

STRAD STYLE

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A documentary about the making of a great violin... maybe.

Various Length synopsis

(250 characters)

A rural Ohio hillbilly with an obsession for 'Stradivari' and all things violin, through the magic of social-media, convinces a famous European concert violinist that he can make a copy of one of the most famous and valuable violins in the world.

(50 words)

A documentary about a backwoods dreamer, living in rural Ohio with an unlikely obsession for 'Stradivari' and all things violin, who, through the magic of social-media, convinces a famous European concert violinist that he can make a copy of one of the most famous and valuable violins in the world.

(40 words)

A rural Ohio dreamer with an obsession for 'Stradivari' and all things violin, through the magic of social-media, convinces a famous European concert violinist that he can make a copy of the most famous and valuable violin in the world.

(76 words)

If you had one chance to change your life, would you take it? STRAD STYLE is the documentary of an eccentric recluse in rural Ohio who is commissioned by a virtuoso violinist to build a replica of one of the most famous violins in history, and he has no idea if he can pull it off. Fighting time, poverty, and most of all – himself – Danny Houck puts everything on the line for one shot at glory.

(381 words)

In his own words, 32-year-old Danny Houck is "a nobody." He's an eccentric recluse living in a ramshackle farmhouse in the backwater town of Laurelville, Ohio. He has no job, no money, and no prospects. But he does have an obsession: violins. Specifically, he's obsessed with the two most acclaimed violin-makers in history: Stradivari, and Guarneri del Gesu. Danny's enthusiasm is absolute, but his talent is not. He's never had any training in violin-making, so his "technique" is one part pictures on the internet, one part trial and error, and one part mania.

While both produce beautiful sound, the key visual difference between Stradivari and Guarneri violins is style. Guarneri are rugged looking, but Stradivari are immaculate.

Danny knows his craftsmanship is closer to the asymmetry of Guarneri, but his greatest dream is to have “Strad Style.”

Through Facebook, Danny “friends” virtuoso violinist Razvan Stoica, who (Danny discovers) has always dreamed of playing one of the most famous violins in the world: Guarneri’s Il Cannone. **Danny convinces Razvan that he can make him a perfect replica in time for Razvan’s next big concert in Amsterdam in June.** It’s November in Ohio, and Danny can’t afford to pay his heating bill, but this is his one shot at glory. At the very least, it’s his one shot at getting out of the house. Either way, he has to try.

Now all he has to do is teach himself to make an exact copy of a nearly 300-year-old violin – in seven months.

After studying detailed photos of the original Il Cannone, Danny scrounges for violin materials throughout the harsh Ohio winter. He works on the violin in his bedroom at all hours, bundled against the cold – occasionally warming himself at the kitchen stove. Though at times seeking advice and help from a local violin-maker, Danny is largely on his own. Nearly everything that can go wrong does, from frozen glue to cheap tools to blistering varnish. Hilarity and heartbreak ensue as he fails more often than he succeeds, and has to start all over again – and again.

Danny’s only companions are his comically oddball cousin, his contentious mother, and the occasional mouse. As the deadline looms, Danny grapples with loneliness, inexperience, and his own peculiarity – as he attempts to faithfully reproduce Il Cannone.

Filmmaker Stefan Avalos was embedded with Danny Houck as a one-man film crew for eight months, extensively documenting Danny’s life and work round-the-clock. What emerges from this in-depth sojourn is an unflinching portrait of an unusual person on the universal quest for transcendence. STRAD STYLE is an offbeat, intimate, and unexpectedly heartwarming story about the potential – and the limits – of the human spirit.

Director's statement

Strad Style started as a very different movie. Having been a classical violinist before becoming a filmmaker, I've had a lifelong awareness of 'obsession' in regard to the violin. Indeed, one *must* be obsessed to succeed in the classical music world in any way. The original film was to be broad examination of various centuries-old obsessions with the violin – be it those of scientists, makers, players, collectors or thieves. Through the musical grapevine, I'd heard of an eccentric violinmaker living in rural Ohio who took things to an extreme. With rumors of "Heifetz" and "Stradivari" tattoos, candle magic to summon old masters, and other hard-to-believe anecdotes, I thought it might make for an amusing five or ten minute sojourn in the movie.

