

Independents Take the Fall

MONTREAL, THESSALONIKI, TORINO, AND THE FILM NOIR FESTIVAL

by Noah Cowan

Knee-deep in the commerce and glamour of a Venice, Toronto or New York, film festivals can often seem like elaborate excuses for champagne-soaked shmoozathons. But after the confetti has settled and the club kids have moved on, a different kind of event shows its face. Low-key and focused squarely on the art of cinema, the so-called "medium sized" festivals have long histories of inventive programming and faithful audiences. They may not attract the major art-house buyers or the gossipy press, but these festivals, each very different, have much to offer independent filmmakers and their progeny.

A well-kept secret for most of its 22 years, Montreal's Festival International du Nouveau Cinema et de La Video has increasingly come to the attention of serious cinephiles. Held this year from October 21-31 in a former Jewish area located in the heart of French-speaking Canada, its ambience of le deli, le disco and smoky cafe culture serves as the perfect backdrop for a challenging program of independent film and video.

The main force behind Montreal's line up is co-director and founder Dimitri Eipides, a staunch defender, along with co-director Claude Chamberlan, of smaller, laid-back film happenings. "Specialized festivals must exist to promote a certain type of cinema which celebrates subjects based in art, not commerce," Eipides insists. "Let's face it. With the continuing attacks of television, cinema is no longer that popular with the public at large, so it's essential that events such as these promote the medium and create a public that knows what to expect."

Although the guest list is small, the Montreal Festival regularly welcomes the big names of art cinema — Wim Wenders, a frequent visitor, has called it "the best festival in North America." Filmmakers especially like its casual atmosphere, with directors and audience milling around after screenings debating things cinematic.

This year the festival saw a number of important premieres, including the first North American showings of Derek Jarman's *Blue*, Wim Wenders' *Faraway, So Close!* and the second installment of Edgar Reitz's magnum opus about post-war Germany, *Heimat II*. The Festival opened with home-town boy François Girard's *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, picked up by Goldwyn for release in 1994.

All, however, did not run smoothly. Last minute cancellations of Peter Greenaway's *Baby of Macon* and Allison Anders' *Mi Vida Loca* caused mass confusion at the cinemas. Projection, usually strong, was pretty abysmal this year — in one cinema, I saw two different prints burn within a few hours; in another, constant focus problems made for collective migraines.

Nonetheless, a well-deserved Best Feature Film prize was awarded to Ning Ying for her charming tale of aged amateur Beijing Opera singers, *For Fun*. (Ning's movie has become something of a festival juggernaut, triumphing also in Tokyo and San Sebastian.) Best Documentary went to Ray Müller's extraordinary three-hour opus, *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*. Best Video was Burt Barr's *The Pool*, a portrait of a frustrated

swimmer. Said the New York-based video artist: "This is probably the predominant film festival in the world that really highlights video".

There is some truth to this. A big buzz always accompanies the festival's video program. But it is Eipides's international film selection that remains the core of this event, a core he is currently transposing to the "New Horizons" program of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece.

Set on a picturesque bay in the North Aegean sea, Greece's second largest city is a charming mish-mash of smart shops, fabulous restaurants and ancient ruins. The festival itself takes place throughout the city, with two main cinemas near the water and two in town for repeats and retrospectives, this year on David Cronenberg and Jules Dassin. (By the way, Dassin's *Two Smart People*, starring Lucille Ball, and *Thieves Highway* are film noir classics which deserve a second look. Rumor has it that MoMA is preparing a show).

Thessaloniki was a strictly Greek-only affair until 1991 when director Michel Demopoulos approached Eipides to create *New Horizons*, a broad selection of new international independent cinema. Its inclusion doubled the size of the festival, and made available a new pool of titles for the festival's official competition.

This provided Eipides with a new set of challenges. "Although my main criterion as a programmer is my own personal taste, I try to differentiate between the two festival audiences. The Montreal public has been exposed to more adventurous work because I have had 20 years to work on them. I am still learning about Thessaloniki. I don't want to alienate them, but so far they seem to like the films I like."

One litmus test for Eipides this year was Gregg Araki's hipster snapshot of gay LA teens, *Totally F***ed Up*. Even though the Greeks are often credited with *inventing* homosexuality, Eipides was quite anxious about the film's reception in this still-religious nation. He shouldn't have worried. Even with an impossible subtitling task — the film is, like, totally half surfer slang — the crowd seemed to get it and like it very much.

