

'Tim's Vermeer' Tackles the Nature of Art With Ingenuity

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Tim Jenison (R) demonstrates his first painting experiment to his friend, producer Penn Jillette (L).

By Joe Bendel

The sheer scarcity of Johannes Vermeer's paintings is guaranteed to maintain the art world's fascination. It was partly why the notorious forger Han van Meegeren was able to pass off a reportedly terrible fake on his National Socialist buyers—demand always outstrips good sense.

However, one entrepreneur might just stand the polite art world on its ear when he suggests that he can paint brand new Vermeers using 17th century technology. Inventor Tim Jenison's buddy Penn Jillette

basically dared him to prove it for posterity. Jenison's results are duly documented in Teller's "Tim's Vermeer," which opens in New York and Los Angeles on Jan. 31.

Building on the research of artist David Hockney and academic Philip Steadman, Jenison argues it is simply impossible for the human eye to perceive the photorealistic detail that distinguishes Vermeer's paintings. Using the scientific process circa 1650, Jenison develops a method to duplicate the Vermeer look. It is complicated, but like the best magic, it involves the use of mirrors.

Both Hockney and Steadman agree that Jenison is on to something, but to really prove the point, he embarks on an audacious experiment. He will re-create the setting of Vermeer's "The Music Lesson" in a San Antonio warehouse, where he will use his proposed technique to re-create rather than forge the Vermeer masterwork. However, what started as an intellectual pursuit becomes an endurance challenge over time.

Director Teller and producer-narrator Jillette strike a shrewd balance throughout "Tim's Vermeer," injecting enough caustic humor to satisfy their fans, but never upstaging Jenison's story. Frankly, it is a surprisingly provocative film that questions many widely held assumptions regarding the nature of art.

Hockney's participation is a particular coup. When he more or less buys into Jenison's system, it carries considerable weight.

Essentially, Jenison argues that Vermeer was the original

FILM REVIEW

'Tim's Vermeer'

Directors: Teller

Starring: Colin Blakemore
David Hockney
Tim Jenison

Run Time:

1 hour, 20 minutes

Release Date:

Jan. 31

Rating:

PG-13



photographer. The composition of "The Music Lesson" is still a work of art. He simply used a somewhat mechanical method to render it on canvas. Of course, he still had to do the work, which Jenison proves is a painstaking process.

Thanks to the developments in digital video, Teller and his associates were able to take an eccentric idea and fully follow through on it. It might shake up stodgier Academy members to hear Penn & Teller tipped for Oscar consideration, but they deserve to be in the mix. Consistently entertaining and rather shockingly erudite, it proves documentaries can cover prestigious subject matter but still be fun to watch.

Recommended for Penn & Teller fans and fine art connoisseurs, "Tim's Vermeer" opens Jan. 31 at Angelika Film Center 6 and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas..

Joe Bendel writes about independent film and lives in New York. To read his most recent articles, please visit: www.jbspins.blogspot.com

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From Off-Broadway to 3-D Film: 'Charlie Victor Romeo'

By Joe Bendel

FILM REVIEW

'Charlie Victor Romeo'

Directors: Robert Berger
Patrick Daniels
Karlyn Michelson

Starring: Robert Berger
Patrick Daniels
Noel Dinneen
Irving Gregory
Debbie Troche
Nora Woolley
Sam Zuckerman

Run Time:

1 hour, 30 minutes

Release Date:

Jan. 29



This is a rather bold programming choice, considering how many attending Sundance have flown in from New York and Los Angeles. Originally, it started as an Off-Broadway theater production, based on the real-life transcripts of black boxes recovered from plane crashes.

Though it retains the potentially stagey single cockpit set and the revolving ensemble, Robert Berger, Patrick Daniels, and Karlyn Michelson's "Charlie Victor Romeo" holds the distinction of being Sundance's first 3-D film, screening as part of the 2013 New Frontiers track.

For a film entirely depicting systems failures, it is ironically fitting that the screening I attended had to be presented in 2-D due to technical difficulties. While some of the schematics incorporated into the film might look cool in 3-D, it is hard to see how the film lends itself to the process.

The real story is the impressively realistic sound, designed by Jamie Mereness, recorded and edited by Kevin Reilly, and mixed by Joel Hamilton. The theatrical nature of the solitary set also becomes quite cinematic, thanks to the eerie lighting.

The constituent stories of "Charlie Victor Romeo" are a bit bracing, since in each case a plane is going down. The only question is how bad will it be. In general, the short ones are more disturbing. However, the clear dramatic highpoint of the film re-creates efforts to save a Peruvian flight that lost all instrumentation, including velocity and altitude, soon after takeoff.

The cast members are all quite

strong in their various roles, particularly Patrick Daniels (the director and co-writer of the original stage version) in the Lima installment. They quickly create convincing working relationships among the flight crews, which are almost immediately tested in crisis situations.

"Charlie Victor Romeo" is kind of like the parts of Zemeckis's "Flight" that audiences really want to see, played repeatedly with key variations each time. An intriguing application of technology to film (which is why it is a New Frontiers selection), but also an unusually faithful adaptation of a stage piece for the big screen, "Charlie Victor Romeo" is recommended for fearless flyers at Film Forum in New York beginning Jan. 29. Travel safe everyone.

Joe Bendel writes about independent film and lives in New York. To read his most recent articles, please visit: www.jbspins.blogspot.com