Fantasia is about discovery. It’s about being adventurous enough to go into a Japanese film with a running time of four hours and 45 minutes, knowing nothing about it. I’m generally attracted to long films, because usually they have reasons for their excessive lengths. Sadly, HEAVEN’S STORY didn’t. Let’s not even talk about it. Or should we? I’ll be brief.

HEAVEN’S STORY

Takahisa Zeze’s simple revenge story (man kills an entire family, sole survivor swears vengeance, plot ensues) is unnecessarily stretched over an inordinate amount of years and multiple characters’ lives. Extremely frustrating and pointlessly overwrought, the movie takes us through various points of view that ultimately amount to nothing, and when it finally climaxes (or rather, collapses onto itself in one of the least thrilling conclusions ever put on screen), once can’t help but laugh at the pointlessness of the interminable exercise.

This so-called heaven’s story is divided into multiple chapters, and the whole five-hour experience—if you include an intermission—comes across as a series of terrible soap-opera episodes, with freeform cinematography and vague existentialist ambitions. Zeze (one of the

giants of contemporary pink cinema, alongside Shinji Imoaka and Hisayasu Sato, who both have far superior films showing at Fantasia) seems to totally lose interest in dramatic resonance and instead takes us through a painfully muddled and boring experience that could’ve easily been summed up in a decent 90-minute film. Sure, HEAVEN’S STORY transcends its medium, but being as tedious as life itself is not—in my book at least—a valid cinematic ambition.

Being who I am, I toughed through the entire five hours, occasionally thinking about PHASE 7, which I could’ve been watching across the street, or even CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER, which opened that day. It became apparent after 90 minutes that the film wouldn’t get any better, but I also accepted the endurance challenge and sat there, enduring the boundary-pushing experience. It’s not my first epic film-watching experience (I sat through Sion Sono’s excellent four-hour LOVE EXPOSURE at Fantasia in 2008, as well as Masaki Kobayashi’s nine-hour-45-minute postwar masterpiece THE HUMAN CONDITION in the past), but definitely my most painful one. Watching HEAVEN’S STORY with a small audience was endlessly amusing, though, as we all groaned and sighed as a group and pulled through together. In retrospect, I’m glad I did it, but wish I hadn’t—if that makes any sense.

BELLFLOWER

Sundance hit BELLFLOWER was easily one of my most anticipated films of the fest. Distributed by Oscilloscope Laboratories, responsible for bringing us great documentaries such as DEAR ZACHARY, EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP and DARK DAYS, as well as captivating fiction like RARE EXPORTS (also playing this year’s Fantasia) and riding high on hype from the festival circuit, BELLFLOWER promised to be thoroughly unique, and seemingly impossible to categorize. I went in having no idea as to what to expect, and left the theater shaken by the sheer ingenuity I had just witnessed on screen. And while it took me a few days

to piece together my reaction and opinions, I know now without a shadow of a doubt that BELLFLOWER is indeed the birth of an undisputable talent and one of the freshest voices to come out of the independent scene—indie in the truest sense, as the film was apparently shot on the staggeringly shoestring budget of $17,000.

Writer/director/producer/editor/actor/inventor Evan Glodell is as impressive a first-time director as it gets. The true auteur of his blazing first feature and head of Coatwolf Productions—which provided distinctive camerawork to the 2009 short film SAVANNA and has a bright future ahead of it—Glodell packs BELLFLOWER with MAD MAX and THE ROAD WARRIOR references, muscle cars and flamethrowers he built himself, as well as explosive moments of unexpected violence, thrown in the midst of a truly sweet yet ill-fated and destructive relationship.

Shot by Joel Hodge on Glodell’s own custom-built camera (the Coatwolf Model II, made of vintage parts, lenses and a digital camera core, all run through a Macbook strapped to a backpack, in turn jerry-rigged to a car battery), BELLFLOWER understandably looks like nothing you’ve seen. Managing to evoke the decayed look of vintage exploitation prints while having its own unique texture and aesthetic, BELLFLOWER knows better than to fall into the annoyingly overused nostalgic look of fauxploitation (which the film definitely isn’t) and instead bombards your eyes with gorgeous tilt-shift photography, worn-out amber-colored vistas, suffocating lighting and a brilliant use of rack and soft focus, all of which is truly unique, refreshing and mesmerizing.

Employing a loose, disjointed chapter structure, the film’s kinetic and carefree approach to storytelling will bring to mind the flow of some of Jean-Luc Godard’s most energetic work—BREATHLESS, VIVRE SA VIE—except BELLFLOWER is dark, twisty and steeped in a love for genre cinema that has nothing to do with the French New Wave—outside of my own brain’s propensity for overconnectivity and the film’s actual loose structure. Is BELLFLOWER the dawn of a New Wave of independent American filmmaking? Perhaps.

Following the romantic relationship between Woodrow (Glodell) and Milly (Jessie Wiseman), as well as his time spent with Aiden (Tyler Dawson)—time mostly spent building cars and flamethrowers, drinking abusively and hoping for the end of the world so they can roam the Earth with their Mother Medusa gang—BELLFLOWER is perhaps one of the most disturbingly male films ever made, and that is exactly where it finds its strengths. Starting off as an almost naturalistic romance and genuine “bromance” (realism augmented by obvious improvisation from the actors, providing dialogue almost uncomfortably close to real-life interactions), the film quickly goes into unexpectedly dark places, taking you through an oblique and fiery black hole

of nihilism, misogyny and self-destruction.

Rather than being exploitative, though, the narrative split serves the heartfelt study of manhood at hand, looking into its appetite for destruction, inherent aggressiveness, obsessions and interests. Rounding out the already considerably fractured storyline, the film’s darker moments enhance the dreamlike qualities of the overall narrative brilliantly, shining a whole new light on Woodrow’s delusions as well as augmenting the film’s exploration of boyhood on the brink of manhood. An unconventional post-coming-of-age film of sorts, BELLFLOWER is as scrambled-up and ethereal as it should be, and its stark look into friendship, relationships and masculinity should sweep you off your feet.

Having already garnered considerable praise and success, Glodell and his motley crew of DIY filmmakers are ones to look out for. Make a point of seeing BELLFLOWER when it goes into limited theatrical release beginning this Friday, August 5.