

Cannes

short, *The Stone of Folly*. Legendary Quebec actress Carole Laure's *Les Fils de Marie* was presented in the Critics Week. Perhaps most notably, Atom Egoyan's latest feature, *Ararat*, was presented in the Official Selection but out of competition. Egoyan felt that *Ararat*, which deals with the Armenian genocide in Turkey in 1915, should not be shown in competition because, "a whole other political process would then be imposed on what has already become a politicized film." Interestingly, *Ararat's* investigations of history, memory and conflict are echoed in many films at Cannes this year.

In this sense, three relatively modest films set in Jerusalem stand apart. In the context of that city now, each offers perceptive illuminations of and compelling cases against the end-game of hopelessness. In Official Competition, Palestinian director Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (given a Special Jury Prize) revolves around Palestine lovers who live in Jerusalem and in Ramallah and who rendezvous at a checkpoint parking lot. It's a gallery of absurdist vignettes of hostility, misunderstanding and aggression in the Holy City. Its minimalist style (hints of Tati, Beckett and Keaton) conveys the thorny predicament of Israelis and Palestinians with power and, surprisingly, with humour. Hany Abu-Assad's equally engaging drama, *Rana's Wedding*, offers another examination of the lived reality of the tension of life in Jerusalem today. As Rana tries to prepare for her wedding, she encounters the banal and exceedingly dangerous unpredictability of life during wartime. More prosaic is Rashid Mashawari's *Ticket To Jerusalem*. It concerns an itinerant projectionist in the West Bank determined to show his films to the Palestinian community despite the chaos. In its humble way, *Ticket To Jerusalem* affirms the indomitability of humanity and the value of cinema in even the worst of circumstances.

Eight months after September 11, with Israelis and Palestinians in a renewed and horrific conflict, India and Pakistan on and off high alert, the rise of right-wing extremism in Europe, and the alarming, continuing spread of HIV, filmmakers managed to argue forcefully that there is some hope in

our desperate days. At Cannes, there are thieves and charlatans, whores and artists; there is vanity, avarice and contempt; there is generosity, compassion and beauty; there is plenty to despise and plenty to admire. Ultimately, the 55th edition of this transient city of images, this carnival of commerce and celluloid with its promiscuous combinations of bazaar and boardroom, did deliver impressive and defiant films about the importance of cinema, the value of humanism and at least the possibility of finding a way through our dark labyrinth.

As I discovered in my inaugural visit to the Cote d'Azur, sometimes a tap on the shoulder can give you hope for humanity. Sometimes, as the Cannes Film Festival selections demonstrated more than once, the cinema affords us the same opportunity. Along the Croisette, as in most places these days, you take hope whenever and wherever you can find it.

The Banff Television Festival

BANFF, ALBERTA (6/9-14/02)

By Maurie Alioff

To highlight this year's 50th anniversary of SRC/CBC-TV, the Banff Television Foundation (organizer of the festival), drew up a list of "50 all-time famous faces" on our home and native tube. Informed by input from professionals and viewers, the honour roll ranged from on-air icons such as *Les Plouffe* and Barbara Frum to SCTV, Paul Gross and Adrienne Clarkson. In the capacity of her current gig as Canada's Governor General, Clarkson opened Banff 2002 with a buoyant, intimate address that raised delegate spirits somewhat dampened by the cold rain and mist hovering over the mountains. Fortunately, the weather changed the next day, and in town, or above it at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, the festival's main venue, the Rockies glowed enticingly.

Following Adrienne Clarkson, writer and broadcaster Robert MacNeil offered the festival's keynote address. The Canadian born-and-raised ex-PBS news anchor's context was today's mainstream television landscape, one that many observers believe has degenerated into a toxic dump. MacNeil's talk was a witty, impassioned defence of public broadcasting (appropriately on the fest's CBC Day), which drove home its point. Commercial television's abdication of responsibility to inform and enlighten means that taxpayer-supported television is far from being an expensive frill to amuse a dwindling elite, especially in an era when democratic rights are getting a little shaky. "Television should not exist only to make some people rich," said MacNeil, who also suggested that public television can get into its own kind of rut. He jokingly tagged traditional PBS programming as "British people talking and animals mating, or vice versa."

