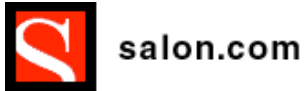


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Beyond the Multiplex

It's springtime and a bumper crop of indie films -- about air-guitar gods, faux celebs, lusty Frenchwomen -- is bustin' out all over!

By Andrew O'Hehir

Mar. 22, 2007 | It must be spring, because just as those of us in the frozen half of the country are beginning to venture outside, blinking into the watery late-winter sun like late-rising groundhogs, a bumper crop of new [movies](#) sprouts like weeds between the paving stones, luring us back into the dark, nurturing cave of the local [art house](#). We've got the compelling human drama of a man wearing a Hello Kitty backpack and playing air [guitar](#), we've got a kinky French revenge [thriller](#), we've got [John Malkovich](#) pretending to be a guy who's pretending to be [Stanley Kubrick](#), we've got teenage Iranian girls defying the authorities, and an Iraqi journalist trapped in the Kafkaesque hell of [Abu Ghraib](#). So to heck with nice weather. Isn't that ironic?

OK, no, it's not. As my late English-professor dad would have told you at great length, "irony" does not signify something annoying or irritating, or even a strange coincidence. In its purest sense, [irony](#) is a rhetorical mode in which you say one thing and mean the opposite ("Dude, what a lovely spring day we're having!" as you walk across town in a driving sleet-storm), although it also refers to a cosmic phenomenon in which human acts produce effects contrary to those intended. (One could say that the results of the Iraq war have been ironic, for example, but only if you believe the war was actually intended to produce a peaceful, democratic Iraq.)

But I'm also not here to rail against the slippery, postmodern sense of the word "irony," the one infamously referenced by Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter when he declared that irony was dead after 9/11. Carter, I suppose, was trying to say that insincerity and dispassion and a permanent attitude of poking fun had to go on hold temporarily in the wake of that disaster, and Jeez, I hope he was looking in the mirror when he said it. (In fairness, he later acknowledged that it was a dumb-ass thing to say, although perhaps not in those words.)

Nay, I am here to honor that indefinable form of irony in all its treachery and instability, its tendency to reverse the polarities of meaning or to render them indecipherable. This is the form of irony that will make all of us, as we grow older, unable to tell whether the younger people around us are behaving sincerely or not. We will find no comfortable recourse, no safe haven. This kind of irony is both a form of self-knowledge and a form of self-mockery, it is a defense against the world of late capitalism and an embrace of it. I say it is a proud and noble thing, and I say bring it.

Is the film "Air Guitar Nation," a crowd-pleasing documentary that follows two American contestants to the World Air Guitar Championship in a small town in northern Finland -- where they must do battle with deadly air-ax wielders from Austria, Australia, the Scandinavian countries, Britain and elsewhere -- a

joke? Do these people really take themselves seriously, as they jump around in front of a few dozen strangers and pretend to play along to a decades-old Motörhead song? Are these events real? Is this movie -- ahem -- serious or ironic?

I bring no answers to these questions, Grasshopper. Or anyway I bring only irritating answers, like "maybe" and "it depends" and "it doesn't really matter." The important thing to say is that I was really dreading seeing "Air Guitar Nation" (which is directed by Alexandra Lipsitz) and that now that I've seen it and partway understood it, and it has rocked my world, I can't remember why. I guess I was afraid it would be some VH1-style celebration of pathetic meathead wannabe rock stars who make fools of themselves in public. And I guess it kind of is.

But in the tradition of the finest forms of American entertainment, both "Air Guitar Nation" and the geekcraft it chronicles go way beyond shtick and self-parody into some meta-meta-ironic zone, where it's never clear from one moment to the next what is a joke and what is deadly earnest, until the two concepts finally merge into a sort of Buddhist singularity. I think it hardly needs saying that Homer Simpson would make a brilliant air guitarist (if only he would get off his lard ass and practice).

Lipsitz's two heroes are a New York actor named David Jung ("C-Diddy," in the air-guitar universe) and a real-life rock musician named Dan Crane who airs as "[Björn Türoque](#)." These guys represent, if you will, the venerable collision of expressionism and impressionism, and perhaps of classicism and romanticism, translated into the idiom of rockhead idiots pretending to play invisible guitars. C-Diddy is an arrogant, braggart showman in the Gene Simmons vein, full of tongue-wagging, finger-picking histrionics. He wears Spandex pants in barfy shades and a Hello Kitty backpack, facing forward, as a sort of breastplate just above his ample tummy. As he tells Lipsitz, his secrets are "Asian fury and air supremacy."

