

A Bad Film Festival

By attendee & contestant Joseph X Casillas



Nestled between the Golden State Freeway and the Los Angeles River lies Frogtown, formally known as Elysian Valley. Here, a group of over 130 toads gathered inside the cozy, independent Elysian Theater – which played host to an event that defies conventional film festival norms: a *bad film fest*. On a hot Sunday night in the dead of August, I attended the Bad Student Film Festival to celebrate unpolished, amateur, and downright bizarre short films. I had a horse in this race as a short of my own had been accepted less than three weeks prior. As the sun set over the sewer water of the LA River, a bohemian urban crowd of filmmakers, curiosity-seekers, and nostalgia-hunters gathered to satirically commemorate the art of imperfection.

The festival's premise is refreshingly simple: showcase films that are "bad" – a subjective term that became increasingly difficult to define as the night went on. From VHS home movies made by elementary school kids to cringe-worthy high school dramas, the lineup was a well-curated smorgasbord of cinematic mishaps and unexpected gems. The atmosphere was electric. The rowdy audience treated it like a combination of respectfully celebrating young filmmakers and shouting jokes as though it were an open mic night at a local comedy club.

I was skeptical when entering. How tolerable would “bad” shorts really be? The second I walked in, I realized that for many of these filmmakers, this event would be the only time they’d ever get to see their work on the big screen (let alone with a sold-out crowd). None of these people realistically thought that their shorts would get the red carpet pulled out for them. These were films made by losers, rejects, and dropouts, so the festival implied. But all of those nerves immediately settled the moment energetic host Miranda Meadows came on stage and listed the first block of films to be seen. Everyone was there to laugh at themselves as much as they were at others. That was apparent from the very first short, where pre-teens try to escape *The Matrix* in front of a green screen, establishing the tone from the very jump. At the Bad Student Film Festival, suddenly those “red carpet dreams” had become a reality (at least for 30 or so filmmakers in attendance). Even host Miranda had a film in the second block, titled *Just One Donut*.

These were just kids some ten years ago running around with the most state-of-the-art VHS camera 2005 had to offer. Now the Bad Student Film Festival generously provided free digitization so all films had a shot at screening. Perhaps the least surprising fact of the night was the amount of children “actors” on screen. Eight-year-old filmmakers – in which you could often hear the mom or older brother behind the camera saying “go” or “action” – gave a genuine backyard feel to the night (as well as the four-dollar beer sponsored by Macleod, Angel City Brewing, and Lincoln Brew). One short seemed to acknowledge that theme, the last addition to the festival titled *Movie Skool*, a short where two roommates debate what to write for a script (at one point speaking through one another’s erect penis).



Highlights ranged from the hilariously inept to the surprisingly competent. *Natalie Saves the Day*, a short about a baby coming to her family’s rescue, became an instant cult classic, with the audience chanting “Natalie” long after the short ended. Later in the festival, the director revealed that her baby sister on screen was now 21 and engaged. A bittersweet note was added to the proceedings, underlining the night’s theme of remembrance and the passage of time.

With these highlights came nostalgia. In the middle of this crowd-fueled event, you take a step back and notice that you’re watching VHS tapes of a time that long passed. Burger Kings from the 2000s are in the background of documentaries like *20 Years Ago*, a slice-of-life short that captures the joy of youth while maintaining a sense of existential dread. Then a film like *Twister 2* screens, with an actual plot, and the audience breaks into an echo of *awes* at the level of heart

and character displayed between two boys and a handheld camera. For many, it felt like making a short film for the very first time again.

The Dumb-Ass captured the pure joy of amateur filmmaking, centered around a little boy shooting himself because there was no more pizza. Meanwhile, the making of *Ignition Sequence* was not without consequence, as the director explained how they “broke into school after hours to shoot most of this...” and “the principal found out and we all got suspended unless we promised to delete every copy.” Thankfully, a single copy survived and made its way into this lineup. But the night wasn't without its controversies. Some entries, like *Mary Christmas*, seemed too polished for the event's ethos, raising questions about the criteria for “badness” even further.



This was the main critique of the festival, the one unanswered, lingering question you walk away with. What constitutes a bad film? Is there such a criterion? Or, here – at the Bad Student Film Festival – is it the mere opinion of the founders? There was a good mix of childhood homemade movies that, due to time, have become funny (like *The Majestic Goldfish*). There were the cringe “trying too hard” shorts that came off as comedic (like *Someone's Someone* which follows a college girl in love with the 50s, in which Chelsea Nicole Lang (who was in attendance) was born to play the lead). And there were even the trying-to-be-bad bad shorts that went over well with the audience, too. But again, what made these shorts bad? Even the oddly “experimental” films found a home here.

The perfect example of experimental was the short that finished the festival, titled *Flush*, which follows a character who finds himself defecating uncontrollably. Somehow a bizarre, downright weird short like *Flush* had fit in at the Bad Student Film Fest. It worked, perhaps in a way it shouldn't have.



It was also interesting to see what was deemed impressive by this audience. A terrible short with a hard-to-follow plot and raspy audio would do something as simple as pan or wipe transition and everyone would erupt in cheers. The festival's knack for celebrating imperfection felt like the opposite approach independent filmmaking has taken in recent years, which is perhaps why this night was so fortifying.

What sets the festival apart is its ability to strip away the pretension often associated with film screenings. Here, technical flaws were celebrated. Amateur acting applauded. And the simple act of creating something – anything – was honored. It was a reminder of why many attendees fell in love with filmmaking in the first place.



The awards ceremony, held in the aptly named Skunk Room, was as informal as the screenings. After everyone grabbed a beer from one of the six coolers, or wine from the pour-it-yourself table, the festival founders Stephen Vanderpool and Danielle McRae Spisso handed out golden VHS tape awards. There were categories like "The Nepo Prize" or "The Truthiness Award," which further blurred the lines between celebration and satire. As an attendee with a film having screened, I couldn't help but wonder; does winning a golden VHS make my film the best of the bad? Or does it make it the worst of the worst?

During speeches, everyone learned that this entire night stemmed from Danielle asking Stephen, "How do you wanna celebrate your 35th birthday?" In the end, it was that type of personality that the founders brought to the festival and made the event worth attending.

Evident through the "Natalie" chants was the fact that the youth left the most lasting impression. Because, in the end, all of these "youth" on screen were now adults with full-time jobs, mortgages to pay, and children of their own. It was hard to fathom – even through the VHS lines

on screen – how much time had truly passed since the making of these films. The iPhone. 9/11. Whatever Jojo Siwa is. At least for me, this realization humanized the night in a way most festivals never achieve (or even attempt to). I've been to HollyShorts. I've attended festivals at the Chinese Theater. Hell, I've even participated in the 48-Hour Film Festival. But nothing had been quite like this.

In an era of high-gloss, algorithm-driven content, this festival serves as a refreshing antidote and a one-of-a-kind experience. It's a celebration of human creativity in its rawest form, a nostalgic trip down memory lane, and a reminder that sometimes it's the *uglies* that make art truly beautiful. In the end, even if you're watching the worst movie of your life, you're still just watching a movie. This slate of student films served as a reminder that even at its worst, watching movies is never *that* bad. As the festival's catchy theme song suggests, *Don't be ashamed, We all were freaks* – especially when it comes to filmmaking.