Other New Horizons hits included Oliver Assayas's challenging exploration of family and cinema, *Une Nouvelle Vie* from France and Mohammed Ali Talebi's spare, moving *The Boots* from Iran. In Official Competition, American Sara Driver's *When Pigs Fly* — a kind of ghost story — and *From The Snow* by Greece's own Sotiris Goritsas, about two Greek Albanians caught between cultures, received warm applause despite a lukewarm reception for both films from the international delegates.

Competition prizes went out to Goritsas' *From The Snow* (Golden Alexander), Ilkka Jarvilaturi's crazy Estonian caper, *Darkness in Tallin*, Pericles Hour-soglou's *Lefteris* and *For Fun* (Best Director, Best Actor). Although nothing burned, cinemas were all without proper 16mm masking, a situation which apparently will be rectified next year.

Immediately following Thessaloniki on the festival calendar is the Festival Internazionale Cinema Giovanni di Torino. Now in its 11th year, Torino is probably the best example in the world of a relaxed medium-sized festival, committed to discovering emerging young talent and

reports from

montreal,

tokyo,

toronto,

and other

fall festivals,

challenging local audiences with difficult material.

With its imposing Savoy palaces, marbled footpaths, and store-front colonnades chilled by November wind, the Torino natives are pretty much compelled to troop into the Massimo complex where all screenings — competition, out-of-competition, Italian shorts and a special silent series — unfold in three cinemas. (In past years, a second complex has housed a large retrospective, but budget cuts have temporarily axed this.)

Festival director Alberto Barbera seems to have a knack for discovering raw cinematic talent. His selections, while often compromised by technical and narrative glitches, still convey a real excitement about filmmaking as process and product. Says Barbera: "My aim is clear: to explore independent cinema outside the commercial and state-sanctioned mainstream... I look to filmmakers who experiment with the form, language and production of film, like American no-budget filmmakers; and I look for emerging talents, people who confront society's main problems in new ways and seek new forms of expression, imagination and creation."

To balance these competing agendas, Barbera tends to place the riskier, lower budget films in competition and the bigger (and more

commercial) productions out-of-competition. Even so, most of the films that won jury awards — like Tsai Ming-Liang's dynamic gangster saga, *Rebels of The Neon God* and Kato Tetsu's interminable coming-of-age film, *The Singing Bamboo* — were the more technically accomplished. A major exception was *The Last Cold Days*, a brilliant Kazakhstani film which was runner-up in the Competition. Shot quickly with mostly amateurs in sub-zero temperatures, it is a brutal and un sentimental portrait of starving children in post-war Central Asia.

Other interesting films in competition were Austrian Florian Flicker's slice of futurist cool, *Half World*, which marries William Gibson to H.G. Wells and *Alphaville* to *Liquid Sky* and Portugal's Joao Guerra's enigmatic road movie, *Far From Here*.

The out-of-competition section generally had a safer selection, which ranged from the very good, like Shang Yuan's Chinese rock guerrilla flick *Beijing Bastards*, to the simply appalling, like Rob Weiss's movie-of-the-week-styled gangster pic, *Amongst Friends*. The only major revelation was Ishii Takashi's new film, *A Night In Nude*, which blows the lid off film noir conventions in astounding ways.

Torino also has a prestigious short film com-

petition, compiled in half-hour programs before the evening feature screenings. The winner this year was American Michael Costanza's *Mama Said*, a three-minute intercut of re-created footage of the Shirelles and '60s civil rights protest footage. Costanza sees the festival "as low-key but important because of the support it gives young, upcoming filmmakers, and its appreciation for shorts. It's a very good festival, and the \$2,500 will pay my rent!" Costanza expects to be at Sundance in January with his new short, *Cruel and Unusual*.

Between budget cuts and fierce competition with Europe's heavyweights (Berlin, Cannes, Venice), it was a tough year for Barbera. He was candid about the shrinking space for festivals like his: "These big festivals are on a carnivorous trend of eating up everything in sight. But when your criteria is about quantity, that means films get lost, they cannot be properly supported. American independents particularly seem to believe that one of the Big Three is crucial for a European release, even if they are on at midnight. But this strategy is dangerous."

