

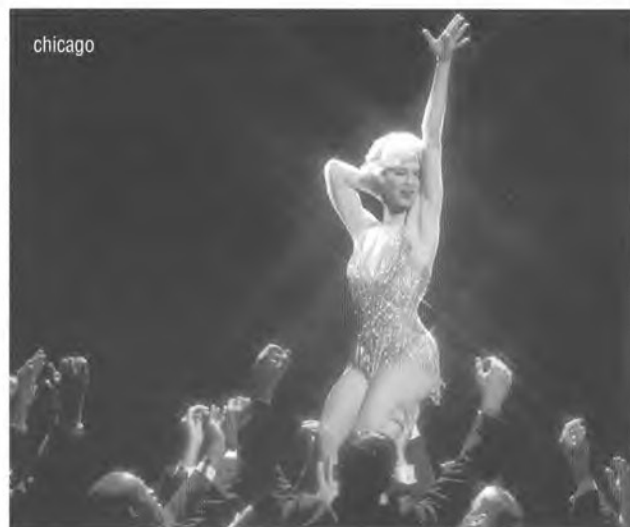


Berlin: where politics meets pathetic fallacy. If you believe in the pathetic fallacy, the frigid temperatures during the 53rd Berlin International Film Festival had much to say about what was happening outside the cinemas. Even while the noble and hopeful official festival motto, "towards tolerance," beamed from the festival posters and advertisements, the shadow of the impending war on Iraq darkened and made colder the proceedings. Whatever the warmth and power of the films, however well meaning the festival vibe under the perpetually positive director Dieter Kosslick, the coldest Berlin weather in years seemed to express that something larger and more forbidding was underway beyond the festival's privileged perimeter. Despite 500,000 people marching for peace up the Unter den Linden to the Brandenburg Gate, the apprehension that George W. was hell-bent on bomb-dropping sent a palpable chill down the spine of the entire Berlinale. Also ominous was the sudden collapse and death of Daniel Toscan du Plantier, head of Unifrance, in the lobby of the Grand Hyatt, the official festival hotel.

Beyond the *realpolitik* of the U.S.–Iraq tango, politics is always prominent at the Berlinale, both in the selection of films and in the discussion of the works themselves. No sunny seaside Mediterranean retreat à la Cannes, the Berlin festival—tough, engaged and Teutonic—was, after all, founded as a political act of resistance during the Cold War and it continues to be a forum for debate about the tangled state of things in the now reunified Germany and beyond. Indeed, the Golden Bear (the festival's top prize) was awarded this year to *In This World*, Michael Winterbottom's potent political drama about two young Afghan refugees trying to get to England. Wolfgang Becker's *Good-Bye, Lenin!* squarely and humorously confronts the end of the Cold War on the consciousness of one family. Inevitably, perhaps, there was also the annual array of the usual Berlinale suspects: documentaries about the Holocaust, personal/political diary films about the crisis in the Middle East and portraits of Germany in transition. In addition to the films, there was also Cinema for Peace, a spe-

cial gala fundraising dinner attended by A-list stars such as Dustin Hoffman to raise money and awareness to stop the Bush administration from launching a war in you know where.

If George W. can be said to represent one aspect of the American presence—political and otherwise—in Berlin, then Hollywood is another. As usual, the Berlinale's Official Competition, not to mention its opening and closing night films, was stacked with Hollywood



films. Opening the festival with *Chicago* and closing it with *Gangs of New York*, the Berlinale's competition included Spike Lee's *25th Hour*, Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*, George Clooney's *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, Alan



Les Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois has certainly taken its thrashings over the years. Celebrating its 21st year, what some see as a vital showcasing of the previous 12 months' film and video from Quebec, others disparage as largely redundant. The festival has had its politically charged moments; several years ago, festival organizers raised

some eyebrows when they allowed English-language films to be screened even when they lacked French subtitles (previously a strict no-no). Last year, Les Rendez-vous faced charges (from Montreal filmmaker Julian Samuel) that the festival excluded people of colour. One filmmaker (Mary Ellen Davis), whose film had been accepted, actually withdrew her documentary in protest.

Whatever its problems may be, I would argue this festival serves as a vital 11 days of reckoning, a chance for the

press, film community and entire public to catch up on what they missed the previous year. After all, although Quebec generally fares a bit better than English Canada, we still do suffer from the syndrome of producing films that just don't get seen by the locals. Getting screen time on our own screens doesn't appear to be getting any easier as the years roll by, in Quebec or the rest of Canada.

