

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

being miscast (though I thought both performers had their moments), but for those who know nothing about this scene (like me), it did serve as a revealing time capsule. Probably the best thing about it, though, is that it may finally kill the term "fabulous."

The intransigent, go-it-alone hero popped up even in the films that offered glimpses of small-town life; a Sundance staple. One of the best-received movies, Tom McCarthy's *The Station Agent*, focuses on a train-obsessed dwarf who just wants to be left alone. Gradually, he's integrated into the community through his relationship with two other outcasts: a suicidally depressed divorcee and a desperately lonely young man who runs a food stand. Sensitively directed and well performed, the movie is a sweet throwback to pre-Tarantino days. To varying degrees, one could say the same about Campbell Scott's well-crafted *Off the Map*, which looks at an eccentric New Mexico family struggling to come to terms with depression, and Peter Hedges's equally charming *Pieces of April*, which focuses on a delinquent daughter's attempts to make up with her family. As the eponymous heroine, Katie Holmes is appropriately winning.

This year, the festival had a beefed-up international section, which included several Canadian films: Mina Shum's *Long Life, Prosperity and Happiness*; Michael Mackenzie's *The Baroness and the Pig*; and Wyeth Clarkson's digital video road movie, *deadend.com*, which got some positive buzz. Ditto for Jennifer Baichwal's *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia*, featured in the inaugural international documentary section. The Native Forum was dominated by Canadians, with Alanis Obomsawin's *Is the Crown at War with Us?* and Sundance favourite, Shirley Cheechoo, who was there with *Pikutiskwaaau (Mother Earth)* a film which explores Cree oral traditions.

The international works seemed to be the most haunted by current events,

with a definite millennial (i.e., apocalyptic) feel apparent in Thomas Vinterburg's sci-fi parable, *It's All About Love*, and Nicolas Winding Refn's Lynchian psychodrama, *Fear X* (a Canada/Denmark co-production). The only American film I saw that seemed to share this sentiment was Michael Polish's daring *Northfork*, the story of a small town about to be buried underwater to make room for a new dam. Epic in scale but packed with bizarre, entertaining and very flaky moments, the film establishes clear links between the Polish brothers and Winnipeg's own Guy Maddin.

There was redemption for one group of outcasts. Richard La Gravenese's and Ted Demme's *A Decade under the Influence* lionizes the great American filmmakers of the 1970s. (La Gravenese took over the film after Demme's untimely death.) The film is an efficient primer on the period, though in truth it is more for a general audience. (Most industry types would, or should, know this stuff back to front.) One could quibble that the film is, ironically, rather slick and conventional given its subject. However, it does feature several much needed reminders, in particular frequent references to Hal Ashby, one of the period's key figures who now seems largely forgotten. I should confess that what bothered me most about the film had little really to do with it specifically. The sanctification of the 1970s has been going on for years now, and it seems, at best, a problematic trend. The indie filmmakers who've made breakthroughs in the last 10 years—for instance Quentin Tarantino and Paul Thomas Anderson—have bought into this wholeheartedly, and their films have clearly benefited from their awareness of Scorsese (in Tarantino's case) and Altman (in Anderson's). But are we actually talking about innovations, or reworkings of their predecessors' innovations? I suspect it's the former, but it's an interesting question. After all, isn't contempt or healthy disregard for your predecessors a better starting point for an innovator than veneration?

That question was made irrelevant after I saw the film I enjoyed the most at this year's Sundance: David Gordon Green's *All the Real Girls*. A touching look at a romance that's simply too precious to last, the film suggests the regional dramas Sundance was first known for, but transcends that sub-genre by virtue of its extraordinary visual sense and the quality of its observations. Romance may be the dominant concern of most Hollywood films, but it's unlikely any of them will be as smart, or as reality-based as Green's film.

*Steve Gravestock is manager of festival programming at the Toronto International Film Festival Group and a frequent contributor to Take One, Cinemascope and Festival magazine.*

## Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival

(1/31–2/8/03) By Henry Lewes

Canada was a major presence at the 25th annual Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival—located in a picturesque medieval town north of Paris—with two special retrospective programs



Image courtesy of The Canadian Film Centre.