And what does Torino have to offer instead? "We have acquired a certain reputation for being a serious and well-organized festival which supports films in every section. We have attracted audiences with independent cinema — and they create momentum for certain key films here every year. I think certain films are better helped by gradual word-of-mouth than a big bang."

Film noir, the mystery novel, true crime tv and the bandits of Italian politics all fall under the rubric of Noir Festival, an interesting specialized event in a crowded calendar of Italian festivals.

The setting is beautiful Courmayeur in the Italian alps, usually known as one of Europe's most exclusive ski resorts. But this festival is less about hitting the slopes than finding a way for creative people working in an unrecognized medium to interact in a relaxed atmosphere.

Why noir? Festival director Giorgio Gosetti sees "film noir and mystery as confronting and revealing our underlying social face... these films and novels provide our best key to understanding our chaotic reality."

A dozen features and ten shorts in competition, plus a sidebar of noir in Eastern Europe and some TV films and documentaries made up the film program. The competition was primarily American, with Peter Medak's *Romeo Is Bleeding* and William Curran's *Love, Cheat and Steal* as the obvious crowd pleasers. The best film here, though, was the wildly inventive tale of two motorcycle racers and their passion for the cinema, *23h58*.

Each afternoon also saw a new episode from Showtime's noir-ish tv series, *Fallen Angels*, which features unexceptional directorial debuts from Tom Hanks and Tom Cruise.

Noir Festival used to take place by the sea at Viareggio in summer, where it attracted mobs of curious tourists. This, its first year in Courmayeur, was not a great public success, with sparse crowds made up mostly of invited guests. But with Geneva and Chamonix less

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than an hour away, and next year's dates set for mid-December — high season on the slopes — this unique event looks set to grow up fast.

TOKYO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

by David Tracey

Every year the Japanese organizers try to turn the Tokyo International Film Festival into a world-class event, with varying degrees of success. Last year they started a film market, hoping to stoke the fires of profiteering by comping air tickets and hotels for a select horde of buyers and sellers. The freebies disappeared in the recessionary gloom covering 1993 Japan (although the market continued on a smaller, quieter, lonelier scale), so the organizers took another route. Everyone knows that recent Chinese films have been gleaming awards from Cairo to Cannes. The Tokyo Festival people may no longer call their gala "the Cannes of the East," but they would like it to at least be recognized as the premier film event in Asia, the Western movie world's key to the continent. The result: 1993 became the year of the Chinese film.

For ten days (Sept. 24 to Nov. 4) Tokyo was a better venue for modern Chinese cinema than Beijing. Films from China took the festival's top two awards, offered the best selection screened out of competition (*Farewell, My Concubine*), accounted for half of the ten entries in the Best of Asia category and also stirred up the event's only decent controversy.

The tiff at TIFF happened when the Chinese delegation walked out in protest over the "unauthorized" showing of two Chinese films, *The Blue Kite* and *Beijing Bastards*. Why they waited until the festival was halfway over is hard to say — nobody seemed to agree once they were gone just what the point was, although several theories were raised. One held that throwing international fits was officially taboo as long as Beijing was still in the running for the Olympics (the walk-out came five days after the games went to Sydney). Another was the lukewarm response given to the official Chinese entry, a snoozer called *Shadow of Dreams* about an old man reliving memories of his youth spent in Taipei.

The Blue Kite, which ended up with the Grand Prix along with a best actress award for Lu Luping, was entered as a Japanese film thanks to creative categorizing that took the financial sources into account. Director Tien Zhuangzhuang's semi-autobiographical tale about growing up in Beijing in the 1950s and '60s is a beautiful and poignant piece that still might strain some viewers' capacity for repetition. It follows the life of a little boy who loses his father to political turmoil in the 1950s, and then watches as political turmoil takes his stepfather in the early '60s.

The other protested film, *Beijing Bastards*,

Noah Cowan is a programmer for the Toronto Festival of Festivals. Peter Broderick is an independent producer living in Los Angeles. David Tracey lives in Tokyo and writes for the *International Herald-Tribune*.

