

examined the concept of cultural identity as seen in some of this year's films; a Mediamatic Workshop investigated new ways of telling stories using digital and interactive methods; leading documentarists talked about their

David Sexter's *The Offering*



work in three Master Classes; the Market offered some 400 titles for sale; and there was the Forum, where 44 projects were pitched. For the first time network commissioning editors were invited to take centre stage and describe their program strands, which resulted in some hard-hitting comments. For example, Nick Fraser of the BBC was grilled over the way the Beeb "reversions" documentaries, cutting them shorter or adding voice-overs in a bid to make them more acceptable to British audiences. Forum director Fleur Knopperts said she had yet to decide whether or not to repeat the experiment. "If we do, we want to make it more of a discussion. Another idea is that commissioning editors should only be invited to pitch if they have new strands to announce."

Winnipeg's Jeff McKay, who pitched for his project *Haunts of the Black Masseuse*, was enthusiastic about his experience. "My film will be a celebration of the swimmer as hero, illustrated

by diving in art, literature, sport and culture, right from the ancient Greeks to the 20th century. I found the Forum ultimately a very positive event, because it forced me to evaluate my project again with a fresh eye. The process of doing the pitch helped me to focus it tighter and tighter. I came away from the Forum with one significant licence deal and offers of others. Besides there is the opportunity to talk with the commissioning editors and filmmakers one-on-one. You can't beat that."

Henry Lewes is a film journalist based in England who has reported for Cinéaste and Take One.

Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival

(11/27–12/1/02) By Allan Tong

Rock music, Oedipal rebellion and cinema history were the highlights of the sixth Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. The autumnal festival gathers the cinematic best of the global Asian diaspora, shunning the chop-socky flicks of the *Fantasia* festival and ignoring the big-budget Jet Li's of Hollywood. Shorter, yet more focused than last year's edition, this year's program highlighted Thai cinema and Asian-Canadian film pioneer, Mary Stephen.

The Bloor, Toronto's venerable rep cinema, was packed for opening night film, *Lolo's Child*, by hometown director Romeo Candido. The audience warmly received this drama about a young Filipino-Canadian coming home to resolve his relationship with his abusive father who's dying. *Lolo's Child* evolved out of a one-man stage show and book on domestic violence. The movie is an uneven but sincere debut that suffers from excessive voice-over narration and a patchy script. The film doesn't dig deep

enough into the central father-son relationship and could have lost some of its minor characters and subplots. However, *Lolo's Child* is stylishly edited and features a tremendous soundtrack. Candido has a sharp ear and eye that will yield great rewards in the future.

The generation gap also ran through the Dirty Laundry program, a strong collection of shorts examining dysfunctional families. Helen Haeyoung Lee's *Sophie* is a chilling study about a Korean-American girl trying to whisk her and her mother away from her abusive father. Writing, acting and direction are solid. The complex mother-daughter relationship feels real and poignant as the child gets caught in the middle of conflicting family loyalties. *Surplus*, by American Joy Dietrich, offers a more sympathetic Korean father, a peasant who must sacrifice one of his four young daughters so he can feed the rest. Set in rural Korea in the past, *Surplus* never lapses into melodrama. It tells the tragic tale of child abandonment with economy and grace. In contrast, Georgia Lee's *Educated* is a delightfully vicious black comedy about an Asian-American girl who can't stand the pressure of scoring top marks to get into university. With a nod to *Heathers*, *Educated's* kids are led on leashes by their shallow, materialistic parents.

Two Canadian shorts, *Ohm-Ma* by Ruthann Lee and Carolyn Wong's *Yin Yang/Jade Love*, try to bridge the generation gap. Both are bittersweet valentines to the filmmakers' mothers. The former examines the gulf between a daughter and her mother who disowns her for being a lesbian—taboo in Korean culture. The latter is a compelling bio about Wong's grandmother, who endured forced marriage and racism to immigrate from China. The story of Wong's grandmother could be that of countless Chinese women who moved to Canada at the turn of the century when it was hostile to Asians. Life was hard and unfair, yet she endured for the sake of her children. She emerges as a hero.

FESTIVAL TRIPS

Images courtesy of Necessary Illusions.