I had been shooting all over the United States and Europe for two years before making the trek to Laurelville, Ohio to film this part of the story. Within a few hours I realized I'd been handed gold; Daniel Houck was a movie absolutely unto himself. I set all other ideas and footage aside and for the next year, immersed myself in his world. In Danny, I found someone obsessed -- but also intelligent, funny, full of the hopes, dreams and frustrations we all have -- and willing to shamelessly wear it all on his sleeve in front of a camera.

Strad Style is a movie with the violin and violin making as a central premise, but it is not really a movie about the violin. It's a story about trying to reach for the stars. It's a story we can all relate to. And Danny is damn funny, too.

BIOS

Stefan Avalos - Director

Stefan's early life started out being trained as a classical violinist. As a violinist, he won major competitions and was a soloist with, among others, the Philadelphia orchestra. Though touted a child prodigy, even at an early age he knew his true love was film.

Flash Forward -

In 1997, Stefan partnered with Lance Weiler to write, direct, produce and co-star in the award winning, *The Last Broadcast*. *The Last Broadcast* received international acclaim as being "the first desktop based feature film", heralding the digital revolution in filmmaking. In October 1998, *The Last Broadcast* made cinematic history with the first fully digital national theatrical release of a feature film via satellite. In 1999, *The Last Broadcast* became the first feature motion picture to screen digitally at the Cannes Film Festival.

Stefan has been recognized as "one of the twenty five people helping to reinvent entertainment..." by *Wired* magazine.

Other work includes writing/directing the crime-thriller, *The Money Game* and the supernatural thriller, *The Ghosts of Edendale*. Extensive work in television led to the creation of a boutique studio, Caveman Post, which specializes in Visual Effects.

In 2012, in a return to his early musical roots, he conceived of a project about the violin world that would eventually become *Strad Style*.

In 2016, after a nearly four-year production -- he completed the feature documentary, *Strad Style*, which he produced, directed, edited and shot.

Daniel Houck - Subject

As a young child, when able to afford them, his mother took him to classical concerts. This led to violin lessons – which of course ended when teenage years came along. Through his early twenties, he bounced through various “careers” in custom upholstery, car painting, and most bizarrely, body removal – yes, dead body removal –before returning to the violin, this time not to play but to build. Though not formally trained in any way, Danny absorbed knowledge via books and the Internet, building violins that, amazingly, were quite good. Now, completely immersed in the world of the violin, Danny strives to make a violin that approaches “Strad Style”, an expression he coined for “perfection”.

Razvan Stoica - Subject

Razvan Stoica is an eminent concert violinist who, in 2013 upon winning the Euro Broadcast Competition, Slovakia, Bratislava, was recognized as “The best violinist under thirty years old”.

Stoica has been awarded over 35 prizes in various international competitions, including the “Strad Prize” Competition, held in Salzburg Austria. As part of this honor, he was given long-term access to a 1729 Stradivari. He uses this violin for many of his performances.

In 2010, together with his sister, pianist, Andreea Stoica, Stoica formed “Het Kamerata Stradivarius”. This orchestra has toured throughout Europe to rave reviews.

Stoica, as a soloist, as a duo with his Andreea, or as the conductor of the orchestra is almost continually on tour or in studio, recording.

His most recent album is “Strad Style” is a solo album recorded on the violin made by Daniel Houck in the movie of the same name.

Stoica is on the Universal Record Romania Label.

Festivals (as of Feb 22, 2017)

Important: Please confirm with Stefan Avalos if Festival has officially announced.

Past

Announced: 2017 Slamdance Grand Jury Prize winner – Best Documentary

Announced: 2017 Slamdance Audience Award Prize winner – Best Documentary

Upcoming

Announced: 2017 Salem Film Festival – Official Selection

Announced: 2017 Florida Film Festival – Official Selection

Announced: 2017 Dallas International Film Festival – Official Selection

Can announce 2017 Sonoma International Film Festival – Official Selection

Not yet announced 2017 Martha's Vineyard Film Festival – Official Selection

Not yet announced 2017 Columbus Film Festival – Official Selection

Not yet announced 2017 Hot Docs – Official Selection

Not yet announced 2017 Mammoth Lakes – Official Selection

Not yet announced 2017 Mendocino Film Festival – Official Selection

PRESS

LA TIMES

[ENTERTAINMENT MOVIES](#)

Can an amateur craftsman, on the floor of his unheated home, duplicate a world-famous violin? That's the central question of the 'Strad Style' doc



[Kenneth Turan](#)

He started playing at age 2½ and had his debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra when he was 10. So when film director Stefan Avalos says “I’ve never not known the violin,” he is not being hyperbolic.

