



Few people have shaped and defined the Toronto International Film Festival like David Overbey. He was a programmer from the organization's second year until his final Festival ten years ago, shortly before his death in December 1998, and is credited with discovering some of the major talent of our age. John Woo, Wong Kar-wai, Gaspar Noé, Tsui Hark, Charles Burnett, Deepa Mehta, Jean-Jacques Beineix, Santosh Sivan, Guillermo del Toro, Paul Verhoeven, Lino Brocka, Jacques Nolot and the late Edward Yang, among many others, count David as the first serious international programmer to believe in them. Some of these directors premiered their films here, others at the Semaine de la Critique at the Cannes Film Festival during David's long tenure as a member. His critical writing was forceful and direct. In many ways, he pioneered the classic "programme note" – because of course the Europeans don't actually write such things – erudite advertorials creating enthusiasm and sparking intellectual debate. The filmmakers he supported were able to use his writing and good name to move their careers forward; it offered a reason for others to invest, financially and spiritually, in these artists. He also insisted that this Festival adopt an open, autonomous structure for its programming team, a model that is now copied the world over.

But David's influence does not stop there. An American installed in Paris, he brought international glamour to the city of Toronto at a time when it was sorely needed. He and another transplanted Yank, Jay Scott, revolutionized how film was written about in this city. They believed that intelligent criticism and a sense of play were not mutually exclusive – and, in part, created the voracious cinema audience with which we are blessed today. Many of us who began in journalism (Cameron Bailey and myself being two ready

examples, as well as one of our guests, Joan Dupont of the *International Herald Tribune*) found our voices by reading David's prose and sharing with him a passion for cinema.

David was also about as much fun as one person can be. A towering, heavy-set man, he thundered through life, clutching an ever-burning Gauloise and knocking back a vodka or seven before the dinner hour, with a handsome, much younger man never too far away. He was a great raconteur and made the movies all the more magic with each conjured memory. (My favourite involves John Waters and Pia Zadora – but ask about that one another time.)

To celebrate this most extraordinary life and his unparalleled contribution to the cinema, our city and this Festival, we have asked three special guests to present and discuss films that David championed. The fact that one is an Indian filmmaker working in Canada, another is an American-born journalist living in France (who will speak about David's best friend, a Filipino filmmaker) and the last is among the finest living British filmmakers should speak to the extraordinary range of David's curatorial abilities.

David would have loved revisiting these films with three of the greatest storytellers I have ever encountered. So we welcome you all to celebrate a most extraordinary life at the movies with some of the cinema that inspired him the most.

■ Noah Cowan

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