The festival paid respect to two pioneers. Hong Kong immigrant Mary Stephen returned to Canada from France (where she now edits Eric Rohmer's movies) to deliver a Q&A and host two of her pictures; the drama, *Ombres de Soie*, and the profile documentary, *Vision from the Edge: Breytenbach Painting the Lines*. Similarly, the festival unearthed the 1966 Canadian feature, *The Offering*, a rough gem by David Secter (*Winter Kept Us Warm*) about an Anglo-Canadian stagehand (Ratch Wallace) who falls in love with a dancer from the visiting Peking Chinese Dance Troupe. Probably the first Canadian feature with an interracial cast, *The Offering* is solid, engaging and long overdue for a revival.

Art and fun comingled at this year's festival. Art-house pictures such as festival-circuit darling, *Mysterious Object at Noon* by Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul, played alongside the Hi-8 video rawness of *Scumrock* by San Francisco's Jon Moritsugu (*too raw in my book*). The rock 'n' roll spirit carried over to many parties featuring live bands and DJs at downtown night spots. Credit should go to the new programming triumvirate of executive director Sally Lee and artistic directors Jane Kim and Nobu Adilman for opening up this niche festival. This year's filmmakers reached beyond the traditional themes of identity and race and examined more personal issues.

The Asian population in North America is expected to double in a decade, and Toronto holds the second-largest population of Asians on the continent. Yet the Western mainstream continues to marginalize Asian filmmakers. This is where film festivals come in. They must encourage filmmakers and challenge audiences. So far, Reel Asian is succeeding. Now, will Asian filmmakers seize this opportunity?

Allan Tong is a Toronto filmmaker and freelance journalist. His film, The Red Album, which features a North American/Asian cast, is in development.

Alanis Obomsawin's *Is the Crown at War with Us?*



Image courtesy of NFB.

Sundance Film Festival

(1/16-26/03) By Steve Gravestock

Robert Redford opened the 2003 Sundance Film Festival with a plea for freedom of expression, an embattled concept in the era of Bush II. But the real keynote speech came from Emmanuel Jordan, the catatonic ex-con hero of Ed Solomon's *Levity*, the festival's opening night film. "I don't want to be redeemed," he confesses, and he could have spoken for most if not all of his fellow festival protagonists. This year, intransigence seemed to be the order of the day. This was probably the surliest group of heroes you'll ever see outside a Fassbinder retro.

The trend was apparent in three films featuring teenagers: Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen*; A. Dean Bell's *What Alice Found*; and Matthew Ryan Hoge's *The United States of Leland*. Hardwicke's film, one of the best at this year's festival, stars Holly Hunter as a put-upon single mother who ekes out a living as a hairdresser. Suddenly, daughter Tracey (Evan Rachel Wood) hits puberty and goes ballistic. Desperate to look grown-up, she starts dressing more maturely (read provocatively) and ingratiates herself with Evie (Nikki Reed), an older girl, by lifting a woman's pocketbook. Ferocious tirades, emotional manipulation, lies, self-mutilation and drug use follow. The opening scene has the

two girls snorting crack and belting one another around Tracey's bedroom. *Thirteen* is a nightmare version of adolescence, and it's gripping in large part because of the performances (especially Wood and Reed, who co-wrote the script with Hardwicke), the unflinching claustrophobic atmosphere and the absence of any real cause for Tracey's downward spiral. At the same time, one is never quite sure if the film wallows too much or not enough in Tracey's pain. Either way, it's a powerful and promising debut for Hardwicke.

Of the teen flicks at Sundance, the most daring premise—or the seediest, depending on how you look at it—belonged to *The United States of Leland*, which asks you to sympathize with a supersensitive young kid (played by Ryan Gosling), who has just stabbed a retarded boy 23 times. The coyest premise belonged to Todd Graf's *Camp*, which looks at a bunch of nerds who spend summer in a camp for budding performers. The most irredeemable pair of protagonists popped up in Randy Barbato's and Fenton Bailey's *Party Monster*. Based on a true story (the directors made a well-received documentary about the same subject a few years ago), the film stars Seth Green and Macauley Culkin as two preening reprobates who were key players in New York's early 1990s party scene. As the endless amount of drugs they consume takes its toll, one becomes a murderer and the other a novelist. The film was criticized for