But even Avalos had never met anyone like Danny Houck, the violin-obsessed subject of his irresistible, way-stranger-than-fiction documentary “Strad Style,” which screened this week at Sundance’s cross-town rival, Slamdance.

An eccentric loner living on next to no money in a rundown farmhouse in little-known Laurelville, Ohio, Houck lives and breathes the violin. “His knowledge is encyclopedic, he will tell you things you never knew,” reports Avalos. “He is absolutely obsessed and immersed in the thing.”

More than that, Houck somehow contrives to build violins as well. And when he agreed to make an exact copy of Guarneri’s Il Cannone (the great Paganini’s instrument and one of the most famous violins ever made) for a rising European star, a personal and professional journey that almost defies belief began.

Avalos, who eventually transferred allegiance from music to movies, was contemplating something else entirely when Houck crossed his path. “I had been working for two years on a wide-ranging documentary about the obsession people had with the great violins, about the makers, the players, the collectors and the thieves,” he says.

“I heard through the grapevine, from a player at the Columbus Symphony,” Avalos continues, “about a guy who lived in the middle of nowhere and was really obsessed with making violins. I thought he would make an amusing five-minute bit in my film.”

It's like saying you can make a NASCAR racing car without having seen an engine block. — director Stefan Avalos

But once the director met Houck, who has a tattoo of great violinist Jascha Heifetz on one of his arms and the great violin maker Stradivari on his calf, everything changed.

“Within half an hour I had a whole different movie in mind,” Avalos says. “For a documentary filmmaker, Danny was a dream subject. He was quirky, intelligent, great on camera, the whole works.”

Avalos set aside two years of interview footage and decided on another, more observational tack here. “I really tried to channel Frederick Wiseman and the Maysles brothers, to provide a slice of life.”

Houck, who is bipolar, had played the violin as a child and had decided to make them because it was the only way he could afford to own one. “He used the Internet, read books before that,” Avalos says. “He had raw, untrained talent, a real gift, but he was completely self-taught.”

Soon after Avalos had made the decision to change the focus of his film, Houck told him that, via Facebook, he’d made friends with a rising European violin star named Razvan Stoica. Says Avalos, “Razvan was obsessed with Paganini and told Danny, ‘My dream violin would be Il Cannone.’ When Danny told me he had offered to make Razvan a copy, that’s when bells went off.”

Plans and diagrams of Il Cannone exist, but Houck had never seen the actual violin. “That was pretty audacious, like saying you can make a NASCAR racing car without having seen an engine block.”

Plus Houck’s work spaces, which sometimes included spreading out on the floor of his unheated house, were not exactly pristine, “so it was like trying to discover a new element in your kitchen.”

Even more unnerving, when Los Angeles-based Avalos decided to devote himself to this project, coming out to Ohio a week or two at a time over a nine-month period, he’d never had a chance to hear how one of Houck’s earlier instruments actually sounded.

“I’d call my girlfriend and she’d say, ‘Have you played one yet?’” the filmmaker remembers. “Finally I got the chance and the tone was just gorgeous. I called and told her, ‘I played one, it’s good!’ I didn’t know whether he was delusional or not. It was a big relief.”

But could Houck pull off Il Cannone in time for the European concert Stoica needed it for? That was an entirely different question, with the answer in doubt even within the last 24 hours of the deadline.

Not in doubt, Avalos reports, was the audience response at the first Slamdance screening on Saturday. “It was beyond anything I could have expected,” he says. “They applauded all through the end credits and then gave it a standing ovation.”

As for the director himself, “I’ve watched it about 150 times and I still have an emotional reaction. That’s not supposed to happen, a magician is not supposed to be wowed by his own tricks. It has absolutely exceeded my expectations.”


Strad Style documentary review: a heart full of violins (#Slamdance2017)

by [MaryAnn Johanson](#)

Wed Feb 08 2017, 08:18pm | [no comments yet](#)



MaryAnn's quick take...

