

SEATTLE WEEKLY

FILM

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Close to Home

The best efforts at regional film fest have strongly anchored roots.

By [Brian Miller](#)

IF SIFF IS LIKE getting your kid into the Ivy League, so far as Seattle filmmakers are concerned, the ninth **Local Sightings Film Festival** represents the honorable fall-back school that might actually deliver a better education. With six features and 50-plus shorts spread out over six days, Northwest filmmakers are less likely to get lost under the institutional weight of SIFF, whose local titles returning here are *Apart From That* and *Urban Scarecrow*. Both deserve your attention for their strong sense of place: Andrew McAllister's *Scarecrow* (7 p.m. Mon., Oct. 9) stages a coming-of-age tale along the derelict stretches of Route 99 where, as he told *Seattle Weekly* this spring, "the motels are falling apart, and yet the signs are really colorful and vibrant. It's almost like our Las Vegas Strip." By contrast, co-directors Jennifer Shainin and Randy Walker filmed their ensemble piece, *Apart From That* (7 p.m. Wed., Oct. 11), up in the Skagit Valley, using a few professional actors and many neophytes to relate overlapping tales of small-townish discontent, absurdism, and occasional comedy. It's like Cassavetes in the sticks.

Somewhat similar, but focused on two fraternal twins in their early 20s, is the festival opener *June & July*, the first feature from Seattle's Brady Hall (7 p.m. Fri., Oct. 6). June longs to escape from their hick town, while brother July has no problem with a place where nothing seems to happen. These bored orphans paint, party, and tend a pair of turtles, and the movie's initial pacing does reflect their aimless lives. Then, unexpectedly, plot starts seeping in—organically, in fact genetically—which makes Hall's tardy tempo seem more calculated. Nothing ever happens until something you don't want to happen does. Violence intrudes on the twins' lives, even as both are finding potential romantic partners.

There's an unhurried mossy regionalism at work here. Whether it's July pedaling his bike to work at a thrift shop or June on a drunken date, texture matters more than incident. In *Apart From That*, too, characters are implicitly defined by their environment—even if they're not actively complaining or plotting their escape. A rainy climate of inwardness prevails as everyone waits for the weather to



Ryan and Schopmeyer harmonize in *Yellow*.
sampo films

EXTRA INFO

Local Sightings Northwest Film Forum,
1515 12th Ave., 206-267-5380,
www.nwfilmforum.org. Free–\$8. Fri.,
Oct. 6–Wed., Oct. 11. See Web site for full
schedule and details.

break.

THIS IS WHY*Yellow*, from Portland's Nick Peterson, seems the sunniest and freshest of the bunch (7 p.m. Sat., Oct. 7). It's the most formally controlled and rigorously conceptualized, and yet it's also a delightful indie musical in which the performers spontaneously launch into song, in their own voices, with musicians performing live (both on and off camera) in the manner of an old-school Broadway show. The plot is thoroughly retro: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and . . . you'll have to see it yourself to learn how things turn out. Songwriter Eric Schopmeyer plays the office dweeb romantic lead opposite Nora Ryan's librarian. All their stumbling approaches and retreats are made more plausibly human by the vulnerability of their voices as they reach for the right note, clink teaspoons into the audio mix, and even accommodate extra instrumentation like the pinging buttons of a photocopier or the castanet clicks of an old Royal typewriter. The movie's hybrid sensibility is both vintage and modern; cell phones chirp in some scenes, while the librarian's A-line dresses wouldn't be out of place in a Doris Day picture.

Rather than simply falling into bed, as the title of one song goes, "Let's Be Prude." Peterson shows no less restraint in scenes shot through windows where the sound drops away entirely. If there are to be big communication gaps between these lovers, why should we be privy to every conversation? Yet *Yellow* isn't off-puttingly arty at all. As the librarian sings, "Why be like everyone else?" Stubbornly sticking to his legato cadences, aided considerably by two charming leads, Peterson has created a winning, offbeat breakthrough.

Lastly, though there are too many short films to track, those who enjoyed Linas Phillips' *Walking to Werner* at SIFF—in which he schlepped from Seattle to L.A. to meet Werner Herzog—won't want to miss *Ushtanka, the Mama Story* (9:30 p.m. Sat., Oct. 7), a portrait of his aged Lithuanian grandmother. Something like Scorsese's *Italianamerican*, it lovingly portrays an old soul shaped by a time and culture that no longer exist—someone, as Phillips says, "you never saw the way you should." Which is not a bad motto for the entire Local Sightings lineup.

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