

# FESTIVAL wraps

## 27<sup>TH</sup> TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

9/5-15/02

By Kathleen Cummins

Early on at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) there were outbursts of dissent among certain journalists about the press/industry screenings, most notably by the celebrity/critic Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times*, claiming the festival had grown too big, lamenting long lines, poor access to the "key movies" and the growing presence of "mob scenes." When I heard all this fuss, I felt somewhat perplexed. Funny, I didn't have any difficulty getting into press screenings, even at the very last minute. Sometimes I was even a little late. But, of course, I didn't! I was covering Canadian films. Covering this year's Perspective Canada program, equipped with 12 press/industry screening coupons—not an official press pass—I would see only a sampling of movies, and get no party invites. Only a true film nerd would relish such an assignment.

Thursday, September 5

**10:00 a.m.** First day of TIFF. Arriving at a crowded press office in the Four Seasons Hotel, I pick up my screening coupons and make a beeline for the Perspective Canada (PC) desk. There I forage for press kits and any premature buzz about the Canadian films this year. A PC staff member excites about two documentaries: Jennifer Baichwal's *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia* and Peter Mettler's *Gambling, Gods and LSD*. I notice there are no press kits for the big Canadian films such as *Ararat*, *Bollywood/Hollywood*, *Spider*, Mina Shum's *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity* or even newcomer Keith Berhman's *Flower & Garnet*. Apparently the distributors (Alliance Atlantis and Odeon) didn't send over its press material. Instead, they wanted the press to go directly to their festival offices, located in a separate hotel. A real nuisance.

**2:00 p.m.** Attend press screening of highly anticipated Atom Egoyan's Armenian historical epic *Ararat*. The film, of course, being an Egoyan film, is not particularly epic and the historical part is background stuff. The premise, as always, is intriguing. A present-day Armenian-Canadian man searches for identity, and the meaning of his terrorist father's death, as he works as a gofer on a movie set about the past horrors of a "forgotten" Armenian genocide. Dramatically, the film-within-a-film "distancing" device distances us a little too much from the unimaginable cruelties and sufferings of genocide to identify with the young man's pain. Hence, the young man's internal turmoil about who he is and who his father was, is lost in among the wreckage of the film-with-a-film's war-torn movie sets. There's blood and fire here, but it's not "real" blood and fire.

Friday, September 6

**2:15 p.m.** Moved by Wiebke von Carolsfeld's *Marion Bridge*, which tells the story of three Irish Catholic sisters (Rebecca Jenkins, Molly Parker and Stacy Smith) coping with past family crimes, addiction and a dying mother on the East Coast. Von Carolsfeld and writer, Daniel MacIvor, eloquently exercise restraint, carefully guiding the characters



Callum Keith Rennie at TIFF. Photo by Nardina Grande.

toward finely tuned moments of emotional salvation, while remaining within the context of the repressive environment: the family home.

**4:30 p.m.** Dash into a screening of Terrance Odetta's *Saint Monica*. Set in the Portuguese community of downtown Toronto, the film tells the bittersweet story of a 10-year-old girl's (Genevieve Buechner) quest and yearning for belonging, while her unhappy working-class single mother (Brigitte Bako) and her unemployed father-figure uncle (Maurizio Terrazzano) struggle to make ends meet. The film has what so many films tend to lack—warmth and charm. Unfortunately, there are only 20 people in the audience.

Saturday, September 7

**9:00 a.m.** I stumble into Jennifer Baichwal's documentary *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia*. I screen this film over *Bollywood/Hollywood* and *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity* because someone somewhere decided to schedule three Canadian features at the same time. There is only one press/industry screening for



Catherine Martin's *Océan*.

# TORONTO



Jennifer Baichwal's *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams's Appalachia*.

every film. Baichwal's bio-documentary is a truly meaningful film, deconstructing the Gothic images seen through the lens and heart of controversial photographer Shelby Lee Adams. Unlike most bio-documentaries, Baichwal explores her subject with integrity, guts and a critical eye. I exit the cinema elated and inspired.

