



# BIG RIVER MAN

USA, UK | 2009 | 101m | 15 | sub-titles

**Director:** John Maringouin

**Cinematography:** John Maringouin

**Original Music:** Rich Ragsdale

**Leading Players:** Martin Strel, Matthew Mohlke, Borut Strel (as themselves)

**filmnote**

Some would say you'd have to be mad to attempt to swim the length of the Amazon River. What becomes apparent in *Big River Man* is that Martin Strel, who attempted to do just that in 2007, may very well be insane. The list of hazards should be enough to send anyone who is *compos mentis* back to dry land; torrential currents, blistering sunshine and, of course, the South American wildlife. Crocodiles, giant anaconda and piranha would be bad enough (and Strel's support crew continually toss in pots of blood to lure hungry predators away from the swimmer), but perhaps worse is the toothpick fish, a parasite whose entry into the body is as unpleasant as it is unprintable, and is removed only by surgery. Such obstacles only serve to make the swim worth the attempt for Strel, someone who truly is worth the superlative larger-than-life, despite describing himself as 'a regular common guy who just has higher goals than usual.'

With his rotund physique and Borat-esque delivery, Strel seems an unlikely candidate for such a Herculean feat. 5,268km of river, from the heart of the Peruvian rainforest to the city of Belém on the banks of the Amazon estuary in Brazil. Strel swims for nineteen hours a day covering an average of 90km with help from the current and stopping for only five hours sleep each night. His Amazon swim is the latest in an escalating series of endeavours that started with the Danube in 2000, and have seen him since conquer the Mississippi, the Paraná and the Yangtze. Strel continues to exploit the publicity his swims attract to raise awareness of environmental issues, in this case, the deforestation of the Amazon basin and "to promote a message of clean rivers, clean water and friendship." And friendship is one of the defining themes of *Big River Man* as Strel is greeted by each community he swims through with puzzlement, delight and ultimately comradeship, as local children frequently join him for short stretches of the swim.

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*Big River Man* is the second feature film by documentary filmmaker John Maringouin, whose first feature was *Running Stumbled* (2006). That film recorded the embittered relationship between his parents, both addicted to prescription painkillers and living out their final days in a filthy New Orleans suburban home. Maringouin has since suppressed distribution of the film for fear that the subjects may be incriminated for illegal activities. *Big River Man* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival where it received the Cinematography Award and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize in 2009.

“I told myself I would try to swim the Amazon or die, because the Amazon can break a man in a second. I am a big man but the Amazon is much bigger.” Strel reflected after his swim. “I want to do another big swim but I still do not know where.” Surely only the oceans of the world are now big enough to challenge him!

**BFF filmnote by Justin Maelzer**

### **More watery films at Bath Film Festival 2009**

Monday 16 November, Rondo Theatre, 9.30pm | £6 / £4

#### **Blind Loves**

Juraj Lehotsky | Slovakia, Czech Republic | 2008 | 77m | PG | sub-titles | [blindloves.com](http://blindloves.com)

An astonishing and revealing film which emphasises the search for companionship amongst those by whom sightlessness has long been accepted. A visually striking combination of non-authored, observational documentary and wildly-realised fantasy – music teacher Peter’s visions of an undersea kingdom are vividly recreated in bold animated sequences. A beautiful film which makes for truly compelling viewing.

Tuesday 17 November, Rondo Theatre, 7.00pm | £6 / £4

#### **Delta**

Kornél Mundruczó | Hungary/Germany | 2008 | 92m | 18 | sub-titles | [ica.org.uk/delta](http://ica.org.uk/delta)

A man returns to his birthplace on the Danubian delta. The only person to welcome him is his half-sister, with whom he undertakes to build a house, isolated at the end of a pier in the midstream of the river. This is a film of few words and of simple, determined actions; it is also a work in which the setting is absolutely integral to the narrative, which unfolds with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy. The tranquil beauty and the inexorable flow of the delta's waters are captured magnificently by Mátyás Erdély's cinematography.

Tuesday 17 November, Little Theatre, 9.15pm | £8 / £6

#### **Cracks**

Jordan Scott | UK, Ireland | 2009 | 104m | 15

A complex and intriguing study of a girls' boarding school swimming team whose dynamics are disrupted by the arrival of beautiful teacher Miss G (Eva Green). The 'cracks' of the title refer to the adolescent crushes which Miss G effortlessly elicits from her charges, but also to the disintegration of the social protocols spurred by the arrival of a pupil with an exotic background.

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