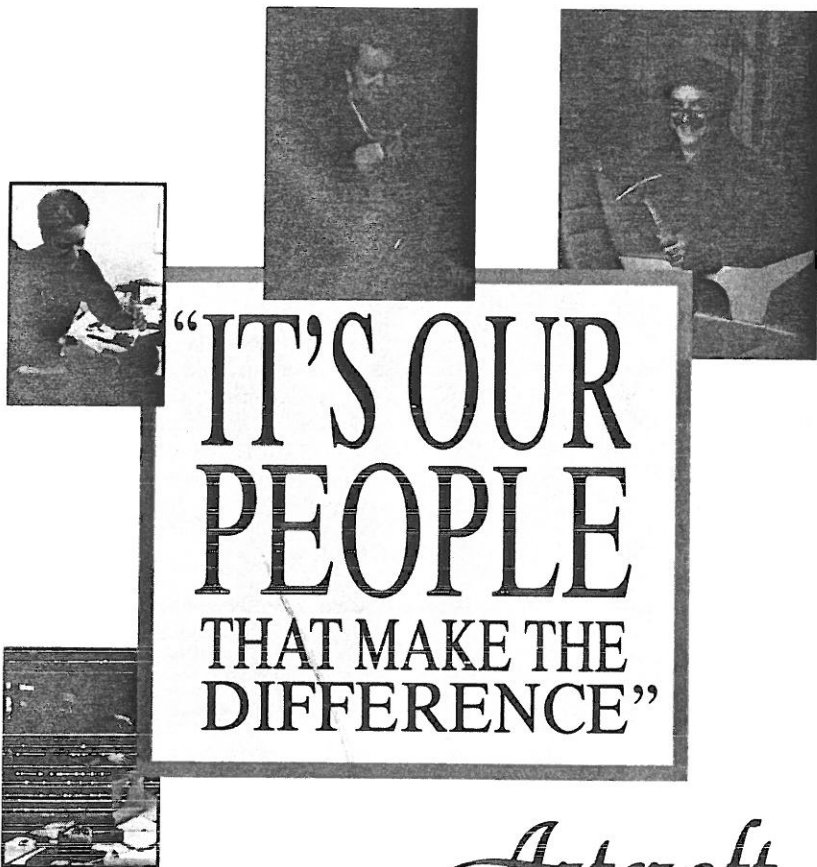
could prove a greater test of the Beijing government's monopoly on correct thought. Entered in the non-competitive "Best of Asian Films" category, it was listed as coming from Hong Kong even though its own billing called it "the first truly independent film made in China." Director Zhang Yuan used money collected from the Rotterdam Film Festival, the French government and four producers who included Chinese rock star Cui Jian, also a star in the film. It still wasn't enough, according to its PR flyer, as "shooting very often had to be suspended due to intervention by the police and lack of money."

Zhuan explained that *Beijing Bastards* has also yet to be approved by the authorities, but he is nevertheless already looking ahead to his next project, a film about young homosexuals

in today's China. Whether the best choice or not, Zhuan represents a new crop of Chinese filmmakers who are no longer tied to one of the major studios as they had to be in the past. Distribution aside, all you need to make a film in China these days, directors say, is a big pile of money. Welcome to capitalism.

Winning the always interesting Young Cinema competition (for directors either up to 35 with less than three feature films or those showing their first film) was Ning Ying, a Beijing woman whose *For Fun* was entered as a joint production from Hong Kong and China. A rare-for-festivals cash prize of 20 million yen (about \$200,000) goes along with the prize to encourage the next generation of filmmakers.

In addition to the competition films, the



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Mijke de Jong's *Love Hurts*, an obsessive love/not-in-love story set among Dutch squatters, based on the director's own feature documentary (in roughly the same relation *American Heart* holds to *Streetwise*), presents the sort of impassioned characters rarely seen in film but easily recognizable in real life. Also showing was Danny Cannon's *The Young Americans*, Paul Trijbit's gritty policier, which represented the new "multiplex school" of English filmmaking. Here, American cop Harvey Keitel follows the heroin trade to London and discovers rave culture, multi-cult gang thugs weaned on *A Clockwork Orange*, and generally all manner of unpleasantness undreamt of back when American cop John Wayne made the same trip in *McQ*.

The Dallas-based USA Festival has always been skewed to a more mainstream sensibility, possibly from necessity. Constructed around a series of annual presentations made to popular actors and directors, it has been responsible for both paying homage where long overdue, as with this year's tribute to veteran director Budd Boetticher, and for handing out a series of mystifying awards. (This year's Master Screen Artist Award went to Richard Dreyfuss.)

