

FESTIVAL wraps

26TH MONTREAL WORLD FILM FESTIVAL

8/21-9/1/02

By Maurie Alioff

Of the 406 films from 75 countries screened at the 26th Montreal World Film Festival (MWFF), a selection of Canadian documentaries were among the most talked-about movies on the slate. Actress/filmmaker Paule Baillargeon's *Claude Jutra: An Unfinished Story* is a feature about the legendary Québécois director (*Mon oncle Antoine*, *Kamouraska*) who committed suicide after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Intimate, imaginatively designed, the bio highlights footage Jutra shot as a movie-obsessed teenager, and it explores his relationship with his mother Rachelle, a high-strung sophisticate whose passion for her son went over the top.

Also in long form, Helene Klodawsky's *Undying Love* offers an unusual view of men and women who survived the Nazi death camps. Klodawsky portrays them, as she puts it, "in terms of their crazy optimism, fighting power and will to survive." More specifically, *Undying Love* is about how quickly romance and desire began to flow again. Throughout her film, Klodawsky conflates interviews with elderly couples who were ironically brought together by the Holocaust with archival footage and ultra-romantic re-enactments of her subjects' experiences.

In a lighter vein, Thierry Lebrun's *A Licence to Remember—Je me souviens* investigates the mysterious motto that's been on Quebec licence plates since the rise of the Parti Québécois: "Je me souviens" or "I remember." Approaching the politically-charged subject matter Michael Moore-style, Lebrun wanders around Quebec, grasping a licence plate and asking people exactly what it is they remember. The answers range from goofy to intensely serious. Also screening at the festival, *To My Birth Mother* is Oscar-winning Beverly Shaffer's documentary about an adopted woman's search for her natural mother. Approached like fiction, the movie's protagonist and a cast of characters re-enact a quest that blends humour and pathos, without ever getting maudlin.

Two Canadian movies at the MWFF screened in Official Competition: Manon Briand's *Chaos and Desire* and Brad Fraser's *Leaving Metropolis*. The festival's opening picture, *Chaos and Desire* concerns a seismologist (Pascale Bussi eres) investigating her own psyche as she studies a weird phenomenon in the region of her hometown: the tides are no longer ebbing and flowing. During an interview, Briand told me: "The film talks about a kind of natural disaster, but it's a non-disaster. It's something that does not happen. It's like an implosion that comes from inside." Co-produced by Luc Besson (*La Femme Nikita*), who received a special award at the festival, *Chaos and Desire* was the public's choice for Best Canadian Feature Film, a \$25,000 prize granted by Telefilm Canada.

Leaving Metropolis, Fraser's debut as a film director, is an adaptation of his play *Poor Super Man*. The movie, which zeroes in on a gay artist who falls for a married man, has a tangential relationship to another Canadian movie at the festival, Ori Kowarsky's *Various Positions*. A



Robert De Niro in *City by the Sea*.

not-quite-Jewish-enough girlfriend, Kowarsky's movie took the Montreal Award for the Best First Fiction Film. A special mention in the same category went to Deborah Day's *Expecting*, a goodhearted ensemble comedy about a group of friends who gather to participate in a buddy's childbirth. Other Canadian highlights included Keith Behrman's *Flower & Garnet*, a nuanced film about a problematic father-son relationship. In it, Callum Keith Rennie offers an attitude-free performance that is probably his best ever. A very different kind of picture, Jeffrey Erbach's *The Nature of Nicholas*, mesmerized festival-goers with its eerie exploration of a young boy's sexuality.

To the ritualistic dismay of the Montreal media, the MWFF is not a big-name event. However, stardom cast its beneficent light on the 26th edition when Robert De Niro appeared at a press conference and later, a screening of his new picture, *The City by the Sea*. Flanked at the public press conference by the

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Valerie Buhagiar and Colin Mochizuki in Deborah Day's *Expecting*.

MWFF's beaming president, Serge Losique, and the movie's director, Michael Caton-Jones, De Niro was genial, but characteristically taciturn. As for the fans, they called to him from the mezzanine of Place Desjardins, the mall that astonishes visitors to the MWFF with its labyrinthine connection to festival headquarters in the Hotel Wyndham. His deadpan face more expressive than his words, De Niro answered questions about the movie, the value of film festivals and Montreal (he shot *The Score* in the city, playing a Montrealer who's a cunning thief). At the high point of the conference, De Niro was asked whether or not he is "secure in his sexuality and star status." His puzzled expression opened up into a big smile, and he answered, "Yeah, I am."

If *City by the Sea* was one of the few U.S. studio pictures at the MWFF, Minnesotan Liza Davitch's *Victory Square* represents the beneath-the-radar movies the festival often gives a chance to. With zero budget, shot on video, *Victory Square* portrays a beleaguered mother-daughter relationship amid the deprivations of post-Soviet Belarus. Tania, whose mother was a famous actress in the days when culture counted, has a big problem with her daughter's married boyfriend, Slava. Meanwhile, the daughter has no patience for Tania's ongoing relationship with her ex-husband Igor, an aging hippie narcissist. Davitch's *The Osbournes*-like, fly-on-the-wall approach pulls you right into the kitchens and living rooms of these flawed people who embody life in modern Belarus. A scene depicting Slava's geeky attempt at modelling in a fashion show is hilarious.

Of the international selections on display, German director Tom Tykwer's *Heaven* was one of the most anticipated. In the movie, Philippa (Cate Blanchett) is an English teacher whose life in Turin, Italy, takes a violent twist when she

for the deaths of her husband and some of her students. The police, who ignored her accusations of the slick criminal, come down hard on her after four innocent people get accidentally blown up by a bomb Philippa leaves in the dealer's office building. Devastated and ready to face the music, she is rescued by another unexpected intervention when a cherubic young cop named Filippo (rising American actor Giovanni Ribisi) devises an escape plan and runs off with her. Tykwer's fable about *l'amour fou* in a morally uncertain situation features a taut Hitchcockian opening, splintered cubistic visuals and fascinating performances. In the movie's last third, once Philippa and Filippo shave their heads and hide out in the Tuscan town of Montepulciano, Tykwer stops telling a story in favour of lingering on their fuzzy crania and white T-shirts, pristine in the sublime light. *Heaven* was written by the late Polish auteur Krzysztof Kieslowski and his partner Krzysztof Piesiewicz as the first installment of a trilogy that would begin with *Heaven*, move on to *Purgatory* and end with *Hell*. Miramax bought the script and set up a production team that included Anthony Minghella and Sydney Pollack as producers.

Closing the festival, François Ozon's French megahit *8 femmes* begins promisingly with its eye-popping approximation of 1950s Technicolor extravaganzas. The picture's eccentric premise takes an Agatha Christie murder-mystery plot (complete with country mansion), and grafts it onto a musical à la Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. On top of that, a constellation of stars that includes Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Huppert, Emmanuelle Béart, Fanny Ardant, Virginie Ledoyen and Daniëlle Darrieux deliberately perform as if they were in a second-rate provincial repertory company. In movies like *Under the Sand* (2000), *Drops Falling on Hot Stones* (1999) and *Criminal Lovers* (1998), Ozon has established a reputation for style and substance. Unfortunately, about 20 minutes into *8 femmes*, one is no longer amused by the multiple conceits. The movie curdles on its own self-consciousness, giving a bad name to kitsch.



Michel Brault with Claude Jutra in Paule Baillargeon's *Claude Jutra: An Unfinished Story*.