

A survival tale

Beautifully crafted minimalist adventure in Zilbalodis' 'Away'

By Peter Debruge

An inspirational work of do-it-yourself computer animation that suggests the sky's-the-limit potential of the medium for anyone with big ideas and a boundless amount of time on his hands (plus access to Maya or an equivalent CG super-tool), "Away" represents more than three years of imagination and labor by 25-year-old Latvian prodigy Gints Zilbalodis, who earns every aspect of his "a film by" credit: He conceived, designed, animated and scored – and what a score! – this hypnotic hero's journey, which treats Joseph Campbell's monomyth as a kind of waking dream.

"Away" opens with its young protagonist dangling by his parachute from a tree in an otherwise barren landscape, which turns out to be the remote end of a primordial island where physics follows a slightly different set of rules. We don't know how this kid got there or where he's going, but the giant black colossus lumbering toward him spells trouble. A moment later, the shadowy creature reaches for the boy and swallows him whole, but only for a moment, initiating a surreal, slow-motion chase that spans the next hour and 10 minutes – a wordless quest in which both the audience and our hero must first get their bearings, then find their way back to civilization.

Consistent across five prior shorts, including similar-themed survival tale "Priorities", Zilbalodis' now-signature visual style is simple but eye-catching, eschewing the hard lines of hand-drawn animation as

well as the hyper-realistic 3D shading of other CG toons. For many, it will remind them of the rudimentary on-the-fly rendering style of early-21st-century video games, in which environments are stripped down to basic shapes and palette, enabling players to explore in real time. We never see directly through the boy's eyes, but we do spend a lot of time looking at him looking at this unfamiliar world.

Stunning

The surrounding terrain can be absolutely stunning at times, especially when viewed at a distance. By contrast, the boy's face is an inexpressive pink expanse, barely accentuated by his ever-so-slightly rosy nose and ears and floppy brown hair, the bangs of which tickle his forehead like chocolate Cheetos, or loose, leather-gloved fingers. More detail might have been nice, but it isn't necessary. Even though the character doesn't speak, we can get a pretty good idea of what he might be thinking from the various clues on offer: a flashback to the plane crash of which he was the sole survivor; a backpack containing a map, a canteen and an auto key of some kind; and Zilbalodis' lovely, low-key score, which alternates between tones of anxiety and exhilaration.

Like the graphics, the map suggests something one might encounter in an old-school video game, depicting a trail of archways across the island, on the other side of which there appears to be a port. The first arch shows the shadow of the colossus – which isn't necessarily as

malevolent as we first imagined but is somehow linked to the souls lost during the plane crash, and the concept of death in general.

These days, the line between VFX-driven cinema and video games has blurred enough that watching certain adventure movies can feel like being a passive spectator while someone else navigates a series of checkpoints or levels. "Away" is structured in much the same way, divided into chapters – like "Forbidden Oasis" and "Mirror Lake" – that feel ideally suited for a virtual-reality experience.

The main character interacts with different animals along his route, including a vulnerable yellow bird whom he must protect at times, whereas at others, it seems to be the one looking out for him. There are small puzzles to be solved – the key operates a motorcycle, for example – and semi-intuitive actions to be worked out, as in a watering hole surrounded by dozing cats.

For those with the opportunity to see "Away" in a theater, the experience will either mesmerize or annoy, as the project feels like a promising first pass – a rough-rendered showcase of Zilbalodis' myriad gifts, which are better suited to world-building and scenic design than character animation. There are shots in "Away" that swoop through space so dramatically they recall the awesome "Circle of Life" montage that opens Disney's original "The Lion King", and the motorcycle ride across Mirror Lake is as beautiful as anything seen in this year's photoreal remake of same. (RTRS)

Film

Features

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Variety



This image released by Netflix shows Laura Dern (left), and Scarlett Johansson in 'Marriage Story'. (AP)

Awards

Driver and Awkwafina win top acting honor

'Marriage Story' dominates Gothams

LOS ANGELES: "Jeanne" ("Joan of Arc"), Bruno Dumont's musical sequel to "Jeanette, the Childhood of Joan of Arc", has been sold to multiple major territories by Paris-based Luxbox.

