

# FESTIVAL ROUNDUP



PEDRO ALMODOVAR'S *ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER*, FOREGROUND: CECILIA ROTH, BACKGROUND: MARISA PAREDES; Photo: Teresa Isasi.

## ► Cannes Film Festival

Noah Cowan

## ► New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival

Brandon Judell

## ► Seattle International Film Festival

Natasha Senjanovic

## ► Los Angeles Independent Film Festival

Stephen Garrett

## ► Florida Film Festival

Stephen Gallagher

### CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

Cannes suffered from the pre-millennial blues this year. Films by major directors felt minor, and no new schools of cinema emerged; neither was there any embarrassing or insulting work. The mood was somber, and the legendary parties lacked imagination. As such the Festival paralleled the cinema world as a whole. There is little energy now for cinematic experimentation, but filmmakers everywhere also acknowledge that the old cinematic avenues are feeling tired. (The exception to all of this is the continuing sense of sophisticated daring coming out of East Asia, where the upcoming calendar event doesn't seem quite as important.) There was also a sense of bottomless wealth for making films, and yet even the richest producers were looking over their shoulders at DV and the changes it may ring for cinema. These are uncertain times, apparently.

This spiritual exhaustion was accentuated by the Competition Jury's ludicrous awards. The jury not only betrayed their lack of knowledge of recent film history but also profoundly misunderstood Cannes' role in world cinema, all at a terrible cost. The two big prize-winners, Luc and Pierre Dardenne's *Rosetta* and Bruno Dumont's *L'humanité* are minor variations on better first films, *La Promesse* and *La Vie De Jesus*. (To be fair, Dumont was trying, in a corpulent two-and-a-half hours, to give a greater scope to his work but what he actually delivered was told better and far more succinctly in his earlier film.) Both films express a kind of regional working class disenchantment with our age. The Dardenne film depicts a young woman's frustration with her unemployment. *L'humanité* follows a simple-minded policeman and his friends through the intrigues around a brutal killing in their quiet town; the jury was particularly impressed with

Emmanuel Schotté's portrayal of a simple-minded, vacuous police officer, a performance that seemed less interesting after the actor's simple-minded, vacuous acceptance speech.

The jury, headed by David Cronenberg, congratulated themselves on highlighting films that world cinema would otherwise ignore. While it is true that *Rosetta* will get a few dollars more from its Arte sale and *L'humanité* might now get bought by a small U.S. distributor, the jury's "victory" was ultimately Pyrrhic.

Solid films from excellent directors were excluded from the awards. Three leap to mind: Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother*, Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* and Takeshi Kitano's *Kikujiro*. Almodóvar's wonderful film is a tour-de-force tribute to the women of classic Hollywood from the innermost soul of a gay man who loves them. Kaige has made an extraordinarily beautiful epic of warring Chinese states featuring the luminescent Gong Li. Kitano's film, a radical departure for him, is a heart-on-its-sleeve road comedy that feel like a perverse cross between John Hughes' *Dutch* and Gianni Amelio's *Stolen Children*.

I am a big fan of the first two and less excited by the latter, but for the sake of this article, they are in the same boat. All three are pretty commercial: glamorous women for gays; swashbuckling swordsmen for *Ben Hur*-aholics and a comedy for the *Kolya* crowd. (Unfair: *Kikujiro* is much better than *Kolya*). All three will be distributed by Sony Classics, a major company, and, as such, will be widely seen. Did the jury decide that these films had made it already? That a Cannes prize wasn't necessary? I fear that was indeed their reasoning.

What they failed to understand was that while, with their content and with Sony behind

them, these films have a better shot than many, all three still enter the United States hobbled. The penetration of foreign-language art films into the American market, even ones by international superstar directors, is a tiny percentage of what equivalent international American art stars like Tarantino or Mamet are able to do. Despite the amazing success of *Life is Beautiful*, it is still very difficult for a foreign-language film to get seen by even one tenth of one percent of the United States population. Whatever your feeling about *Il Benigni*, his success could well have paved the way for an increasing number of foreign-language art films to reclaim a piece of America's screen time, both small and large. These three would have been excellent candidates to do so. It's not impossible now for this to still happen, but the prizes haven't helped anyone.

The jury also failed to understand the nature of the American films in this year's Competition. The three main selections were John Sayles's *Limbo*, David Lynch's *A Straight Story* and Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*. The Sayles works an intriguingly open-ended narrative in a contemporary Robinson Crusoe story; and the Lynch is a small, "shaggy dog" road movie for the whole family. Minor work from perennially interesting filmmakers. The Jarmusch is something else: a dramatic rethinking of the contemporary hit-man film through the eyes of an ancient samurai text. The result is absolutely American, urban and full of Ozu-like restraint.