Yet this year the populist programming was finally put to better use as it subsidized more challenging fare — like the posthumous celebration of Derek Jarman. Even a career retrospective for director Martha Coolidge (there with *Angie*), used the occasion to screen her rarely-seen and disturbing first feature, *Not a Pretty Picture*, shot in 1975. The pic is a frank and powerful docudrama that dramatizes the director's own rape at age 16.

Particularly stunning was the large-screen showing of Jarman's *Blue*, his last feature, and the only one to directly apply his signature anger to the disease that finally claimed him. Constructed in layers of sound and orchestral bridges over an unvarying blue matte screen, the film is a meditation on life, love, politics, and metabolism. Just formally, it accomplishes several dramatic things no other feature in memory does: the constant blue, and the hypnagogic imagery it inspires, has the curious effect of highlighting the dimensions of the screen itself, foregrounding the proscenium and integrating the screen into the world of the theater, an effect counter to that of virtually all other films as they attempt to narratively engage the viewer. This makes the film, in effect, as large as the theater itself. *Blue* stages you in the room, rather than on-screen, and makes the viewing experience both immense and regal, something out of a hall of kings.

Also of interest was Roger Avary's ersatz French caper *Killing Zoe*, in its first showing outside of Sundance, with the exquisite Julie Delpy in tow (who was on her way to Austin to meet with co-star Ethan Hawke in Rick Linklater's new *Before Sunrise*, currently lensing in Vienna). John Dahl's *The Last Seduction*

proves the belated reception given his *Red Rock West* was not a fluke, as Linda Fiorentino gives a performance you could strike safety matches on. And finally of special note was Severo Perez' *...and the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*, an American Playhouse production of a revered 1971 Mexican-American coming-of-age novel by Tomas Rivera. In starkly poetic terms, this gentle film presents a magical child's-eye view of the migrant farmworker experience in Texas, circa 1952, and the attendant superstitions that hold the world in its wiredrawn orbit.

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL OF INDIA • BOMBAY DOCUMENTARY & SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

by Noah Cowan

Only one country can boast a film industry that rivals and often surpasses Hollywood in terms of number of films produced and star glamour. That country is India, a place also blessed with a strong tradition of independent art film, which continues to flourish even after the death of its leading light, Satyajit Ray. To fuel this interest in things cinematic, the Indian government supports two festivals of international calibre.

After years of indifferent programming and intense media criticism, the International Film Festival of India — usually known by its acronym, IFFI — is now establishing itself as a major event on the festival calendar. This year's IFFI took place from January 10 - 20 in Calcutta and was dedicated to Ray, the city's most famous cinematic son. Calcutta itself is not particularly suited to a festival — traffic jams snarl the downtown; steamy weather and dense pollution limit casual strolling — but the cultural fervour of its inhabitants more than makes up for the unending chaos.

The festival takes place all over the city in massive cinema halls which, according to director Malti Sahai, are at 99% capacity, a figure hard to doubt when you see lines snaking down city blocks and shoving matches at the door. Most of the program is comprised of new-ish international films, programmed out of the Cannes and Toronto festivals, plus a large panorama of new Indian cinema and major retrospectives (this year on Antonioni and Garbo).

Sahai was ecstatic about this year's event: "Even our harshest critics admitted this was the best film selection in ten years. But that was something of a fluke. Veteran Indian filmmakers all made new films and there were at least four very good first films in the Indian Panorama; the market opening up has made it easier to get films in and [Ted] Turner delivered a Garbo package without charge." India has recently relaxed its film import/export laws so that entertainment conglomerates can now set up shop profitably; companies like

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Turner have been wisely generous with cultural events, despite fears of piracy, and already the goodwill is paying off at the legislative level.

But even with this year's success, the festival remains a state-run organization, subject to massive political intervention. Not only do officials gobble up huge numbers of tickets, but they insist that the festival be itinerant — last year it was held in New Delhi, next year in Bombay. This creates an organizational nightmare which can mean cancelled screenings, poor projection, and empty offices. Sahai is ambivalent: "With at least four centers of Indian film production, the poorer people involved in the industry should get an opportunity to see this work, even if its only once every few years. But that means all our energy and funding is diffuse, and dollars invested today in infrastructure have to be matched every year."

For the first time since the 1970s, FIPRESCI (International Critics') prizes were awarded: one for best Indian film to Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Servile* and for best international film, *Farewell My Concubine*. Other programming highlights were Ismail Merchant's Indian premiere of *In Custody*, a rapturous search for Urdu poetry starring the incomparable Shashi Kapoor, and an Indian first film, *Leaves and Thorns*, by K.P. Sasi; the film is a powerful indictment of prejudice in the nominally socialist Indian state of Kerala.