Buzzing with the energy of MacNeil's speech, delegates flocked to a Showcase of Excellence that featured John Cleese, recipient of Banff 2002's Sir Peter Ustinov/Comedy Network Award. The master of comedic repression and rage (interviewed onstage by the CBC's Ralph Benmergui), got his biggest laugh with a story about how he responded to his late mother's complaints about the miseries of being old. "If

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wraps

it gets too bad," he told her, "I know a little man in Fulham who can come in and kill you," a typically Cleesian gag that she found hilarious. Later on, Cleese segued from the funny stuff to comments about the television industry that echoed MacNeil. After claiming that *Monty Python's Flying Circus* couldn't even get a meeting today, he told an audience full of television execs, "The only way back to real quality is in trusting people who can deliver the programs."

Unlike most competitive festivals, Banff hands out its awards, the Rockies, during a slickly produced show at the top of the event. The festival's omnipresent Pat Ferns calls the Rockies the "Olympics of television," and in 2002, 82 programs from 21 countries were nominated in 14 categories. The Global Television Grand Prize (\$50,000 comes with the trophy) and Best Made-for-Television Movie Award went to *Othello*, a sombre contemporization of Shakespeare's play. The show was written by Andrew Davies, whose miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* took Banff 1996's Grand Prize, and whose credits include co-authorship of the screenplay for *Bridget Jones's Diary*. In his production of *Othello*, about a talented black cop who becomes the victim of a resentful white officer, Davies layers an exposé of British racism into Shakespeare's core theme of male envy and sexual paranoia.

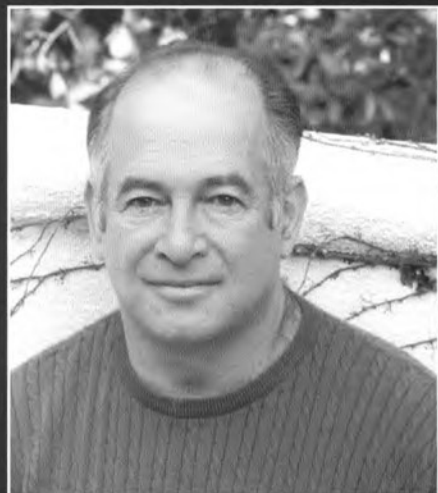
Othello (which also took the Sony International Critics' Prize), was made by international partners, including the CBC. Canadians were also involved in *I Was a Rat*, an ingenious twist on the Cinderella story, which picked up the Rockie for top Children's Program, as well as the Telefilm Canada Prize for Best Independent Canadian Production in English, the equivalent French-speaking award going to the visually striking *Hugo et le dragon* (the prizes yield \$20,000 in development or production funding). The only purebred Canadian winner (for Best Sports Program) was the National Film Board's *Shinny: The Hockey in All of Us*, an upbeat look at pickup game fervour. Other Rocky winners included Alan (American Beauty) Ball's darkly funny, multiple Emmy-nominated look at a family in the funeral business, *Six Feet Under* (Continuing Series); Steven Spielberg's and Tom Hanks's tough-minded Second World War series, *Band of Brothers* (\$25,000 NHK President's Prize for the best entry produced or post-produced in HDTV); Saira Shah's harrowing tour of women under the Taliban, *Behind the Veil* (Information); and French producer Olivier Gal's cliché-challenging *Fellini, je suis un grand menteur* (Arts Documentary).

As for the business at the heart of the Banff festival, the majority of the 1,800 delegates left satisfied. If they didn't necessarily close deals, they advanced projects, evolved ongoing relationships, and at the very least, caught the eye of major professionals from around the world. Banff not only offers face time that gives delegates the opportunity to hear each other's pitches, it does so in a literally elevated, stress-relieving environment. As Montreal distributor Jeanne Ritter puts it, "You tend to get the full attention of the people you're talking to. It's a more intimate atmosphere." And Alex Chapple, recipient of this year's CTV Fellowship Prize (awarded to successful professionals who were once invited to the fest on CTV fellowships), told me that Banff kick-started his career as a writer/director.