Wonderful; so funny and strange and human. An amazing portrait of a fascinating character, beautifully told with enormous suspense and tenderness. 

I'm "biast" (pro): nothing

I'm "biast" (con): nothing

(what is this about? see my [critic's minifesto](#))

I could be a famous violin maker... if I had the energy and drive to do it." So laments amateur

violin maker Danny Houck, who lives in rural Ohio, has no training in crafting musical instruments, and isn't even a woodworker ("but I am a sculptor," he offers). He doesn't seem to have much of anything except a passion for classical music and for great violins, such as the very famous ones built by Antonio

Stradivari, which are among the most expensive and most storied on the planet. And now Houck has convinced hot up-and-coming European violinist Razvan Stoica — whom Houck met online — to let him make a replica of a famous violin by Guarneri del Gesu, the only significant rival to Stradivari's legendary status.



Sure, it looks nice, but what is it gonna sound like?

Wait, what? A renowned violin player has agreed to buy, sight unseen and — more importantly — sound unheard an expensive musical instrument from some fanboy he met on the Internet? Something seems hinky there. But the other side of the coin is equally, well, *off*: Can Houck actually do what he has promised, and in time for the big concert in Amsterdam Stoica wants to play the violin at? Houck shows some of the other violins he has made to filmmaker Stefan Avalos (himself a violinist) as Avalos

documents Houck's oddball creative odyssey, but what do they sound like? (We never hear.) Does Houck even play? (We never learn.) *Does he know what the merry frickin' heck he's doing?*

I don't think I've ever found myself growing so tense watching a documentary as I was with *Strad Style*. This is a wonderful movie, so funny and strange and human, in part because it becomes increasingly

painful to watch, in the most entertainingly bittersweet way, as Houck stumbles over his own ambitions and runs smack into his own limitations. I was reminded of another terrific documentary about artistic dreams that seem bigger than the talent needed to realize them: [American Movie](#), about a wannabe filmmaker who cannot get his shit together, creatively or otherwise. I had a dreadful feeling Houck's violin was going to be unplayable, or never even finished, and that would be unbearable, because his many troubles and foibles aside, Houck comes across as a good person and I really liked him. Or was I watching another [Catfish](#), the doc about how on the Internet it's easy to pretend to be someone you're not, and the human needs that fuel fakers? I suspected naïveté on both sides of this transaction, and perhaps malice on the European side: Was that really Stoica on the other end of that online text chat? If it was him, had Stoica been misled about Houck's violin-making abilities? Dear god, the many ways in which this story could end in disappointment and disaster!

Strad Style's feel-bad, feel-weird, feel-good emotional journey is unforgettable...

Strad Style just had its world premiere at Slamdance Film Festival (a sort of punk little brother to Sundance), where it won both Documentary Feature Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award for Documentary Feature, and well deserved those prizes are. This is an absolutely amazing portrait of a

fascinating character, his story told beautifully and with enormous suspense and tenderness. I hope it gets picked up by a distributor who can give it as wide a release as possible, because *Strad Style's* feel-bad, feel-weird, feel-good emotional journey is unforgettable, and I want as many people as possible to experience it.

viewed as part of [Slamdance 2017](#)

The Film Stage

Written by **C.J. Prince** on January 27, 2017

Strad Style

Slamdance 2017 Review

Independent; 105 minutes

Director: Stefan Avalos

Social media can lead to strange things, as evidenced in **Stefan Avalos'** documentary *Strad Style*. Avalos profiles Danny Houck, a 32-year-old living in small-town Ohio at an old, rotting farmhouse, where the stairs literally crumble beneath his feet. He's unemployed, behind on his bills, and unable to find work, but finds an outlet to take up all of his free time: violins. He's fascinated with the work of Stradivari and Guarneri, considered to be the greatest violin makers of all-time (their instruments have sold for millions at auctions), and wants to make his own violins despite having no experience. Houck also spends his time online, and it's through YouTube that he discovers Razvan Stoica, who's seen as one of the best violinists working today.

