

Time again for the Toronto International Film

Festival and, like the beginning of the school year, it signals a fresh start, a new crop of films to keep us going until the next film festival. Like it or not, this festival is big, and there are very few film events that create such a level of excitement. Tensions run high and tempers flare in all sectors of the filmmaking community across Canada. We all want certain films and/or people included since we all know that a film's inclusion provides it with the greatest chances of success. All the more reason why the experimental film community scans the program book very closely, mercilessly judging the success or failure of this year's festival.

I must say, after last year's experience (a whopping three experimental films), I wasn't expecting much from the Perspective Canada program this year. Now, however, I must admit that I'm quite excited about this year's selection, both in terms of numbers and quality. With more than double last year's number of experimental films, audiences get the chance to discover some exciting new talent. The only name familiar to festival audiences is that of Wrik Mead. In recent years Mead, along with Mike Hoolboom, has been a regular presence in the Canadian program.

This year's festival features *guise* by Wrik Mead and Julia Creet, an "adult fairy tale" in which Creet struggles with her desire to don a suit of armour. Beyond the obvious metaphorical implications of this image, Mead creates an interesting tension between his protagonist's need to cover up and his unending desire to unmask. His films often feature a single protagonist wrestling with unseen forces to break free of literal or metaphorical constraints. Freedom is achieved through the very literal act of disrobing. In *guise*, Mead provides an interesting twist on his previous films. Whereas in the past he has focused on the act of breaking free, he now focuses more closely on the struggle that inevitably takes place before the final act of liberation. Interestingly, the happy ending we have come to expect from Mead is subverted in favour of a touch of ambiguity suggesting that while the fairy-tale ending is more desirable, it is nonetheless unrealistic.

This is a banner year for new talent. Some of us are already familiar with the work of John Kneller but he is a newcomer to the festival. *We are Experiencing Technical Difficulties. Regular Programming Will Resume Momentarily* is the highly ironic title for Kneller's pseudo high-tech rumination on the natural world, pseudo in the sense that the film imitates techniques now associated with sophisticated video postproduction when in reality the imagery has been meticulously handcrafted by Kneller. At a time when many are moving away from a hands-on approach to image construction, Kneller shows he can create the same effects using superimpositions, layering and matting, creating relationships between nature and technology that are insightful and provocative.

Another festival rookie familiar to some is Neil Burns. *Grace Eternal* details the postmortem of a woman whose death goes unnoticed for two years. This is the story of technological advances gone awry—machines take care of everything, even when the individual can't. Her bank account is replenished and her bills are paid by electronic transfer and the answering machine tends to the calls. Playfully evoking the films of Peter Greenaway through the obsessive cataloguing of details and the repetitive soundtrack, Burns adds his

Photo courtesy of CFMDC



Wrik Mead's and Julia Creet's *guise*: an adult fairytale.

own signature style, complete with luscious optical effects and a digitized ghost that is awe inspiring in its simplicity. This film's strength lies in the subtlety with which it tells such a fantastic story and it is this very subtlety that elicits such strong feelings of compassion in the viewer, something Greenaway has never managed.

Two newcomers to the experimental film community are bursting onto the scene with a vengeance at this year's festival. The Perspective Canada selection committee decided to include two films by Cara Morton, an honour that has been reserved for festival mainstays such as Hoolboom, Mead and Ann Marie Fleming. Morton's *Incantation* and *Across* are hand-processed gems. *Incantation* combines images from last autumn's anti-Harris protest in Toronto with a dancer creating a brilliant combination that illuminates the spirit and energy evident in the marches. *Across* has a gentler power, furiously and passionately engaging with the unobtrusive landscape to uncover what most of us have yet to discover. Christopher Walsh marks his debut with *Museum*, a minimalist meditation on relationships and filmmaking. Surprisingly, Walsh displays a control and maturity that some veteran filmmakers have yet to master. Simple, yet hypnotic, his film features some of the most striking imagery I've seen in a long while. For those of us who've grown tired of the ubiquitous optical printing in recent Canadian experimental films, *Museum* provides a refreshing reminder of the reasons we were drawn to those images in the first place.

All in all, it is a strong year for experimental filmmakers at the Toronto festival. It's the type of year that inspires a feeling of optimism about the future of this art. ■