The festival's various public-pitching forums blend education and practical benefits with high-voltage entertainment. Expertly orches-



John Cleese



Gary David Goldberg



Shinny: The Hockey in All of Us

Banff

trated and emceed by Pat Ferns, events like the International Market simulation (which he created) and the CTV Canadian Documart fill the main conference hall. The festival calls the Documart the "Richest Pitch in the World" because of its \$100,000 in award money to the producers deemed most worthy by a phalanx of top international commissioning editors and broadcasters. The criteria include the quality of the pitch itself, which must clock in at three minutes. In the Documart, one-time *Kids in the Hall* Scott Thompson and producer Hilary Jones-Farrow took the top prize of \$50,000 with *Do You Know Where We Can Get a Donkey?*, a high-concept series on humour around the world.

At the intriguing *Two in a Room*, commissioning editors Dan Chambers, controller of Factual at Britian's Channel 5, and Jerry McIntosh, CBC's director of Independent Documentaries, strove to find common ground for a hypothetical co-pro. In this game, the two broadcasters issue a tender inviting proposals, draw up a short list, and hear the pitches at the end of the festival. Chambers, who has nothing against going "tabloid," if a show has underlying substance, had problems finding points of agreement with the more conservative McIntosh. But the two came up with their tender and eventually awarded \$10,000 to producer Peter Raymont for a doc about a long-forgotten Canadian scientist whose bacteriophage therapy against infection didn't stand a chance against antibiotics, not to mention some strange twists of fate.

Among the numerous special guests at the festival, writer/producer and buddy of Michael J. Fox, Gary David Goldberg (*Family Ties*, *Spin City*) received an Award of Excellence and gave a master class on comedy writing. Another writing class was offered by Paula Milne, author of the audacious 1995 miniseries, *The Politician's Wife*. Milne explained her working methods and views of story structure by analyzing crucial scenes from *Wife* and her

latest, Thursday, the 12th, an inventive miniseries that switches character point of view from episode to episode.

Producer Anne Wood, whose company Ragdoll Ltd. creates the *Teletubbies*, presented a master class on children's programming. During an interview, Wood revealed that if it weren't for the huge international success of Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa and Po, her firm would have gone belly up. She also made it clear that whatever the projections of the show's adult admirers and detractors, it is not some kind of experiment in acid-drenched surrealism set in a post-apocalyptic world monitored by electronic devices. The "*Tubs*" derive from meticulous research into preschoolers' "emerging speech and behaviour when they are first learning to express themselves." Moreover, in today's environment of disembodied electronic voices, computer monitors and non-stop television, children live in "a chaos of visual culture that they have to navigate their way through. And you're not going to help them by being negative about what's happening. To be honest with you," said Wood, "it doesn't worry me in the slightest that some adults think the program is sinister because I have such overwhelming evidence that Teletubbies makes little children feel happy inside."

Banff 2002's special Focus on Africa was motivated by Jean Chrétien's intention to give prominence to the continent at the G8 Summit in nearby Kananaskis. African productions were screened, and the 70 delegates from 20 countries, many dressed in traditional robes, participated in panels and seminars dealing with a range of issues, for instance, the hopeless image of Africa projected on television.

Montreal filmmaker Erica Pomerance, who helped assemble Focus on Africa and hosted events, organized the writing of a declaration African professionals sent to the G8. "It asks for regulatory bodies, somewhat like our CRTC," Pomerance explained to me, "that would ensure a minimum of local and national programming. And they want better distribution across Africa of work produced by their filmmakers. Plus, they've asked for a Pan-African fund that would free Africans from some of the dependence they have on Europe."

For Jacques Bensimon, head of the NFB endeavours like Focus on Africa are crucial to the festival's integrity. Bensimon was everywhere this year, hosting, participating and explaining his ambitious plan to trigger a renaissance of the NFB as a socially conscious supporter of talent and innovation, while at the same time functioning within the realities of the 21st-century media marketplace.

An enthusiastic supporter of the beautifully located festival, Bensimon, (once executive V.P. and chief operating officer of the Banff Television Foundation), sometimes worries about the dangers of too much industrial success. But "as long as the NFB and Robert MacNeil are able to say what they want to," Bensimon told me, "as long as Africa can be in our midst, not as a lip service, but truly because they are heard, then I can tolerate the industrial side. Banff shouldn't be owned by either CTV or Global. It has to establish constantly a balance between public and private. It has to be a forum where we question and review our industry. And to maintain such a difficult task is a challenge."