

FESTIVAL WRAPS



Benicio Del Toro (left) won the Best Actor award for his performance in Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic*



Martine Chartrand's *Âme noire* won the Golden Bear for Best Short film

The Berlin International Film Festival

by Jack Vermeë

Started by an American and initially viewed as a way to celebrate Western ideologies during the Cold War (and to give dissenting filmmakers from the USSR and its satellites a forum for their anti-authoritarian, often suppressed films), the Berlin International Film Festival has earned its reputation as one of the most important film festivals in the world. But what makes it so much more than that is that, well, it's in Berlin, the city of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (the original, 1970s version), of heroin chic, of David Bowie's "Heroes," of the Love Parade. It is a city where smoking is every child's birthright, where legal brothels stand beside fancy department stores, where you can stay out all night, every night, and never go to the same place twice. It is a city where black is – and always will be – the *de rigueur* colour for clothes, where the influx of Eastern Europeans and Turks has resulted in a "fantastische" mix of cultures. In short, despite the corporatization of almost everything in the newer sections – the festival's Potsdamer Platz location is a monument to Mercedes-Benz, Sony and overpriced restaurants – Berlin is still the quintessentially cool European city. The festival itself consists of three main programs: the Competition, the Panorama and the incongruously named International Forum for Young Cinema (incongruous because it programmed, for example, Béla Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmoniak*; and the 46-year-old Tarr isn't exactly a spring chicken). Add the European film market into the mix, and on any given day you have more than 30 films playing at the same time. With the first press screening usually beginning at 9:00 a.m. and the last screening of the day slotted at 11:30 p.m., just writing that down has brought back a strange combination of vertigo and fatigue the *Berlinale* manages to induce in this festival regular.

However, it brings back the exhilaration as well. The year 2001 – and yes Stanley Kubrick's classic *2001: A Space Odyssey* was screened on the closing weekend – provided much to feel hopeful about. Although Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* was the odds-on favourite to take the top award (Benicio Del Toro received the Best

Actor prize), the jury did not give the Golden Bear to an American film for a change, as previous juries have done four out of the last five years. It opted, instead, for Patrice Chéreau's *Intimité*, as controversial a film as you're likely to find this side of Catherine Breillat, who – surprise! – was also in the competition with her equally controversial *A ma soeur!*. The controversy is, as usual, of a sexual nature. *Intimité* represents the first English-language foray into the hardcore sex/art film, giving us Kerry Fox (winner of the Best Actress award) and Mark Rylance as strangers who meet once a week for some rough – and real – sex. *A ma soeur!* depicts real sex with an "underage" girl and left audiences divided along gender lines – the women generally liked it and the men generally didn't – not surprising in a film that ends up "leaving men feeling as if they've been raped," as one fellow critic put it.

And what of Canada? We did not do too badly, really. Martine Chartrand's animated *Âme noire* captured the Golden Bear for Best Short film in the Competition section while Denis Villeneuve's much-lauded *Maelström* was awarded the prestigious FIPRESCI prize in the Panorama section. Regarding Villeneuve's work, the jury cited the film's "innovative dramatic structure, playfulness and its contemporary sensibility" in its decision. Unfortunately, given English-Canada's resistance to Québécois films, it's hard to see the award translating into a box-office breakthrough west of the Ontario/Quebec border. Equally unfortunate is that Canada's other entries – among them Michael Winterbottom's Canada/France/U.K. co-production *The Claim*, Clement Virgo's *Love Come Down*, Renny Bartlett's *Eisenstein*, and, perhaps most disappointingly, Léa Pool's *Lost and Delirious* – failed to cause much of a stir at all.

Of the 50-plus films I sat through, two personal favourites are Thomas Arslan's Berlin-set *A Fine Day* and Lucrecia Martel's debut feature *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp*), from Argentina. Arslan's film – a closely observed look at one day in the life of a 22-year-old would-be actress, which celebrates *la vie quotidienne* – is a bit strange in that it's the most French film I saw, despite Arslan being a Berliner of Turkish descent. *La Ciénaga* chronicles the exploits of a couple of families on vacation and manages to evoke a mood – in this case a kind of humid claustrophobia mixed with a strong undertone of incestual sexual tension – better than any film I saw. ●