

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 *Pikutiskwauu (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.

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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



Brad Peyton's *Evelyn: The Cutest Evil Dead Girl*

Image courtesy of The Canadian Film Centre.

devoted solely to Canadian cinema. In the general screenings, 25 recent Canadian shorts were shown, several with the filmmakers present. The retrospective screenings ranged from *Mes esperances en 1908* (Léo-Ernest Ouimet, 1908), a two-minute silent film made with Ouimet's children, to the NFB's classic *Glenn Gould: On the Record* (Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor, 1961), in which Gould's playing of J.S. Bach's Italian Concerto is very skillfully cut with shots of his visit to a New York recording studio. Other films recalling Canada's rich cinematic heritage were the NFB's animated gem, *Begone Dull Care* (Norman McLaren and Evelyn Lambart, 1949), where vividly coloured stripes and spots dance to a specially written jazz track by Oscar Peterson, and *Bucherons de la Manouane* (Arthur Lamothe, 1962), which faithfully depicts the almost unbelievably tough, freezing and lonely life of the lumberjacks of northern Quebec.

This year, Canadian contemporary filmmakers seemed predominantly concerned with personal relationships. In *Chopstick, Bloody Chopstick* (Shawn Durr and Wayne Yung, 2001) a neurotic gay man describes his messy failed romances to his mute Asian boyfriend. *Novembre* (Nicolas Roy, 2001) is about sadness, despair and departure, and the NFB's *Aatagonia* (Nicolas Brault, 2002) uses animation to depict a vast ocean in which two birds are carried on a dark tide beyond the limits of their world. By contrast, French films in the same program dealt directly with public life. *Biotope* (Merwan Chabane, 2001) disturbingly compares human behaviour in the Paris Metro with that of animal wildlife, and *Freedub 1* (Stephane Elmadjian, 2002) states, "animal is a man endowed with reason," and then shows endless library shots of soldiers marching toward each other from dozens of different countries.

Two Canadian shorts shared an endearing quirkiness. In *Why Don't You Dance* (Michael Downing, 2001), based on a 1970s short story by Raymond Carver, a young couple come upon a suburban lawn sale with the whole contents of a house spread-out, although there is no owner visible. The couple are trying out a bed when the proprietor returns bearing liquor, which he willingly shares. He accepts any offer for his furniture and soon takes to dancing with the girl rather than bothering with the sale. I asked Downing what he thought was the significance of the story, to which he replied with engaging frankness: "I'm not sure really. Like all Carver's stories. It's a bit ambiguous. For me, it's about a middle-aged man purging himself of his past. But it's very open to interpretation." *Evelyn: The Cutest Evil Dead Girl* (Brad Peyton, 2002), from the Canadian Film Centre (which won the award for Best Soundtrack), is a lighthearted fantasy in which a young dead girl tries to come alive again. She emerges from her grave full of life, but her ghoulish appearance frightens her former chums. Her problem is not solved until she accepts her plight. I asked Peyton about the film's meaning. "It means that you have to trust yourself," he explained. It's a simple lesson a lot of us forget.

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

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