Just two weeks later, from February 1 - 7, India hosted another major international film event: the Bombay Documentary and Short Film Festival. The country's bustling, modern film center hosts this event every two years, a time lag which allows for greater concentration and better organization than IFFI. But it also means tough programming choices.

Festival director Krishna Mohan must rely on a large selection committee to help pare down the huge numbers of entries. Mohan, who has directed several documentaries himself, believes "the festival would be a better showcase if we could mount it on an annual basis. But, because it's a government-supported festival, it's their decision."

One of the strongest features of the festival is its India section, even though Indian filmmakers complain about being placed in a ghetto. Says Mohan: "Indian filmmakers should be happy that interested people can find them. We choose the best Indian documentaries to participate in the competition and the rest are shown in a small cinema in another part of the complex."

This complex is Nehru Centre, an imposing '60s-style cylindrical tower, with an adjacent planetarium. That gives the festival three screens — one big Competition facility which runs continuous shorts and documentaries from 9 AM until about 10 PM, and two smaller screens underneath an unused planetarium for sidebars and Indian films. Unfortunately,

the Nehru Center area isn't particularly lively so meals and fun are a taxi ride away — not such a strain when a trip to the city's tip is under \$3.

These constant forays were the only complaint from Frederic Cassidy, director of *Kissing Time*, an extremely accomplished and funny revisiting of silent-film comedic conventions. Otherwise, he found it "the most dynamic international festival he has been to. After I showed my film, people were unabashed about coming up to ask strong questions, which makes a festival more interesting for a filmmaker." As for the selection, there is the luxury of so many films and the burden of choice.

Gianfranco Rosi, director of *Boatman* — a riveting, beautifully photographed trip along the Varanasi ghats with a wisecracking oar master — also acknowledged the enthusiastic, well-informed audiences, but had scorn for the festival's projectionist: "This may have been the worst projection I have ever seen. The sound was terrible; twice it fell badly out of sync. The reel changes were really bad. All the clapping and cheering at the end only balanced the horror of the projection."

Still, Rosi liked the festival's mood: "It's a village square. You're always surrounded by and talking to people waiting to go see movies. It's easy to interact."

But it is the age-old attraction of India that finally impressed Cassidy: "This place just overwhelms the senses. A large part of the atmosphere of this festival is the fact it's in this incredible city." ▼



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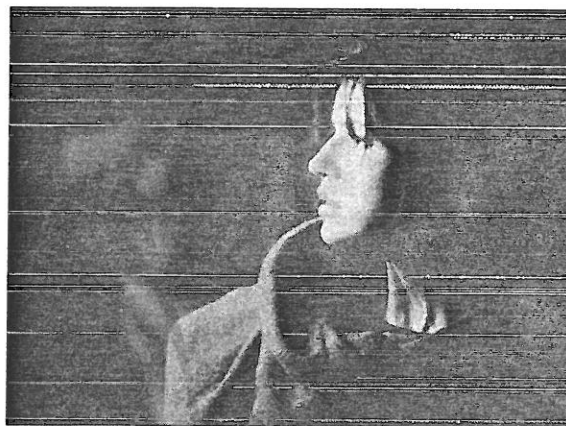
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It is here you find the heavy-hitters of world art cinema, which this year included Krzysztof Kieslowski, Zhang Yimou and Alan Parker. It can be a daunting experience, even for a festival veteran like Canada's Atom Egoyan, in Cannes with his latest film, *Exotica*. "I felt a sense of excitement when the film was on screen;

the sound was just incredible," Egoyan recounts. "But there is a huge amount of pressure; you don't want to fail in front of very important people while representing your country." And failure can be ugly, with hundreds of chairs specially designed to thwack as people leave during quiet scenes. Even great masters have been roasted — Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* and Jane Campion's *Sweetie* were both literally booed off the screen in years past.

Competition prizes are awarded by a jury of international film luminaries at a closing-night ceremony notorious for its bad taste. This year, Jeanne Moreau, acting as a deranged den mother to seven young French actresses/beauties/prize-givers, saw the Golden Palm (Best Film) again go to an American film, the fourth time in five years. Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, an edgy, entertaining visual poem about violence and loyalty, is an obvious festival hit and a deserving winner. The consensus among a broad range of critics, however, was that the film is too long at 149 minutes; we will see if this award holds back the Miramax scissors.