Björn is also "kind of a dick" (Crane's phrase, not mine) but in a different spirit of dickness. He's a standoffish, introspective art-rock air-god in aviator shades, with a bit of Keith Richards and Johnny Thunders in his DNA. He's clearly a vain and untrustworthy character, but girls flock to him and other guys crave his approval. Onstage, he clearly believes he's doing us a favor just by showing up, but when he's in the groove and adequately medicated, he rocks that nonexistent Les Paul like nobody else.

It's true that Lipsitz has made another of those documentaries that goes spelunking into some neglected subcultural realm -- like [spelling bees](#) or [crossword puzzles](#) or or [balloon twisting](#) or, I don't know, beekeeping ("Buzz! On Hives and Humans") -- and comes back with a few goofballs, a few yucks and the message that people are people no matter where you find them.

But the oddness of air guitar turns out to be an especially rich kind of oddness: Björn and C-Diddy and their competitors understand that they're doing something inherently silly and self-referential, and they've constructed personas to match. Along the way they've also become convinced of the truth in an apparent paradox: that pretending to play along with Jimmy Page or Yngwie Malmsteen is a pure, uncommodified form of expression, and that within its arbitrary limits and apparent meaninglessness lies artistic freedom.

In some mysterious way, the level of self-awareness behind the braggadocio of air guitar made me care more, not less, about the bitter and finally respectful competition between these two air-maestros. (In "[Murderball](#)," by contrast, I found the macho intensity of the quadriplegic rugby athletes ultimately wearying.) Lipsitz captures the electric night in Oulu, Finland, when Björn, having already lost to C-Diddy in New York and Los Angeles and paid his own way across the pond, enters a qualifying round in a nightclub and blows the doors off with a legendary display of airness, a performance so great it will forever be remembered wherever fast-food employees solo with brooms in walk-in refrigerators. I don't know whether to call it interpretive dance for dudes or performance art or just a highly developed form of wanking. Who cares? It seriously rocks. (Said with just the faintest ironic penumbra.)

"Air Guitar Nation" opens March 23 at the [Angelika Film Center](#) in New York; March 30 at the [Nu art Theatre](#) in Los Angeles; April 6 in Honolulu; April 13 in Austin, Texas; April 20 in Boston and San Luis Obispo, Calif.; April 27 in San Antonio; May 2 in Portland, Maine; May 4 in Jacksonville, Fla., Madison,

Wis., Nashville, Portland, Ore., and San Francisco; May 11 in Atlanta; May 18 in Seattle and May 25 in Denver, with other cities to be announced.

"Color Me Kubrick": Ludicrous outfits, a bad accent and a cackling darkness at the heart of the celebrity dream

While we're on the topic of movies that strongly resemble reality TV -- a proportion slowly creeping toward 100 percent -- anyone who still thinks that being a celebrity would really be kind of fun should check out Brian Cook's directing debut, ["Color Me Kubrick,"](#) in which John Malkovich plays Alan Conway, the London con man who impersonated Stanley Kubrick during the famous director's last years.

Conway is a juicy role, and Malkovich gnaws on it with all the gusto you'd expect from Mr. Art-Movie Hambone Actor himself. Not only had Conway never met Kubrick, he knew almost nothing about him and had never seen any of his films. As played by Malkovich, Conway is a pathetic, flaming queen who wears nonsensical outfits he thinks will make him seem bohemian. His "American" accent sometimes sounds like an aging New York Jew and sometimes like Blanche Dubois, with stopovers in Korea, Scandinavia and the East End. (Malkovich has said he wanted Conway to sound as if he were making mistake after mistake with total confidence.)

Watching Conway perpetrate outrageous scams on gullible commoners, in the name of a so-called celebrity most of them had only dimly heard of, makes for jaw-dropping, head-scratching fun, at least for a little while. As I wrote when I saw the film [last year](#) at Tribeca, it's never clear what the point is once you get past the shock value of Malkovich's performance. What sticks with me, I guess, is what arduous drudgery Conway's ruse was: Sure, he got free drinks at a few upscale clubs and sex from a few particularly stupid rent boys. But he remained a bitter, sick, impoverished fellow, who could have made a much better living putting his talents to work selling insurance or used cars.

