

'Train Driver's Diary' a bittersweet tale at the Orinda Theatre

By Sophie Braccini



image provided

It is so refreshing to see a movie that is unpredictable and not formatted to a specific framework. The latest offering from the International Film Showcase, "Train Driver's Diary" (Dnevnik masinovodje), a Serbia-Croatia co-production, by writer-director Milos Radović, is such an unclassifiable production: Is it a sweet fable, a tragi-comical coming of age movie, or a social satire? Fortunately, it does not matter. The story of train driver Iija and his maybe-son Sima is a touching piece of cinematic art, constantly oscillating between tears, smiles and sweetness.

Iija, played by Lazar Ristovski, is an older train driver. He has moved beyond grumpiness, with a skin thicker than his locomotive. The driver has seen much and has survived by closing up his emotions and affections. A 10-year-

old boy, Sima, crosses Iija's path, breaking into his life. As the child becomes a man, he too wants to become a train driver, to Iija's dismay. "Train Driver's Diary" grapples with a very real issue: how train operators deal with fatal accidents caused by the train they drive. In the 2014 article "Part of the Job: How Engineers Deal With Death on the Railroad" by Darren Orf, published on PopularMechanics.com, the reporter quoted statistics, stating, "It is not so much a matter of if an accident will happen, but when." The film meets the topic head-on, but treats it with irony and black humor, cutting through the drama. For example, Iija, after a particularly gruesome accident, meets with two railroad psychologists, but ends up being the one helping the two professionals cope with the reality he describes.

Sima has also been through a lot. He was allegedly dropped in front of an orphanage in a banana crate by parents "who did not love him and had no use for him."

He somehow grew up next to the closed-up Iija and his friends, who are all train drivers. They live in an unlikely village made of train cars very creatively converted into

unique lodging units. The little tribe's members support each other in order to survive the dramas they have all suffered.

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Gold Coast Chamber Players' fall concert features families of famous composers

By Sophie Braccini



Photo provided

Tickets are already getting scarce for the first concert of the season of the Gold Coast Chamber Players. The Lafayette orchestra has tripled the number of subscribers in recent years, surpassing the 100 count last year, so Pamela Freund-Striplen's group almost always plays to a full audience at its usual location: Lafayette Library and Learning Center Community Hall. The first concert on Sept. 23 this fall is "Family Business," featuring pieces from family members of famous composers, giving an opportunity to reflect on the inspiration and the links that run in families.

Every year the orchestra performs five concerts designed to create an experience around a theme. Freund-Striplen believes that the pre-concert talks play an important role in the pleasure people derive from the events.

Freund-Striplen explains that she constructs her programs in a multi-layered process, finding connections between composers, themes and players. She thinks of the people she wants to work with, of composers and pieces she wants performed, and then circumstances make the match. The director is in touch with musicians from all over the world and she says that somehow it always works out to create the unique events she brings to Lafayette.

This year the overarching theme is "youth." For example the Georges Enescu string quartet that Gold Coast will play for the third concert in February was composed in his youth. The director is extremely excited to present this moving epic piece in Lafayette, one of the first times in the Bay Area. Freund-Striplen wanted Romanian violinists to play the Romanian composition. She says that having musicians who were raised and

have studied music where it was composed give it a different sound, because they grew up with it. Similarly, for program five, the French Connection, a French cellist, Jean-Michel Fonteneau, will join the orchestra.

The first concert will include youthful work by Felix Mendelssohn and his sister, Fanny Hensel, by Mozart's sister, and a piece by Bach's youngest son Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach for violin, viola and piano – a sonata that Freund-Striplen characterizes as a very good piece rarely played.

The second concert on Oct. 28 is called Wayfarers. While teaching a master class with Zakarias Grafilo, Freund-Striplen learned that he had arranged several Mahler pieces for a smaller orchestra. He will come and play with other members of LiederAlive! Mahler Wayfarer Songs, with Kindra Scharich, mezzo-soprano.

The third concert is Fantezie on Feb. 3, featuring George Enescu, followed by Czech Mate on March 10. The director says that she would like to be able to present Czech music every year, exploring things that are not widely known.

The final concert on May 19 will open the festivities for the celebration of the city of Lafayette's 50th anniversary. The concert will present Lily Boulanger, one of the female composers Freund-Striplen likes to feature, in Ravel's Piano Trio in A Minor and Faure's Piano Quartet No. 2 with Alex Strauss, violin, Freund-Striplen, viola, and Jeffrey Sykes, piano.

The GCCP also continues to partner with Stanley Middle School, Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School and Campolindo High School educational programs.

For tickets, visit www.gcplayers.org.

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