Written by Dumont and based on the writings of France's Charles Peguy, "Joan of Arc" adapts the second and third parts of the stage play "The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc". These take Joan of Arc's story through her victorious battles against the English, to court case and death, burnt at the stake.

In the 15th century, France and England both claimed the French throne as their own.

The companies and territories in which Luxbox has closed deals so far are Brooklyn-based indie distributors Kimstim in the US, New Wave in the UK, Grand Film in Germany, Spain's Pecker Audiovisual, Interior XIII in Mexico and Colombia, Outside the Box in Switzerland.

Luxbox has also closed with Contact for The Netherlands, Film Europe in Czech Republic, Spentzos in Greece and 2i Film D.O.O. in former-Yugoslavia. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Sony Pictures Television has joined Italy's Lux Vide and RAI Fiction as co-producer and international distributor of Frank Spotnitz's high-end TV series about Leonardo da Vinci, which started shooting Monday in Rome.

The eight-episode "Leonardo" (working title) stars Aidan Turner ("Poldark") in the title role and Freddie Highmore ("The Good Doctor") as Stefano Giraldi, a fictional Milanese police officer investigating Leonardo as the suspect in a murder case. Highmore is also on board as executive producer. It is being directed by Dan Percival ("The Man in the High Castle").

Other key cast members include Italy's Matilda de Angelis as Milanese noblewoman and Leonardo muse Caterina da Cremona and Giancarlo Giannini in the role of Renaissance master Andrea del Verrocchio, of whom Leonardo was a student. The plan is for the English-language series to play next year

NEW YORK, Dec 3, (Agencies): Noah Baumbach's "Marriage Story" was the resounding winner at the IFP Gotham Awards, taking four awards including best feature at the annual New York awards-season kickoff.

By the end of the night on Monday, Baumbach, having long ago exhausted his one prepared speech, stood at the podium exhorting cast members Adam Driver and Laura Dern to lend him help. Having already given their own speeches – Driver for best actor, Dern as a tribute honoree – they demurred, content to watch Baumbach squirm again while he improvised a few remarks.

Baumbach turned, ultimately, to his actors – "My special effect, my everything is the cast," he said – and to Netflix for what he called its "unconditional" support of his film, a portrait of divorce starring Driver and Scarlett Johansson. Earlier, Baumbach thanked Netflix, too, for saving the Manhattan single-screen Paris Theatre, which the streaming company purchased last week.

Praise for Netflix and its chief content creative officer Ted Sarandos, who was also in attendance, was a common refrain throughout the evening. The streaming service, which filled up numerous tables at the banquet at Cipriani's Wall Street in downtown Manhattan, also celebrated wins for Ava DuVernay's Central Park Five series "When They See Us", (DuVernay was additionally singled out for tribute) and the documentary "American Factory".

The Gothams, now in their 29th year, are the premier New York gala for independent film, a kind of earlier East Coast corollary to Los Angeles' Independent Film Spirit Awards in February. Put on by the nonprofit Independent Film Project with nominees selected by committees, Gotham winners can diverge from seasonal favorites. Last year, Chloe Zhao's lyrical western "The Rider"

took best feature.

But a recent stretch of Gotham winners went on to land best picture at the Academy Awards, including Barry Jenkins' "Moonlight", Tom McCarthy's "Spotlight" and Alejandro Inarritu's "Birdman".

And "Marriage Story", which begins streaming Friday after playing for several weeks in theaters, seems sure to continue a long march through awards season. Acclaim has been heaped on its leads and its ensemble, and it's been celebrated as a crowning achievement for the 50-year-old Baumbach.