Director Cook and screenwriter Anthony Frewin were both intimates of the real Kubrick, which I guess counts for something. But for what, exactly? Does it uniquely qualify them to make a mean-spirited, trashy and intermittently funny film about a guy who *wasn't* Kubrick?

"Color Me Kubrick" opens March 23 in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, St. Louis, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and other cities, with more to follow.

"The Page Turner": Revenge served cold, a fugue in B-minor

Some degree of realism keeps me from hyping Denis Dercourt's psychological thriller ["The Page Turner"](#) as much as I would like to. French films are competing for an infinitesimal slice of the American market to begin with, and this one, a hit at Cannes last spring, isn't likely to reach far beyond the coasts. Still, it's a fine example of the excellence of French genre film right now: A dark tale of revenge with an inscrutable heart, ice in its veins and an electric undercurrent of eroticism, it also might be the best-photographed picture I've seen so far this year.

Dercourt is a former orchestral violist (who still teaches music), which explains why he's so intimate with the dramatic, neurotic world of classical music in which "The Page Turner" takes place. It doesn't explain how he made such an elegantly constructed and mysterious little film, although I suppose experienced musicians develop an innate sense of structure. Perhaps this film is really a fugue, or a theme and variations. It's certainly a kind of psychic transaction, an exchange of sexual and artistic power between the two women at its center.

You need to pay attention right from the beginning of "The Page Turner," and not merely to plot points. Both the actions and motivations of Mélanie (Déborah François, last seen in the Dardenne brothers' ["L'Enfant"](#)), the luminous young woman who becomes a star pianist's "page turner," remain ambiguous from beginning to end. You'll turn this movie over in your head for a few days after you see it, trying to wrestle with what Mélanie does, and why.

She was once a gifted student pianist from a working-class family, who gave up the instrument after failing her music-school exam. Years later, Mélanie is a law-office intern who goes to work as a nanny for her boss, a certain Monsieur Fouchécourt (the always-terrific Pascal Greggory, with his aristocratic hound-dog looks). Does she already know that his wife, Ariane (Catherine Frot), is the same pianist who oversaw her exam? Has she planned the encounter for years?

Frot is one of those graceful, sexy, middle-aged women who seem to populate French film by the hundreds, and her Ariane is nearly as closed a character as Mélanie. Her husband tells the new nanny she has become "fragile" after a car accident, but it's hard not to see Ariane's passive, wounded demeanor as a cumulative symptom of all her life choices. She's as much a beautiful possession of her rich husband as the piano she plays or the antiques that decorate her home; she's admired and even adored, but not exactly regarded as a human being.

Mélanie becomes a trusted member of the household almost immediately. She keeps secrets with Tristan, the Fouchécourts' lonely little boy, even as she pushes him to practice piano pieces too difficult for him. Ariane discovers that -- surprise, surprise! -- Mélanie can read music, and recruits her to turn pages for a major concert. Dercourt's narrative advances so subtly that at first I wondered if I were imagining the erotic tension that seemed to be building between Ariane and Mélanie (and separately between Mélanie and Tristan). I was not.

Jérôme Peyrebrune's camera writhes around these two long-legged, elegant women in sinuous loops, seducing us just as cautiously and thoroughly as Mélanie is seducing Ariane. This film has no sex at all and only the briefest flash of nudity. There's a lesson here that Jean-Claude Brisseau, director of the deliberately pornographic ["Exterminating Angels"](#) (which I generally liked), has chosen to ignore: When it comes to sexual frisson, less is almost always more. The hotness of ["The Page Turner"](#) derives in large part from the fact that everybody is wearing clothes, and never quite says what they mean.

"The Page Turner" opens March 23 at the [Angelika Film Center](#) and Lincoln Plaza in New York; March 30 in Atlanta, Chicago and Los Angeles; April 6 in San Francisco; April 13 in Minneapolis, St. Louis and San Diego; April 20 in Boston and Chattanooga, Tenn.; and May 4 in Washington, with more cities to be announced.

