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Festival looks at women directors

By John Petrakis
Special to the Tribune

Women in the Director's Chair was established in 1983 to give female film- and videomakers from around the globe a chance to showcase their work. Instead of fighting the system, as most women directors are forced to do, WIDC provides its own system. As a result, audiences are treated to a program of films and tapes that address issues such as female identity and sexual empowerment. The festival is heavy on programs of shorts, with the occasional feature thrown in to balance things out. And it is open-minded and adventurous when it comes to venues for their eclectic product, including such offbeat locations as the Chicago Eagle Tavern, 5015 N. Clark St., and Video Machete, 1350 N. Milwaukee Ave., in addition to the more familiar Gene Siskel Film Center,164 N. State St., and their two home screens, the Preston Bradley Center and the WIDC Theatre, 843 W. Lawrence Ave.

The opening-night reception takes place at 6 p.m. Friday at the Preston Bradley Center, followed by "Homegirls" at 7 p.m., the traditional opening-night program of new films by Chicago filmmakers, that will feature the latest work by such talented local artists as Paula Froehle, Samantha Sanders, Suree Towfighnia and Sara McCool. All will be present to discuss their work.

Tickets for the festival, which runs through March 24, are $8. Festival passes are available. For more information, call 773-907-0610 or visit www.widc.org.

Below are capsule reviews of some of the feature-length films that were available for preview. Look for more reviews of films from the final weekend of the festival next week in Friday.

"RED RAIN" ★★ (USA; Laura Plotkin) This video about Gina Guidi, a tomboy-turned-lesbian who recently became the women's professional middleweight boxing champion, is pretty standard stuff, except for Gina herself. Unlike many boxers, male and female, who tend to be silent and pensive as they approach their dangerous work, Gina is a laugh-and-a-half as she goes about her daily business of training and feeding her dogs. Interviews with her supportive family, including her three brothers, are revealing. Plus, the film gives a good sense of what female boxing has become since the days of skinny strippers going at each otherwith oversized gloves to amuse the male bar patrons. Plotkin's film reveals Gina to be a serious professional, with the muscles and the courage to prove it. (6 p.m. Saturday, Preston Bradley Center)

"DETOUR TO FREEDOM" ★★½ (Denmark; Sidse Staubolm) It is sometimes said that most of us are allowed to make one major mistake in our lives, and 27-year-old A'me Nameth made a doozy when she and her lame-brained mother tried to smuggle heroin out of Thailand. They were caught and sentenced to 100 years in a Thai prison, but because A'me was half-American, she was transferred to a penitentiary in California and set free after serving 4½ years. The film, made by a Danish friend, follows A'me from the moment she gets out of prison, through her gradual recovery, her marriage to a former lover and her move to London to start over. I couldn't help thinking that a better film could be made about the mom, a former hippie and drug user, whose obsession with the exoticism of the Far East started all the trouble. (6 p.m. Monday,Gene Siskel Film Center)

"BLACK RUSSIANS" ★★★ (USA; Kara Lynch) Though this informative documentary is at least 25 minutes too long, it does a decent job of explaining why so many blacks from Africa and the U.S. moved to Russia during the height of the Cold War, when the Communist state promised (and sometimes delivered) a much fairer life with less discrimination. Alas, even the most altruistic ideas sometimes go bad, which explains why Russian skinheads now roam the land, urging these productive members of society to "Go back to Africa!" (7 p.m. Monday, Preston Bradley Center)

"THE CHINATOWN FILES" ★★½ (USA; Amy Chen) This eye-opening documentary zeroes in on seven politically active Chinese immigrants whose lives were made miserable in various ways—including denial of American citizenship—because of their involvement with assorted left-wing groups and organizations. (7 p.m. Wednesday, WIDC Theatre.)

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"Kevin Costner Delivers A Very Passionate, Heartfelt Performance!" Sandie Shaw, CBS
"A Unique Blend Of Suspense And Inspiration" John Finnegan, CBS
"A Moving Journey Into The Unknown" Jeanne Wolf's HOLLYWOOD
"Dragonfly" Is Intriguing! Stunning!" Jeffrey Lyons, NBC
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