While not a surprise to others, the most shocked winner of the evening was easily Awkwafina, who took best actress for her performance in Lulu Wang's family drama "The Farewell".

"Oh my god. I never won anything. I can't even win an argument in the Instagram comments," said Awkwafina.

Tributes

A handful of movies up for best feature – "Uncut Gems" with Adam Sandler, "Hustlers" with Jennifer Lopez – went home empty handed. Trey Edward Schultz' ambitious family melodrama "Waves", also up for best feature, scored an award for Taylor Russell as breakthrough actor.

The Gotham Awards liberally sprinkle in tributes throughout the ceremony. This year's honorees included Dern, DuVernay, Sam Rockwell, FilmNation chief executive Glen Basner and Jason DaSilva, a filmmaker and disability rights activist. DaSilva's Emmy-winning documentary "When I Walk" chronicles his own experience with multiple sclerosis.

DuVernay shared her tips for directing, among them: treat actors and crew the same, don't be afraid to say "I don't know" and change your socks at lunchtime.

Both Baumbach and Greta Gerwig presented

Dern with her award, donning what they called "Laura Dern sweaters" for the occasion. The two filmmakers, aside from living together as a couple with a son, share Dern in their latest movies. In "Marriage Story", Dern plays a ruthless divorce attorney. In Gerwig's "Little Women", she plays Louisa May Alcott's benevolent matriarch Marmee.

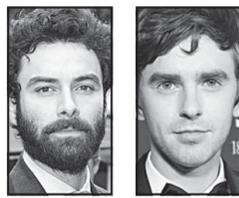
Gerwig and Baumbach swapped their speeches, which resulted in Baumbach declaring that he loved Dern "even more than Leonardo DiCaprio, who I sincerely believed I would someday marry."

The Gothams reliably serve as pep rallies for independent cinema and those that toil in the ever-threatened lower-budgeted realm of movie-making. Presenter Natasha Lyonne, whose Netflix series "Russian Doll" was nominated for best breakthrough series in episodes less than 40 minutes, evoked that sense of indie pride with more than a touch of sarcasm.

"If there's one thing everyone in the room can agree on," Lyonne said while presenting, "it's that we can never have enough Batman movies."

- Here's the full list of winners.
- Best Feature: "Marriage Story"
 - Best Documentary: "American Factory"
 - Breakthrough Director: Laure De Clermont-Tonnerre for "The Mustang"
 - Best Screenplay: "Marriage Story", Noah Baumbach
 - Best Actor: Adam Driver in "Marriage Story"
 - Best Actress: Awkwafina in "The Farewell"
 - Breakthrough Actor: Taylor Russell in "Waves"
 - Breakthrough Series – Long Format: When They See Us
 - Breakthrough Series – Short Format: PEN15
 - Audience Award: Marriage Story

to mark the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death. "Leonardo" is expected to become the first project to hit the airwaves from The Alliance, the co-production group formed by continental Europe's top pubcasters. Besides Italy's RAI, France Television is also on board. (RTRS)



Turner

Highmore

LOS ANGELES: Korean fantasy thriller romance "Black" has been given a Malay-language adaptation with a more supernatural spin. The series is produced by Malaysia's Alpha47 Films, from a CJ E&M format. It is co-directed by award-winning directors, Razaisyam Rashid and Kroll Azri. Cast includes Kamal Adli, Siti

Saleha, Nabila Huda, and Zoey Rahman. It will air with this month with four back-to-back episodes each on Dec 17 and 24, on pan-Asian streaming service Viu. In the original Korean series, Black follows a grim reaper who enters the world of mortals and finds himself falling in love with a woman who can foresee death.

(All 18 episodes of the original are available on Viu). The Malaysian adaptation replaces the concept of grim reaper with Bunian, a supernatural being from another dimension in Malay folklore. It sets the eponymous Black on a mission to track down his fugitive partner in the human world. (RTRS)