Tarantino's hip film noir edged out the more classical art epics, Nikita Mikhailkov's *Burnt By the Sun* and Zhang Yimou's *To Live!*, which shared the Grand Jury Prize. Acting honors went to Ge You, Chinese star of *To Live!* and Vima Lisi, Catherine de Medici in the bloated, disappointing French epic, *La Reine Margot*. Italian director Nanni Moretti scored Best Director for his charming three-part autobiography, *Dear Diary*.

Scandalously absent from the awards was Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Red*, the final chapter of his "Three Colours" trilogy. Easily the best film in Competition, it explores complex themes of friendship and duty and features astonishing performances from Jean-Louis Trintignant and Irene Jacobs. Other oversights were Abbas Kiarostami's sublime *Through the Olive Trees* and Edward Yang's smart take on urban malaise, Taipei-style, *A Confucian Confusion*.

What Festival director Gilles Jacob considers unsuitable for Official Competition goes to Un

see page 46

Cannes Film Festival

Noah Cowan

Mary Glucksman

San Francisco International Film Festival

Kurt Wolff

The New York Underground Film & Video Festival

Stephen Gallagher

Southwest Film & Media Conference, USA Festival, and Houston Worldfest

Paul Cullum

Bombay Documentary & Short Film Festival and International Film Festival of India

Noah Cowan

CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

by Noah Cowan

The strapless celebante, doused in an atomic shower of paparazzi flash, scales a palatial stairway with her impossible heels and perfect smile. At the summit, she joins her seventh husband, a vaunted master of European cinema sporting an ill-fitting tuxedo. He is fondly recalling an afternoon extolling the virtues of a since-denounced Communist film bureaucrat to an enraptured Van Nuys-based creator of erotic thrillers, himself bankrupted by the two watery cappuccinos just purchased from a surly waiter who undoubtedly will have better seats than any of them for tonight's film. All four have great tans.

Art, hypocrisy, cash and glamour; this is the reputation and, to some extent, the reality of the Cannes Film Festival.

Until the late 1930s, Cannes was an unremarkable beach town on the road between Nice and St. Tropez. But when Benito Mussolini decided to convert the then-unrivaled film exposition of Venice into a fascist propaganda organ, horrified French and American film elites decided to establish a rival event on the Cote d'Azur. Interrupted occasionally since then by wars and riots, the Festival International du Film this year celebrated its 47th anniversary, safely in power as "The Queen of Festivals," a position she fiercely defends from her infamous castle — a huge and baffling, ugly faux-Mayan complex of cinemas and reception rooms aptly named the Palais des Festivals.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of Cannes is the existence of several sections, most of which are administratively separate, that take place at the same time and compete against each other for films.

In the Official Competition, 20 to 25 major new films never before screened outside their countries of origin compete for prizes in eight categories. Films are screened once for about 2,000 accredited press, then twice for lucky or well-connected ticket holders in the immense

FESTIVAL ROUNDUP

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Certain Regard, which translates rather loosely as "A Definite Perspective" — something clearly not on offer in this grab bag of world cinema. Films are placed in Un Certain Regard for a variety of reasons — too old, too small, too challenging, etc. — although its reputation as a dumping ground is fast disappearing. More and more, it is being filled by first films and seems to be a breeding ground for the Competition.

Suture directors David Seigel and Scott McGehee were thrilled with their Un Certain Regard placement. Says Seigel: "The intense spotlight of the Competition would not have been good for either *Suture* or us. Here we had a very successful public screening with 200-300 people turned away and the festival has taken very good care of us." McGehee says "it was our weirdest Q&A ever; we had done so many and had become used to a pattern around issues like co-directing, influences, black/white...but here we got questions like: 'You changed the race of the main character, why not change his gender too?' I think we were dealing with some very frustrated filmmakers."