One could hardly imagine a better sampling of iconoclastic filmmakers who represent a tense resistance between studio financing and independent production. While not necessarily important work by these directors, the films should certainly should have been in the running for awards. One senses that they were excluded because they emerged from the dominant world cultural power.

Atom Egoyan's tough, perfectly acted (especially by Bob Hoskins) new film, *Felicia's Journey*, was also studiously ignored by the jury. Perhaps he too was being punished for having his film produced by Mel Gibson's Icon.

Other highlights included a controversial new film from Peter Greenaway. Loathed by most, I found it a welcome return to form after his dabblings in the literary (*The Pillow Book*) and historical (*Baby of Macon*) worlds. As tough and exciting as *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, *8 1/2 Women* is a jaded inspection of overdetermined and overly successful collectors — the plague of millennial culture — played out with lots of humor and amusingly untantalizing sex. When Greenaway gets it right — *The Cook, the Thief, A Zed and Two Noughts*, and this new film — cinema has no better interrogator of contemporary culture.

Amos Gitai's first good narrative feature film, *Kadosh*, delves deep into Orthodox culture in Israel to find an unsettling story of a woman

abandoned. Gitai is a documentarian switching to fiction, yet the film's only whiff of documentary is its eerily accurate sense of entering a forbidden world.

Many critics were taken (in?) by Aleksandr Sokhurov's silly mannerist Hitler bio-pic and another lugubrious Manoel de Oliveira yarn. Nobody much cared for Nikita Mikhalkov's multi-houred *Barber of Siberia* nor Leos Carax's bourgeois-loathing (read: self) tortured-artist-amongst-the-Bosnian-refugees tome, *Pola X*.

The Director's Fortnight had a new director this year in Marie-Pierre Macia, formerly of the San Francisco Film Festival, and her selection was good. She particularly excelled with the American independents, an area of baffling inconsistency in past years. The group included Alex Winter's dark, obsessive and intricately Corman-esque *Fever* and Sofia Coppola's sophisticated and charming *The Virgin Suicides*. Anjelica Huston's newest film, *Agnes Browne* — the plucky tale of an Irish widow getting back at her debtors — made up in charm and wit what it lacked in narrative complexity.

Macia also showed a strong feel for the new cinematic movements of Asia. Nobuhiro Suwa's *M/other* is a follow-up to his largely improvised "screechy fighting couples" film, *2 Duo*. *M/other* is a far more sophisticated film using the same improvisational approach; the story concerns a woman whose older boyfriend brings home a confused young son from a previous marriage. Her inability to feel like a mother to the child questions her role in Japanese society in a controlled and fascinating way. *Charisma* is the newest and strangest film from new Japanese master Kiyoshi Kurosawa. His elegant blending of genre and experiment is winning him fans everywhere; this environmental cult thriller in which the villain is a tree should add legions of new acolytes. Chang Tso-Chi's *Darkness and Light* shows an interesting turn in Taiwanese cinema: unusually upfront sentimental material — the daughter of a blind family of masseurs falls in love with a soon-martyred young gangster — is handled in the quintessentially dispassionate



manner we have come to expect from the island's filmmakers. It makes the film's emotional resolutions far more genuine than one might expect.

Other strong work included Jeremy Podeswa's sumptuous, lush and breathtakingly photographed *The Five Senses*, an interlocked set of stories relating to the eponymous subject; and Benoit Mariage's kooky, steely black-and-white Belgian family story, *Les Convoyeurs Attendent*.

Not strong was Macia's French selection. Mediocre work, much of it by old school '68ers who have nothing left to do but whine about the old days, was the rule, save the small, charming provincial film, *Le Bleu des Villes*, in which a policewoman dreams of becoming a singing star.

Un Certain Regard, the B-list of the Competition selectors, outshone the main event for the second year running. Their selection mirrored the Fortnight in most respects with less-than-riveting films from France and a rich and deep Asian selection. The best of the lot though was *Ratcatcher*, the first feature by immensely talented Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay. Atmospheric and moody, surreal and tough-minded, this is the kind of observation-

FOREST WHITAKER IN JIM JARMUSCH'S *GHOST DOG: THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI*, WHICH SCREENED IN COMPETITION AT CANNES. Photo: Abbot Genser

al narrative we would expect from a great master in mid-career. Every note of the film is perfectly conceived and elegantly presented, with the exception of a second, Fellini-esque ending out of keeping with the rest of the work. The film tells the story of a dirt-poor Glasgow family during a mid-'70s garbage collection strike in a community dealing with a child's murder.