Stoica, who uses social media regularly, started talking to Houck after noticing a comment he made on his Facebook page, and their communication leads to Houck making a bold promise: he will build an exact replica of Guarneri's violin 'Il Cannone' for Stoica, even though he doesn't really know how to properly build a violin from scratch. That's where *Strad Style* begins, with Avalos following Houck over several months as he tries to deliver on his promise, fighting off his own limitations along with making sure the heat and electricity don't get cut off.

Beside Houck himself, the most fascinating thing about *Strad Style* is how it demystifies the creative process. A series of title cards in the opening minutes explain how Stradivari and Guarneri are the gold standard of violins, and no matter how much people try to imitate, it's impossible to know what exactly makes these specific instruments better than the rest. Houck doesn't bother himself with the importance of the work he's trying to copy; he just wants to get his project finished and make sure it doesn't fail. That means doing whatever he can with his financial limitations, and Avalos focuses on the small, unglamorous steps taken to achieve an accurate replica. There's something funny about comparing the romanticism and mystery surrounding Guarneri's construction of his violin with Houck using a space heater and tinfoil lining a plastic tub from Wal-Mart to build his.

Houck's near-delusional commitment to following through on his promise makes it easy to admire his dedication, and by the time he boards a plane to bring the final product to Stoica in Amsterdam it's hard not to root for him to succeed. That's largely due to Avalos, who doesn't cast a judgmental eye at his subject. At first glance, there are plenty of things that can paint Houck as an eccentric who can easily be laughed off, whether it's his need to wear a bandana at all times, his practicing of magick, or his very *Grey Gardens*-esque living conditions. Avalos doesn't go for easy laughs here, nor does he make fun of Houck's even stranger relatives who pop in and out of the film from time to time. Instead, he shows Houck as someone with a very specific passion and no real outlet for it. With the help of Stoica and Facebook, Houck finds a way to show off his potential, and Avalos is lucky enough to step back and let the remarkable story speak for itself.

Strad Style premiered at the Slamdance Film Festival.

Filmmaker Magazine

by [David Leitner](#)

in [Festivals & Events](#), [Filmmaking](#)

on Jan 25, 2017

Slamdance Notes: If Fitzcarraldo Made a Violin



Razvan Stoica clutching exact copy of Niccolò Paganini's famous "Il Cannone," made for him by Danny Houck, right, in Stefan Avalos's "*Strad Style*", as he prepares to serenade the Slamdance audience with Marie-Annick Nicolas's "*Introduction Et Tarantelle, Op. 43*." (Photo David Leitner)

by [David Leitner](#)

in [Festivals & Events](#), [Filmmaking](#)

on Jan 25, 2017

Slamdance remains the little festival that could, a throwback to analog film festivals of the early 1980s, with their cinema-obsessed audiences and packed makeshift screening rooms. A halcyon age of innocence, before the onslaught of marketing, branding, corporate sponsorship, publicists, producer reps, agents, and social media.

At Slamdance there's still no red carpet and no one checks your bags or makes you open your coat for inspection before entering every screening.

Nonetheless every year Slamdance, with its tiny slate, upstages Sundance with one or two films that soar. This year's not-to-be-missed Slamdance film is Stefan Avalos's [Strad Style](#).

Strad Style has more than enough quirk to win a slot in Sundance's U.S. Dramatic Competition or edgier Next and New Frontier sections. The main character is a societal outlier with a taste for Steven Van Zandt headscarves, who survives rural Ohio winters alone in a derelict farmhouse without heat, his bipolar disorder mostly under control. His waking hours are preoccupied with the 18th-century rivalry between the Guarneri and Stradivari violin makers of 18th century Cremona, Italy.

Online he friends an acclaimed Romanian violinist, Razvan Stoica, on tour in Europe. He Facebooks his new friend with an offer to build a replica of the famous Guarneri played by Paganini, "Il Cannone," the Cannon, named for its fiery, booming sound. Can it be ready for an upcoming concert in Amsterdam?, asks the violinist. Almost done with it, replies Danny Houck. Except that we in the audience know otherwise.

Strad Style, however, is a documentary, not a fictional contrivance. It's a beautifully shot shaggy-dog story with an overcoming-adversity theme and fairy-tale outcome Hollywood would kill for, which leaves audiences applauding through tears.

Where could a work like this fit into Sundance's U.S. Documentary Competition, in which every film this year (perhaps one exception) contains an urgent social justice or environmental theme, along with an impressive credits list of major foundation support?