Created out of the 1968 student riots to be a subversive parallel program to the Official Competition, the Quinzaine des Réalistes (Directors' Fortnight) has definitely mellowed with age. While it still carries a reputation for discovering edgy and more difficult films, it is increasingly interested in crowd-pleasing ones. Ergo the easily digestible *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee's family-and-food saga which opened the section, and Aki Kaurismäki's charming but shallow look at '60s Finland, *Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatjana*. But, while the Fortnight included a number of heavily-hyped English-language films — like

the *Strictly Ballroom* pseudo-sequel *Muriel's Wedding* and Hal Hartley's newest, *Amateur* — the real gems came in quieter packages. From India, Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* re-enacts the life of Phoolan Devi, a living folk hero/villain who responds to serial rape by becoming a brutal armed gang leader in the Indian countryside. Its violence, both emotional and physical, make it a difficult but ultimately rewarding portrait of a complex woman. From China, *Back To Back, Face To Face* by Huang Jianxin is a funny and intelligent satire set in a government office. Like his earlier *Stand Up, Don't Grovel!*, Huang deploys comedy to probe delicate matters, political and personal, in modern, urban China.

Atom Egoyan, whose *Speaking Parts* and *The Adjuster* were shown in the Fortnight in 1989 and 1991, sees the Fortnight "protecting the filmmaker more as an institution because it has its own loyal audience. It's a great place for demanding and vulnerable films and can be a great place to launch first features. There's just not the same chance of people booing here. In Competition, you can really *bomb*."

Normally, the Fortnight is very possessive about its filmmakers, as part of an often vicious rivalry with the Competition programmers. Egoyan, however, says: "Pierre Henri Deleau [the Fortnight Director] is a loyal, astute and generous individual; when he understood the film had a chance to be in Competition, he was very supportive." Although, Egoyan admits, "if I had gone into Un Certain Regard, that would have hurt him, even if it is becoming a strong section."

A smaller and more eccentric section of the Festival, the Semaine de la Critique Française (Critics' Week) always yields a few treasures and a few overly formal clunkers. One happy discovery was Frouke Fokkema's *Spring Doesn't Exist Anymore*, a nasty tale of disintegrating love. But by far the most popular offering here was Kevin Smith's raunchy exposé of convenience store shenanigans, *Clerks*. The film won both the Critics' Week's Best Film award and the Prix de la Jeunesse, even though its thick New Jersey accents and extremely idiomatic humor must have lost something in

translation. No one was more surprised than director Kevin Smith: "We figured the movie would translate fine in the U.S. and maybe Canada, but nowhere else. But the audience here proved everyone wrong, including us." About the Critics' Week section, Smith says "it's an unlikely place for the film, but we got a great reaction. This is supposedly the smallest sidebar, but it's been great for us and has given us really wide exposure." As for Cannes, "it's pretty much a fucking circus. We hardly saw any movies; we just couldn't get in!"

That, excluding retrospectives, exhausts the programmed sections of the festival for about 70 films, quite modest by international festival standards. But that number balloons if the market is included. Film sellers from around the world buy out cinemas throughout the town of Cannes — about 20 of them — to show movies to prospective buyers. Other festival passholders can go, but only with the invitation of the company screening the film. Critics are rarely allowed to attend these screenings, but may do so anyway because the market holds the possibility of the "next big thing." This year's crapshoot yielded at least one great film: New Zealand's *Once A Warrior*. A first film, it is a brutal, powerful saga of a Maori woman with a subtle political edge; a major omission from the official sections of the festival. Other "finds" were mostly in non-traditional Cannes Festival genres, like Danny Boyle's intense Scottish thriller, *Shallow Grave*. Debate also raged around Charles Burnett's police drama, *The Glass Shield*, and Jim McBride's fine art mystery, *Uncovered* (formerly *The Flemish Board*).

Much was made of the fact that the Hollywood studios stayed away from Cannes this year. So what? Most studio films aren't appropriate to be shown in a festival context and the stars come anyway, usually for promotional reasons. In fact, the lack of a Hollywood media glut this year meant that smaller films got some breathing room. A Cannes in which party talk concerns the new Kiarostami and Kieslowski, rather than the cost of Joel Silver's new suit, can only be a step in the right direction.

CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

by Mary S. Glucksman

Pulp Fiction ruled at this year's Cannes festival from the moment Quentin Tarantino touched down on the Croisette with stars John Travolta, Bruce Willis, Sam Jackson and Uma Thurman in tow. Although Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Red*, the third installment in his *Three Colors* trilogy, had been widely expected to win the Palme d'Or, few were ultimately surprised when the festival's highest honor went to Tarantino. The Camera d'Or (the festival's award for best first feature), on the other hand, went to *Petit Arrangements avec Les Morts*, a

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