Many were surprised that *Ratcatcher* did not win the Camera d'Or for best first feature, but the film that did was a charming surprise.

ing the concerns of the coming years, can learn a thing or two from the exuberant cinema of an East Asia reveling in all the confusion.

#### NEW YORK LESBIAN AND GAY FILM FESTIVAL

With the summer season swinging into full gear, many Big Apple gays were puffing up their pillows in their Fire Island abodes. Meanwhile their more culturally bent — and financially poorer — brethren were stuck gleefully attending the 11th Annual N.Y. Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (June 3-13).

rapper MC Lyte. Yet where else could you go and see two intelligent black women chat, let alone kiss?

Attracting a large group of gay Indian attendees was Kaizad Gustad's enjoyably loony romp, *Bombay Boys*, a tale of three young men of Indian descent returning to their country respectively to find a lost brother, to become a star in Bollywood, and to become queer. They all succeeded to various degrees.

As for Marco and Maurio La Villa's *Hang the DJ*, a beautifully accomplished documentary



LEFT: ROSE TROCHE'S *BEDROOMS AND HALLWAYS* AT THE NEW YORK LESBIAN AND GAY FILM FESTIVAL. RIGHT: WIM WENDERS' *DOC BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB* AT THE SEATTLE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL.

Despite its title, Murali Nair's *Throne of Death* is a gently ironic fable about the first man to be sentenced to the electric chair in India. Instead of fear and dread, the uneducated peasant is full of pride; he becomes a local hero to the provincial village in which he gets executed because he has allowed the village to receive electricity and attract senior Cabinet Ministers to the unveiling.

Other section highlights included Wang Xiaoshuai's gritty take on a Vietnamese prostitute in Shanghai, *So Close to Paradise*, and Chen Kuo-fu's heavily stylized drama about the nature of loneliness, *The Personals*.

Un Certain Regard also saw the premiere of Chris Doyle's wild experimental roller-coaster ride, *Away With Words*. A kind of poem to inarticulateness, Doyle's two main characters are a sexy Japanese guy who transposes words and their meanings — so the word "house" means the color red to him — and a gay bar owner whose drunkenness renders him amusingly incoherent to all but a chosen few. The cinematography is unspeakably beautiful, with every frame a strikingly original take on color and form. No surprise. Doyle has shot all of Wong Kar-wai's films.

Perhaps the old masters, so weary of predict-

With over 200 independent films and shorts on view in four locales (including Brooklyn for the second year) plus representation from Japan, Germany, Canada and Norway, this was the Fest's biggest year both in the selection of films and attendance, according to Basil Tsiokos, the new program coordinator.

As for content, Tsiokos says, "This year, we had pretty strong showings dealing with gays and their families. Also an overwhelming showing of documentaries and narratives about transgender people. Themes develop basically from what's out there. Usually there's a lot of the same kind of material, but it does change from year to year. Last year we had an opportunity to do a larger focus on African cinema. There was even a film from the Ivory Coast. Not this year."

What's really fascinating though about this festival is how every film attracted its own specific audience. Sidra Smith's *A Luv Tale* was a look at two beautiful black lesbians, one a "straight" magazine editor, the other a "gay" photographer. This effort had the audience, which was heavily populated with black gals, cheering and laughing much more strenuously than anything on the screen artistically merited, except possibly the fine performance by

on a not exactly absorbing subject — whether playing and scratching records in discos is an art form — its audience was brimming with stunning, shallow twits. I mean dance enthusiasts.

The drag queens, though, saved themselves for the saucy spectacular *Charlie!*, an adaptation of the off-off-off Broadway show. This spoof on "Charlie's Angels," which features Mistress Formika, Sherry Vine, and Candis Cayne as lovely detectives who are out to discover whether a certain manufacturer has created a lipstick that can make you retarded, was a hoot when you could hear the dialogue, which wasn't that often. The main venue, The New School's auditorium which has seating for 475, may be fine for its normal use — lectures by the likes of Susan Sontag and discussions on the future of mass transportation. But as a movie theater, its sound and projection is often irritatingly uneven, no doubt causing many of this year's directors to throw in the towel and apply for sales jobs at Bloomingdale's.

Another film of note was Gil M. Portes' comic *Miguel/Michelle*, a touching look at how a small Filipino town reacts when one of

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