Fast forward: Soccer-mad Iranian girls go "Offside"; an Iraqi journalist's hellish ordeal; redeeming "Sacco and Vanzetti"; revisiting the Falklands in "Blessed by Fire"

Another picture that deserves more love than I can show right now is ["Offside,"](#) the latest work of semi-guerrilla filmmaking from Iranian director Jafar Panahi. Shot in and around the Tehran soccer stadium during an actual World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain, ["Offside"](#) dramatizes the plight of the dozens of teenage female fans who disguise themselves as boys to get into games.

There isn't much to it, plot-wise: A bunch of plucky, likable Tehran tomboys get into trouble and have to get out of it. As with other Panahi films like ["The White Balloon,"](#) ["The Circle"](#) and ["Crimson Gold,"](#) there's a commitment to half-improvised, ground-level realism that lends the picture news value and an obvious urgency. Here's some irony, or at least some stupid synchronicity: Panahi is no friend to the theocratic regime in Tehran, which has barred almost all his films from any domestic exhibition. Yet at this writing he can't get a visa to visit the United States either, despite the seemingly obvious propaganda value: We are the defenders of free expression, blah blah. I am shocked, shocked, to report that when it comes to genuine questions of liberty, the Bush administration and the Iranian mullahs are on the same side. (Opens March 23 in New York and Los Angeles, with other cities to follow.)

I was a pretty big fan of Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein's documentary ["Gunner Palace,"](#) which was really the first film to capture the surreal, deepening madness of post-invasion Iraq. Their follow-up, ["The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair,"](#) follows a single Iraqi detainee, whom Tucker had noticed during his first tour as an embedded journalist. He's a man named Yunis Abbas, who stood out immediately as an English-speaking freelance journalist. He was arrested, beaten and imprisoned for seven months in Abu Ghraib, accused -- apparently in all seriousness -- of hatching a plot to assassinate

British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

This far more modest picture offers a miniature portrait of the military occupation at its most sinister and comically inept, and the mild-mannered Abbas himself makes a wry, fatalistic protagonist (after the fashion of many Arab writers and intellectuals). It's a pretty anti-cinematic experience, since mostly what we see are halting interviews with Abbas and comic-book-style re-creations of his grim tales of arrest, incarceration and interrogation, all purportedly supported by evidence.

If you're already inclined to view the entire occupation as a buffoonish disaster that would be funny if not for all the dead people, you may not be surprised by anything here. On the other hand, if you're already warming up your typing fingers to ask me how I know this guy wasn't a nefarious terrorist planning to kill Blair, let's just move on. (Opens March 23 at [Cinema Village](#) in New York and [E Street Cinema](#) in Washington; March 30 in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Austin, Texas; and April 6 in Los Angeles, with more cities to follow.)

Peter Miller's by-the-numbers documentary "Sacco and Vanzetti" clearly lays out what is now pretty well understood about the early 20th century's most famous court case, in which a couple of Italian immigrants with anarchist leanings were convicted of a robbery-murder they clearly did not commit. The 1921 trial and 1927 execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti set the template for a certain kind of American confrontation between authorities and radicals, one inevitably tinged with political repression and racial bigotry. The pattern has repeated itself over and over, with Angela Davis and Huey Newton, with John Sinclair and Leonard Peltier and Mumia abu-Jamal. A bit pedantic, but thorough and interesting throughout, a must for history buffs. (Opens March 30 at the [Quad Cinema](#) in New York and April 6 in Los Angeles. Other engagements may follow.)

Finally, for those of you in New York, the morbid and gripping war film "Blessed by Fire," from the Argentine filmmaker Tristán Bauer, is well worth a look. (It won the Best Narrative Feature award at Tribeca last year.) Based on an influential novel that rocked Argentina's nostalgic-amnesiac view of the Falkland War of 1982, this is the first film to explore how the country's vicious military dictatorship drummed up nationalist fervor into an unwinnable war against Britain over some meaningless rocks in the South Atlantic. (It's also the first Argentine film production to be allowed access to the Falklands since the war.)

When a journalist named Esteban (Gastón Pauls) gets a phone call from the wife of an old army buddy who's tried to kill himself, he's launched into a wrenching series of flashbacks. His memories of "las Malvinas," as the islands are known in Spanish, are of cold, hunger, deprivation and the slow-dawning realization that Argentine forces have been abandoned out there to be killed or surrender when the British finally show up. It was a tiny, old-fashioned and stupid little war, but no less ugly than most for those who were forced to fight it. (Now playing at the [Pioneer Theater](#) in New York.)

-- By Andrew O'Hehir

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