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## At fest, stars mingle among us - and it's fantastic

Anna Hanks, Local Contributor

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Just before I was sucked into the movie madness of Fantastic Fest, I called my mother to let her know I wouldn't be answering my phone much the next week.

When I explained I'd be at a film festival the last week of September, her first question was, "Are there going to be any movie stars there?"

I told her that it would be mostly film critics and obscure directors.

It completely escaped my mind that actor Elijah Wood would likely be at the festival. Wood is best known for playing the Hobbit Frodo Baggins in the massive "Lord of the Rings" film trilogy.

Though a lot of Hollywood names pass through Fantastic Fest, Wood is the only actor who has attended the festival long enough that he's become part of the ecosystem of "Horror High."

It might sound farfetched, but in many ways Fantastic Fest resembles the ecosystem of an American high school.

I think of Tim League, co-founder of the Alamo Drafthouse theater and one of the co-founders of the 7-year-old festival, as the groovy "principal" of Horror High. League gives the rules and hands out the awards. (This year, League even donned a powder-blue tuxedo for Prom Night!)

"Professor" Harry Knowles of the website Ain't It Cool News often introduces screenings, enthusiastically tracing the cinematic backstory of the upcoming movie.

Spanish director Nacho Vigalondo — who brought his film "Extraterrestrial" this year — is the "exchange student" who doubles as the karaoke king and the life of every party. (He dressed as an undead Elvis for the closing night event!)

The coolest guy at Horror High is actor Elijah Wood. Wood takes part in the tomfoolery of the festival. This year he was on stage for a costumed skit at the beginning of the gross-out horror film "Human Centipede 2" and took part in a boxing match — complete with pink gloves — with fellow "Lord of the Rings" actor Dominic Monaghan.

Despite Wood's bazillion Twitter followers and the fact that even my recently retired Aunt Diane knows who he is, Wood has managed to blend into the festival with an air closer to that of the cool captain of the winning football team at a small-town high school, rather than a big-name actor at a public event. I didn't see anyone shoving scripts into his hands, asking for an autograph or asking him to pose for a picture when he wasn't literally standing on the red carpet.

How approachable is Wood at Fantastic Fest? I saw girls not long out of high school tapping him on the shoulder and smiling as they went by — just like, if you were brave, you would do to the cute boy in high school. Of course, I'm far too shy to do such a thing to the most popular boy in school.

Near the end of the festival, I had a ticket to the "Secret Screening." This meant no one knew the name of the film they'd be watching, until "Principal" League announced it.

Looking around for a seat in the theater, I asked a group about an empty seat next to them. When the dude perched on an armrest turned out to be Wood, I quickly realized that Wood planned on sitting

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in that particular seat during the movie. Having those intense blue eyes turned on me in the most routine conversation possible between strangers is a feeling that I haven't had since I was in junior high and the cute captain of the seventh-grade football team was flirting with me.

After the screening, Wood and some of my film critic pals ended up standing outside the Drafthouse, discussing what turned out to be an early cut of the horror film "Paranormal Activity 3." Hearing terms like "aspect ratio" and the visual quirks of vintage video tapes being discussed by someone whose movies I've paid to see was like realizing that the coolest boy in school is fluent in the geeky lingo of the AV club.

So, Mom, I wouldn't exactly say there were "movie stars" at Fantastic Fest. But there was a really cute dude there who has done a bit of acting. Maybe next year I'll have the gumption to talk to him.

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