15pm). Both are at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport, Chicago. The 2017 CCFF takes place from May 12th through May 18th. For a complete schedule, the line-up of short films in each program, and more information... including purchasing tickets, [click here](#). [21] To follow Collin Souter's work as a filmmaker, [click here](#). [22]



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