

The beauty of Salem(ia)

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I am always skeptical of those constant Salem boosters, those people who can do nothing but make grocery lists of why Salem is awesome and you just don't realize it yet.

If something is good, you don't need to go around saying it's good all the time. It speaks for itself. I don't need to spend the effort convincing you I have red hair, because I do.

But at the same time, the temptation to speak up for and defend Salem is constant because the things that give it value are not always visible to the naked eye.

Salem's worth is like seeing ultraviolet light. When we look at a flower, we see nothing. When a bee looks at a flower, it glows electric.

This stands in sharp contrast to the pleasures of a big city, which are obvious. You go to Manhattan, and it's Manhattan. No one needs to tell you about the tall buildings, the way the sidewalk shakes when the subway whooshes somewhere beneath you. No one needs to tell you you're at the center of the world because it's self-evident.

But the pleasures of a smaller city take longer. You can't see them at first, even if you live here. Someone passing on Interstate 5 wouldn't have a clue.

A visitor wouldn't sense the delicate social connections that tie us to each other, that bind people in surprising and unexpected ways. It's not immediately obvious that if you move here knowing no one, in three years' time, you will know everyone.

Maybe an outsider could sense the friendliness, the eagerness with which people will integrate you into the social fabric. If you're down to hang out with Salem, Salem is down to hang out with you. There is zero pretense because what would we be pretentious about?

These things take time and close inspection. And if you can't see it, whatever. We can.

But we also can see the provincial, the ugly, the crumbling, the mediocre, the ridiculous. This town is not short on any of those things.

I'm a big proponent of laughing at yourself. One, show me a person who can't laugh at themselves, and I'll show you someone who you don't want to get stuck talking with at a cocktail party. Two, and more importantly, that self-awareness neutralizes the impact. It wouldn't bother me if you called me a flaky, self-obsessed dilettante because it's true ... and I just beat you to the punchline.

Which is what makes "Salemia" so great.

For those who aren't familiar, local dude-filmmakers Mike Perron and Dave Jenkins wrote and produced two episodes of "Salemia," modeled off the TV show "Portlandia."

Full disclosure: I was involved, albeit minimally, with "Salemia." I had a couple cameos as a bush-league TV reporter covering Salem. So, you know, a pretty big stretch.

But out of the 276 things that were great about "Salemia," I'm maybe 264th on the list, so I feel OK gushing about it.

The premiere of episodes one and two was Wednesday night at the Grand Theatre as part of the Salem Film Festival.

It's hard to overstate the pleasure of seeing Salem on the big screen. I had a goofy smile from the opening credits onward.

It's the familiarity of the intersection you've driven through a zillion times. The knowledge that everyone else in the theater has driven through that intersection, too. It was spotting all the people you know, the Word of Mouth table you've sat at. That tunnel on Center Street that always makes you lose radio reception for a few seconds.

There were so many in-jokes that any Salemite would get. Our jealous hatred of but secret admiration toward Portland being one of them.

So yes, "Salemia" makes fun of Salem and gets it just right. We were laughing at Salem, with Salem, at ourselves and with ourselves. But like Salem, the loveliness of "Salemia" wasn't obvious while you were watching it.

After the film, the filmmakers asked everyone who was involved to come up front. And maybe a sixth of the theater stood and lined up on stage. Out in the audience were so many familiar faces. The cast of characters in our town may not be huge, but they're pretty great.

K. Williams Brown is the entertainment reporter for the Statesman Journal. She is shyly passing Salem a note asking if it will go out with her. Check one, ___ yes or ___no