

Cultural Daily

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Icarus

Patricia Goldstone · Thursday, January 19th, 2017

ICARUS, directed and written by Bryan Fogel with help from Mark Monroe, is one of the most insanely exhilarating pieces of performance art ever. But, like the testosterone high Fogel sets out to replicate, once the rush subsides it leaves, if not a hangover, an unpleasant ethical aftertaste behind.

Fogel, a comedian whose main credit is JEWTOPIA, an ABIE'S IRISH ROSE-type farce which received almost uniformly rotten reviews (LA Times critic Gary Goldstein said "To call this winkfest towards an astoundingly retrograde sliver of Judaism offensive would be, well, offensive to the word offensive"), is also a competitive cyclist who conceived the idea of imitating the doping programs used by athletes like Lance Armstrong in order to place in the legendary Tour de France. Imitation morphs into expose when Fogel fails, even on drugs, and turns to Don Catlin, founder of the UCLA Olympic Lab, to boost his performance. Catlin, a strange if not sinister figure who has supervised many US gold medalists and implies to Fogel that it's impossible for a clean athlete to succeed, introduces Fogel to his Russian counterpart Gregorio Rodchenko, head of what Rodchenko later admits on film to be Putin's state-sponsored athletic doping program, to initiate him into the tricks of the trade (It's interesting that Catlin, who from his own comments presumably knows a lot of the same tricks considering that America holds the largest number of gold medals on record, passes Fogel on in what could be perceived to be an entrapment).

Fogel is crazy enough to inject himself with massive doses of testosterone and record his transformation into a "medium-sized monster" on film along with his blossoming friendship with Rodchenko, an engagingly cynical rogue whose laughing mask drops when he reveals that his own mother used to inject him as a child to make him succeed in Russia's ruthlessly competitive athletic system, one of the country's few stepping-stones to economic comfort. When the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), which supported Rodchenko's candidacy, accused Russia of state-sponsored doping in order to ban it from the Rio Olympics in 2014, Rodchenko fears he may be tossed under the bus. Fogel obligingly helps him flee from Moscow and into US custody where he delivers massively damning documentary evidence that contaminates Putin's pet soft power project, the Sochi Olympics. Fogel goes to the New York Times, the FBI and the Department of Justice with Rodchenko's story in order to keep his prize "safe" from FSB threats against his life. The unfortunate Rodchenko disappears into the uncertain arms of the witness protection program, where he will never see his family again.

Fogel and his producers, Impact Partners, Diamond Documentaries, and Alex Productions, are left with an exciting film in their hands but one wonders what the larger consequences might be, not to

mention those immediately affecting Rodchenko. Only Putin knows how spoiling the Sochi Games might have impacted his distinctly hard-power decision to defy America by invading Ukraine the following year, or even to allegedly hack the U.S. election. As one journalist asked Fogel in the Q and A that followed the screening, “At what point did you become aware that this movie isn’t about you sticking needles in your ass?” Unfortunately, the auteur was not available to answer further questions.

Image: Icarus, directed by Bryan Fogel. Courtesy Sundance Institute.

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