I'm all for social-justice documentaries, having filmed them in El Salvador during the war, Chile during Pinochet, northwest Pakistan after the earthquake. And I do realize our precarious moment in national and world politics. But I, too, once programmed a documentary festival (New York's "docfest" in the late 1990s) and must point out that nonfiction film as a narrative form can be every bit as faceted, poetic, open to idiosyncratic expression, even whimsy, as written nonfiction. (Think *Grey Gardens*, early Werner Herzog.) If Sundance documentary programmers understand this too, it's not much in evidence in this year.

It's worth noting that *Strad Style* is a true independently produced documentary. No institutional support in the credits. When Stefan Avalos, a violinist himself, followed his gut instinct that Danny Houck would prove a compelling subject, he had no way of knowing what would transpire after he began filming, or how any of it would turn out. Or how long he would continuously have to film to collect enough of a story to make a worthwhile film. How do you frame any of this as a proposal for a program officer?

In other words, Avalos — who envisioned, shot, sound-recorded, edited, animated, produced & directed — green-lighted himself.

Bravissimo!

ParkRecord

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‘Strad Style’ and ‘Dim the Fluorescents’ captured hearts at Slamdance

Festival wraps with boisterous ceremony

The Thursday-night ceremony at Treasure Mountain Inn was rambunctious, rowdy, irreverent and heartfelt, meaning it was the perfect way to end the 2017 Slamdance Film Festival.

In the end, the Jury Award for Documentary Feature and Audience Award for Documentary Feature went to Stefan Avalos' "Strad Style," an inspirational and quirky film about Danny Houck, a man living in Ohio who is so obsessed with violins that he attempts to make one, without any training, for world-renowned violinist Razvan Stoica.

Academy Award-nominated director, cinematographer and producer Adrian Belic, known for his work on the documentaries "Ganghis Blues," "Beyond the Call" and "Happy," was on hand to give the Documentary Feature Jury Award, known as a Sparky, to Avalos and Houck.

"This is for a film that captures the journey of passion and commitment, honesty and the triumph of one's vision against all odds," he said.

Avalos' was visibly surprised as he accepted his second award of the evening.

"This is amazing," Avalos said. "As all you guys know, making movies is a long journey. You wonder if you're making junk or making something good. So to be here now is incredible

<http://www.hammertonail.com>

STRAD STYLE

Craftwork

by [Christopher Llewellyn Reed](#)

January 28, 2017



(The [2017 Slamdance Film Festival](#) kicked off on January 20 and ran through January 26. The HtN staff repped Slamdance hard with reviews like this one, Documentary Grand Prize Winner [Strad Style](#).)

[Strad Style](#), a new documentary from director Stefan Avalos ([The Ghosts of Edendale](#)), tells a remarkable true-life story about one man and a seemingly impossible dream. Daniel Hoult, a self-taught violin maker (in his spare time) from Laurelville, Ohio, lives on limited funds in a ramshackle house without heat. One day, he befriends up-and-coming classical violinist [Razvan Stoica](#) on Facebook and offers to make him a replica of a legendary violin, the 1743 “[Il Cannone](#),” by [Giuseppe Guarneri](#) (known as “del Gesu”). Hoult, it turns out, has always seen himself in Guarneri, a talented, if temperamental and disorganized, craftsman, though his friends early on nicknamed him “Strad” after the better-known (and more disciplined) [Antonio Stradivari](#), del Gesu’s contemporary. Hoult sees the challenge of recreating “Il Cannone” as his own manifest destiny, and though the task is daunting, he brooks no thoughts of failure.

To complicate matters, Stoica requests that Hoult have the violin ready in eight months, as he’d like to use it for a concert in Amsterdam. Somehow, then, with almost no resources, Hoult must fulfill his promise to Stoica. The film documents, in close proximity, the 8 months from start to finish. Hoult is quite a character, a man as comfortable with car engines, farm animals and tattoos as he is with a gracefully carved wood. In fact, his versatility proves stunning: what he is able to accomplish, on his own, with virtually no money, beggars belief. The process, however, is not smooth, for Hoult’s comparison of himself to Guarneri is not made loosely, his own manic energy both obstacle and opportunity to success. Embedded in Hoult’s house, Avalos, a one-man film crew, captures it all, both the good and the bad, allowing Hoult to ramble and digress on camera. So often, it seems as if the poor man, talent and all, may not make it, yet watching him struggle is part of the beauty of the film.

