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A GUIDE TO FANTASY ISLAND

By GUY DIXON

Fantasy has a bad reputation. Attracting comic-book fans and *Lord of the Rings* fanatics, fantasy is often seen by the rest of us as mere genre material, with silly mythologies and a kind of general clutter substituting for any depth.

The Fantasy Worldwide International Film Festival, showing this weekend at the Bloor Cinema, seems hell-bent on proving otherwise, even if it may not attract many non-fans. Too bad, because the festival offers a rare assortment of international films, some of which -- such as the Portuguese film *Kiss Me* (Sunday, 4:30 p.m.), about a woman living life as if she's Marilyn Monroe -- approach fantasy as merely a flight of fancy within the real world.

Lord of the Brush (Sunday, 7 p.m., shown with three shorts) is another example. The thoughtful documentary focuses on expat British Columbian John Howe, an illustrator of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth mythology who is greatly responsible for the look of *The Lord of the Rings* movies. Howe paints the kind of highly detailed illustrations that undoubtedly rub those not drawn to fantasy illustration the wrong way. But his work is the epitome of fantasy drawing, blending the gothic and the baroque with action scenes.

An interesting notion in the documentary is the artist's obsession with his work. Think about it: Those ultra-detailed drawings by fantasy illustrators do seem obsessive, and maybe it's that quality, that hint of the heavy bearing by the artist, that puts some off. But the film is much more than an homage to one fantasy illustrator. It offers a trove of *Lord of the Rings* analysis (such as ecological interpretations of the original books and how West Coast geography has seeped -- via Howe -- into our idea of what Middle-earth should look like). Any thinking person with a fantasy compulsion, wondering what to make of what many see as juvenile, will enjoy this documentary.

Meanwhile, the digitally animated nine-minute short *Moongirl* (playing with *Lord of the Brush*) is a chaotic fantasy tale that somehow manages to stay pleasantly grounded as it tells the story of a boy who goes night-fishing with fireflies, only to suddenly find himself on a surreal moon. Not much more can be divulged without giving the whole film away. But, again, the tone here is not outright escapism; more like the homey kind of story we might read to our children.

Strangely, these films seem to emphasize how familiar fantasy can seem, even when the imagery is otherworldly. If anything, in both films, fantasy is really about looking inward.

The Fantasy Worldwide International Film Festival -- Toronto runs to Sunday at the Bloor Cinema, 506 Bloor St. W. See <http://www.fwiff.com/> for program details.