*Sunday, September 8*

**9:00 a.m.** S. Wyeth Clarkson's *deadend.com* could be the *Clerks* of TIFF, but it's not American, and it's depressing and it's scheduled at the same time as *The Four Feathers*, the epic war flick starring Heath Ledger. Also screening at the same time is another Canadian feature, Guy Bennett's *Punch*, using the topless female boxer circuit as a quirky backdrop for a troubled father-daughter relationship movie. Unfortunately, there are two Canadian movies fighting for my attention here: a psycho-horror film and a "chick flick."

**3:15 p.m.** Attend Daniel MacIvor's *Past Perfect*. The film has some memorable moments, and the ending proves to be stronger than the beginning. Too bad I am constantly distracted and annoyed by people vacating whole rows at a time. The thumping of cinema seat chairs is the equivalent to people who use their car horns excessively. It's a hazard.

**7:15 p.m.** Wait in line for an hour, politely, for David Cronenberg's creepily austere *Spider*. Lynne Redgrave sits behind me at the screening and because it's a Cronenberg film I'm unnerved. *A Beautiful Mind* it is not. No heartfelt speeches, no expository dialogue about paranoid schizophrenia, no CIA agents! Quite simply, it's a masterpiece.

*Tuesday, September 10*

**10:00 a.m.** Ryan Feldman's *Folk*, Larry Peloso's *Prom Fight: The Marc Hall Story* and Jennifer Allyn's *Les Rossy* make for an interesting lineup of

short documentaries. *Folk* stands out because of Feldman's ability to move effortlessly between humour and pathos, featuring his two very reluctant parents as subjects.

**11:00 a.m.** I wait in line patiently for the premiere of Edouardo Ponti's Italian-Canadian co-production, *Between Strangers*, starring his still gorgeous screen-icon mom, Sophia Loren, as well as Canadian divas Wendy Crewson and Deborah Kara Unger. Blessed with fabulous bones and screen charisma, Loren brings true magic to this troubled film, but when she's not on screen, we realize it can't be saved. In the film Loren plays a martyr/mother who makes the ultimate sacrifice for her daughter's future, and in a way her presence in this film is also an act of motherly love.

*Wednesday, September 11*

**11:00 a.m.** Anticipate Alanis Obomsawin's *Is the Crown at War with Us?* Single handedly, Obomsawin has established the Native-rights documentary in this country. However, unlike the powerful *Richard Cardinal: Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child* or *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, this film seems rushed and excessively one-sided. Obomsawin's mission as a filmmaker is significant and necessary, but here I felt a complex issue about racial and class politics among struggling Native and non-Native fishermen was being simplified.

*Thursday, September 12*

**9:00 a.m.** When I arrive for more PC shorts, I notice on the press list I'm the only journalist in attendance. There are about 10 people in the audience. Richard Fung's deconstructive and humorous *Islands* plays with star close-ups, campy dialogue and a sweeping musical score, as he revisits his uncle's experience as an "ethnic" movie extra in a 1950s Hollywood epic war/romance starring Deborah Kerr. If only this film could have opened for *The Four Feathers*. Despite annoying sound projection problems, which induces some viewers to leave, Quebec filmmaker Catherine Martin's 50-minute documentary *Océan* is a near spiritual experience. Gorgeously shot in 35 mm by Carlos Ferrand, without voice-over narration and very few interviews, the film is an elegant and pensive cinematic ode to the culture of train travel.

*Friday, September 13*

**My last day** Running out of coupons brings mixed emotions. On one level there is a great sigh of relief, and on another level there is a feeling of anxiety. I realize it's all those films I didn't get to see. However, of the films I did see, I was often the only press person or one of a few in attendance, and so I have to wonder about Ebert's rants about not getting into the "key movies." I bet he didn't have trouble getting into Planet Africa films. And so, maybe it isn't that the festival is too big, maybe it's just that some of the movies are. Everything and everyone else gets lost amid the stardust, just like Richard Fung's indistinguishable Chinese uncle as a Japanese extra in a Hollywood star vehicle. In the end, everybody wants to go to America.

**2002's TIFF Canadian winners**

Toronto-City Award for Best Canadian Feature (\$25,000): David Cronenberg's *Spider*; Citytv Award for Best Canadian First Feature (\$15,000): Wiebke von Caorlsfeld's *Marion Bridge*; and Best Canadian Short Film (\$10,000): Ann Marie Fleming's *Blue Skies*.