No detailed plot spoilers here; you'll have to watch the film yourself to see exactly how it all turns out. Let's just say that it's a deeply satisfying bit of cinematic storytelling. Avalos, himself, is a classically trained violinist, so he brings a great understanding and appreciation of that craft to this movie. Always present, yet never obtrusive – it's almost as if Hoult is talking to himself, or to us, so quiet does the director usually remain – Avalos shows us a true creator at work, the obsessive builder as artist. It remains unclear, at the end, what will happen next for Hoult, but we can only hope that he rises above the demons that have heretofore kept him from realizing his full potential and embraces the new opportunities on the horizon. I'm sure that this film, a brilliant testament to his strengths, can only help. Watch *Strad Style*, then, and become a fan.

Slamdance Film Review: Strad Style

By Kathy Zhou [kathy@slugmag.com]

Posted January 21, 2017 in [Movie Reviews](#)

Tags: [Slamdance](#), [Slamdance 2017](#), [Stefan Avalos](#)

Strad Style

Slamdance

Film

Festival

Director: Stefan Avalos

Danny Houck is a 32-year-old eccentric. He wears a long scarf around his head at almost all times, and he has a mania for violins. In particular, he's obsessed with the two greatest violinmakers in musical history, the Masters of Cremona: **Antonio Stradivari** and **Guarneri del Gesu**. Living alone in a farmhouse in the rural Laurelville, Ohio, Danny has no job and no prospects, but he does have a nickname from his Myspace days—**Strad**, after Stradivari—which he proudly wears on his truck's vanity plate and embroidered on the back of his vest.

Somehow through Facebook, Danny virtually befriends the world-renowned European violinist **Razvan Stoica**. Over Facebook Messenger, Stoica talks about his dream violin: the **Paganini Il Cannone**, a Guarnerius and one of the most valuable instruments in the world. After Danny tells Stoica that he can recreate the violin for him, Danny sets off on a passion project—turned—quest for glory.

The thing is, Danny considers himself a sculptor and woodworker, but not at all a violinmaker. He's never had any training, relying instead on the internet, the violin-making masters of the past—who, he feels, spiritually guide him—the kindhearted guidance by Ohio-based fine violin maker **Rodger Stearns**, and a

little bit of magic. When Stoica reaches out to Danny about having the violin ready for a summertime performance of Paganini in Amsterdam, Danny finds himself booking a flight for his first-ever trip abroad and racing to beat the clock—and all odds.

Director Stefan Avalos' *Strad Style* has us cheering for Danny from beginning to end. With the exception of his active social media presence and his supportive best friend, **David Campbell**, Danny leads a fairly reclusive life. He talks out loud a lot, though, making for an entertaining ongoing narrative throughout the film. We follow along as Danny laboriously examines and fits the pieces of his Il Cannone recreation together, meticulously shaving the wood and chiseling away at each piece. We also follow along in other aspects of Danny's life: when he goes on a shopping trip with his mother, **Mary Houck**, or when he briskly sprays his head with some sort of liquid to help thicken his hair.

Danny's earnestness, enthusiasm and seeming self-confidence make for an immensely curious yet charming lead subject, and Avalos' documentary follows suit. Avalos intersperses Danny's story with a score of vigorous violin music and playful tendencies, like the occasional, silent-film-style text and, in one instance, a dramatized, animated rendering of the time that a mouse apparently ran off with Danny's violin sound post.

With the impending date of Stoica's concert, Danny finds himself burdened more and more by mounting uncertainty, self-doubt and the pressure to succeed, and Avalos keeps us on our toes until the very end. Danny's story is one of fervor, for history, art and craft—and how that fervor can come from the most wonderfully unpredictable of places. One of *Slamdance* 2017's documentary treasures, *Strad Style* is as deeply heartfelt as it is riveting. —*Kathy Zhou*

<i>Documentary</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>Grand</i>	<i>Jury</i>	<i>Prize</i>	<i>Winner</i>
<i>Audience Award for Documentary Feature Winner</i>					

FILM PULSE

Slamdance 2017: STRAD STYLE Review

January 22, 2017

Adam Patterson

DIRECTED by: Stefan Avalos

Stefan Avalos' *Strad Style* opens with an ominous shot of the lead subject, Daniel Houck, burning what appears to be pieces of a violin in a fire, a stressful way to begin a documentary about a small-town guy attempting to make a 100 percent accurate version of arguably the most famous and expensive violin in the world, Guarneri's Il Cannone.

