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By Keith Powers

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FILM: Extreme endurance storytelling

Everyone endures difficulties. The lengthy pain of an illness. The challenge of completing a marathon. The extended drama of a breakup.

Some of endure separation from home, and loved ones - sometimes permanent separation. Dutch artist Guido van der Werve examines such separation, weaving together the stories of Frederic Chopin and Alexander the Great in a compelling narrative film exhibition, "Nummer veertien, home," on view now in the Davis Museum on the campus of Wellesley College.

Van der Werve weaves his many talents - composer, triathlete, filmmaker - into an exhaustive personal journey. He travels from the burial site of Chopin's heart - the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw - to Chopin's grave at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, swimming, cycling and running the entire 1700 kilometers: more than seven times the Ironman triathlon distance, as he points out.

He does so to embrace Chopin's dying wish - which was carried out by his sister - that his heart be buried in his native land, even though he died far away in France. The film begins with van der Werve at the piano, in the Warsaw church, an empty silver cup on the keyboard. It's a scene that recalls Chopin's own Romantic gesture; he carried a silver cup filled with soil from Poland when he left the country at age 20, never to return.

In three movements, the score (by van der Werve) divided into the 12 sections of the mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Agnus Dei, etc.), van der Werve is filmed completing the exhausting endurance test. He swims alone, in a frightfully swift moving river. He then takes to the bike, riding almost 1400 kilometers across Germany, the Netherlands and into France. He runs the final leg, almost 300 kilometers, arriving exhausted, into Paris.

The film makes some digressions along the way. Van der Werve visits Chopin's birthplace, and fills the cup with dirt. Several sections veer off to tell the story of Alexander the Great, with scenes from his birthplace in Greece, his voyage to Egypt, and his final battlefield in India. Like Chopin, Alexander also left his homeland at age 20 - for entirely different reasons - never to return.

"Nummer veertien, home" becomes a deeply meditative experience for the viewer. The score, set mostly for string ensemble and large choir, who appear throughout the film, invokes the mesmerizing music of sacred minimalists like Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki. The cinematography, shot mainly in overcast or evening light conditions, mutes the individual and focuses the viewer on the demanding task, and the scenery's geometric shapes.

Some disturbing non sequiturs - an explosion, van der Werve setting himself on fire, or being hoisted by a crane in a crucifixion-like moment - add an anomalous quality. The narrative, which begins at the top of every hour and lasts about 50 minutes, can be appreciated in random parts for its visual and sonic appeal, but is best experienced through the invigorating beginning-to-end of the triathlon.

This work, originally shown at Luhring-Augustine Gallery in New York, continues van der Werve's "Nummer" series. In others he has walked precipitously in front of an ice breaker, run for 12 hours around his home, and stood rotating at the top of the world after journeying to the North Pole. In these, as in "Nummer veertien, home," van der Werve has created intensely engaging art by melding history, extreme activity and music.

"Nummer veertien, home"

WHEN: Through July 20

WHERE: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 781-283-2051. www.davismuseum/wellesley.edu



"Guido van der Werve: Nummer veertien, home" Courtesy Photo/ Luhring Augustine Gallery

<http://brookline.wickedlocal.com/article/20140417/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/140416468>

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