Films about race and political identity were in full view at this year's Les

Parker's *The Life of David Gale* and Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris*. Moreover, the Hollywood star power assembled by the festival was impressive, rivalling even Cannes with appearances by Richard Gere, Kevin Spacey, Nicholas Cage and a combative George Clooney, who went on the offensive at the *Solaris* press conference when one journalist described the film as "boring." Clooney's impassioned defence of his film was as refreshing as it was surprising, given the usual sycophancy of press conferences with mega-movie stars.

Canada's presence in Berlin 2003 was understated but significant. Atom Egoyan was the president of the jury, the first time ever for a Canadian, and he also presented *Ararat* at special public screenings. Two minority Canadian co-productions dotted the Competition: *Madame Brouette*, directed by Senegal's Moussa Sene Absa and Spanish director Isabel Coixet's *My Life without Me*, starring the incandescent Sarah Polley. Terrance Odette's *Saint Monica* enhanced the Kinderfilmfest, while Richard Kwietniowski's *Owning Mahowny*, Thom Fitzgerald's *The Event*, Ileana Pietrobruno's *Girl King* and Keith Behrman's *Flower & Garnet* bolstered the Panorama section. The official Canadian reception, organized by Telefilm Canada, was also notable, featuring a remarkable live perform-

ance by the powerhouse Quebec cellist and singer Jorane. Her performance so dazzled certain foreign producers that business cards were exchanged and sound track commissions appear in the offing.

As the host nation for the festival, Germany has much to be proud of. Its cinema continues to impress, even in a year without films by Tom Tykwer or Thomas Arslan. The annual showcase of German films yielded several fine works, including *Identity Kills*, *Half Rent*, *They've Got Knut* and *This Very Moment*. China, too, had an impressive showing, with humanist gems such as *Cala*, *My Dog!* and the extraordinary *Remnants*, a three-hour documentary about the social problems of modernization. With these works, one can almost forgive perhaps the worst film of the festival, the utterly execrable Chinese drama *The Old Testament*. That other old Cold War "enemy," Russia, also offered some accomplished pieces, including *The Suit*, a bittersweet tale of three young men and their desire for a better future. In fact, new Russian cinema was given a spotlight program at the Berlinale, highlighting the new work, much of which is shot digitally, coming out of that nation's troubled film industry.

By design and by geopolitical accident, the 2003 Berlin International Film



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Festival did register the importance of moving towards tolerance in our troubled world. At another level, it also revealed that we are now rapidly approaching the end of filmmaking, per se. Almost every "film" I watched was shot with a digital camera and transferred to 35 mm, with varying degrees of aesthetic success. From Canada to China, from Russia to Hollywood, the cinematic apparatus is going, going, gone digital. The new image-making technologies promise much, but, as always, must be applied to meaningful stories; and such is not always the case in Berlin and elsewhere. Nevertheless, some things remain the same in the "new Berlin": those unmistakable ravens still mass in the cold skies over the city; the Potsdammer Platz is still ugly; and we still huddle in the cinemas dreaming of better times and better films. In 2003, however, we had something else to wish for—that those same skies where ravens fly will not soon be filled with missiles.

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Rendez-vous. Of particular interest was Brenda Keesal's feature debut, *Jack & Ella*, in which the relationship between a black man and a Jewish woman is explored. The film touches further on social issues such as alcoholism. Keesal manages to evoke sincere emotion with her work, while never succumbing to the maudlin. She is a young Montreal filmmaker to watch. The documentary *Undying Love*, which features some incredible interviews with Holocaust survivors who met up in Hitler's death camps, is pretty astonishing. The sto-

ries are well told, touching and rife with irony. As some of the interview subjects put it: "Hitler was our matchmaker." This is documentary filmmaking that's as surreal as it gets.

Cool biographies were also plentiful here. *Claude Jutra, portrait sur film*, Paule Baillargeon's loving ode to her late friend, was screened. Luc Picard won a richly deserved Genie for his work in Mario Azzopardi's *The Savage Messiah*, in which he plays the nasty and notorious Roch Theriault, the cult



leader who was imprisoned after a number of his wives mysteriously disappeared. The film itself is perhaps a wee bit clumsy, but that doesn't take away from Picard's artful performance.