Houck is a penniless farmer living in rural Ohio with lofty aspirations to become one of the world's most prominent violin makers, a seemingly impossible task given his geographical and economical situation, but his obsession drives him to drink in all the information he can. After meeting one of his favorite contemporary violinists online, Razvan Stoica, he embarks on a journey to recreate this famed violin in just seven months time.

With no money to even keep the heat on in his home, Daniel dedicates every moment to working on the violin, motivated even more with the open invitation to bring it with him to Amsterdam so that Stoica can play it for an upcoming concert. But with one nightmare scenario after another, will Daniel even be able to finish it in time, let alone have it be acceptable enough for a world-famous violinist to play?

This is the suspenseful through line I continued asking myself as *Strad Style* progressed, and though the documentary is filled with oddball comedy, the driving force behind the film is the tension to discover if this guy can pull off such a monumentally difficult task.

Houck himself lends a lot to the engagement of the audience, playing the perfect underdog. This is a man who puts his craft above all else and despite having to grapple with severe social anxiety, mental illness and overdue bills, he maintains a positivity that makes it easy for us to root for him. We want to see him succeed because there's so much stacked against him, and this makes for an extremely entertaining watch.

Supporting Daniel in his endeavours are his mother, who seems to support him the best she can, and his cousin, who is such an intriguing character that I could easily watch an entire movie about him. His randomly comparing the cost of a violin to a high-end sex doll and having a penchant for tarot card reading instantly made me want to know more

about this guy and what makes him tick.

If there is one element the film is lacking it's that it would have been nice to know more about who Daniel Houck is and what transpired in his life to bring him to this moment. We know he lives by himself on a secluded farm and that his hobbies include low-riders and violin-making, but he's such an interesting guy; I wanted to find out more about his backstory.

Strad Style plays out like a less-exploitative version of American Movie (not to besmirch one of my favorite docs of all-time) and manages to deliver not only a successful underdog tale but a compelling character piece as well.

Strad Style - complete end credits

Directed, Shot and Edited by Stefan Avalos

The Violin-Maker	Daniel Houck
The Violinist	Razvan Stoica
The Cousin	David Campbell
The Mother	Mary Houck
The Violin-Mentor	Rodger Stearns
The Cremonese Violin-Master	Alfredo Primavera
Music Performed by	Razvan Stoica
Produced by	Stefan Avalos
Co-produced by	Suzan Ortmeier
Additional Producer	Kevin Annest
Field Producer (Italy)	Consuelo Simmons
Fixer (Italy)	Sara Pampaloni
Production Assistant (Netherlands)	Kristen Ortmeier
Additional Camera	Sara Cross Suzan Ortmeier Daniel Houck
Driver	Niels Weijers
Animation	Caveman Post
Wardrobe Consultant	Mavencraft Studios
Violin Cookies	Laura Lopiccolo Lauras Creative Cookie
Production Insurance Carnet	Truman Van Dyke Co. ATA Carnet
Music Brucia Il Sogno	Written and performed by Razvan Stoica
Paganini Caprices	Performed by Razan Stoica
Fantasy on Paganini 24th Caprice	Written by Razvan Stoica Performed by Razvan Stoica and Kamerata Stradivari
Paganini Violin Concerto #1	Performed by Razvan Stoica and Ad Hoc Orkest, Conducted by Haiko Boostra

Liebesleid

Written by Fritz Kreisler

Performed by Razvan Stoica and Andreea Stoica

La Ronde des Lutins

Written by Antonio Bazzini

Performed by Razvan Stoica and Kamerata
Stradivari

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Sebastian Rotstein

Marianne Connor

Patrick Hasson

Steve Saute

Gregory Gast

Eunice Stearns

Rebecca Tyler

Haiko Boonstra

Paganini's violin "Il Cannone" is preserved and exhibited at the Strada Nuova Museum in the Paganini room.

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