

ReelWorld

FILM FESTIVAL

(4/2-6/03) BY ALLAN TONG

The third ReelWorld Film Festival opened in a freak spring ice storm that paralyzed Toronto. The storm accentuated the remoteness of the festival, located at a Famous Players SilverCity Cinema, miles from downtown, and kept audiences away until Saturday. For once, more people attended a festival closing-night gala than the opener.

A good film fest is like a storm. It blows into town, sucks everything into its orbit and suddenly it's gone. The ReelWorld Film Festival isn't yet a hurricane, although it continues to absorb more sponsors, expand its programming and attract a growing audience base. The festival showcases filmmakers of colour who are neglected by the establishment. SAG, the actor's union in the United States, reports that in 2001, Latino roles totaled 4.8 per cent even though Latinos make up 12 per cent of the U.S. population. For Asian-Americans, it is 2.5 per cent vs. 4.5 per cent. African-American representation matched population, but most of these roles were as stereotypical gang leaders, junkies or hookers.

This year's films shattered stereotypes, some more successfully than others. Bob Clark's *Now and Forever* was named the festival's best Canadian feature. Leads Mia Kirshner and Adam Beach are fine as Angela, a white girl from a dysfunctional Saskatchewan family who strikes up a lifelong friendship with John, a kind Cree Native. An audience pleaser, *Now and Forever* starts out with promise but suffers from a contrived ending and one-dimensional characters. Similarly, *Good Fences*, the closing-night film, cruises along, but then trails off. After delivering an articulate Q&A, director Ernest Dickerson introduced this enter-

taining chronicle of an African-American, upper-middle-class family, headed by the wonderful Whoopi Goldberg, growing up in the white-bread suburbs of the 1970s.

The most likely crossover hits were the comedies *Where's the Party Yaar?* and *Mi Casa Su Casa*. In *Where's the Party Yaar?*, newcomer Benny Matthews concocts a hilarious story about an FOB (fresh-off-the-boat) attending university with his American cousin in Houston. Borrowing from *National Lampoon's Animal House*, the guys in this film chase babes and grades while skewering South Asian life in America. Bryan Lewis's *Mi Casa Su Casa* is a reworking of the overdone "green-card" film in which an American (Roy Werner) marries a foreigner (nicely played by *Mulholland Drive*'s Laura Elena Harring) to keep her in the country. Decent jokes, good timing and sympathetic characters rescue *Casa* from sitcom hell.

There were more films by Aboriginal, Latin and South Asian filmmakers this year, alleviating criticism that the festival is skewed toward black filmmakers. Asian films fared especially well. Carolyn Wong's *Yin Yin/Jade Love*, also seen at the Toronto Reel Asian Film Festival, took Best Canadian Short. Like the finely edited *Yah Yah* by Yiuwing Lam and Akira Boch's touching *Finding Fire under My Grandma's Fingernails*, *Yin Yin* is an Asian filmmaker's homage to her elders, in this case Wong's grandmother who endured racism and sexism to survive in a country that did not want Chinese. Gil Gauvreau's *Spirit of the Dragon* deserved its Best Canadian Documentary Award. It profiles Chinese-Canadian civil rights activist Jean Lumb who tells her brave

story of her lifelong fight, from the 1930s through to the present, to be recognized as a Canadian, not only for herself but for her people. Lumb shines whenever she is on camera and transcends the film's cardboard narration.



the game of their lives

At the ReelWorld Film Festival, documentaries often outshone fictional films. British filmmaker Daniel Gordon brought his excellent *The Game of Their Lives*, chronicling the 1966 World Cup upset by the Cinderella North Korean soccer team over the top-ranked Italians. Two other fine documentaries illuminated black American history: the Oscar-nominated *Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks* by Bobby Houston and Joel Katz's *Strange Fruit*, which chronicles Billie Holiday's classic song and America's shameful history of lynching blacks. Unfortunately, the short films programmed were wildly inconsistent. One program scheduled the acidly funny *Educated* with the poignant *White Like the Moon* but also the amateurish *Deborah Morris... Everyday after Work*, which climaxes—appropriately—with a close-up of dog shit.

In a short period of time, ReelWorld has made a mark in a crowded year-round festival circuit. It gathers filmmakers of colour from across the

continent to nurture one another in an industry that usually views them as outsiders. However, the festival doesn't generate enough buzz in the multicultural capital of Canada. Furthermore, Toronto film festivals take place in the downtown core, where clubs and restaurants are readily available for the press and attendees alike. Not the ReelWorld and despite a good mix of films at this year's festival, it is still

perceived as a mainly black film festival. More marketing and a better location would help matters and artistically ReelWorld's mandate remains unclear. Two major features—the riveting *Midnight Fly*, directed by Jacob Cheung, and Aparna Seu's *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*—were made in Hong Kong and India, two of the biggest film markets in the world. Shouldn't ReelWorld lend a voice to filmmakers of colour who don't

get a break from the white mainstream? If so, then why program purely foreign films? Leave that to the Toronto International Film Festival.

I would like to see ReelWorld flourish, but it appears it has to endure more growing pains before it takes the film industry by storm.

Allan Tong is a Toronto-based filmmaker and freelance journalist.

Images

FESTIVAL

(4/10-19/03) BY ALLAN TONG

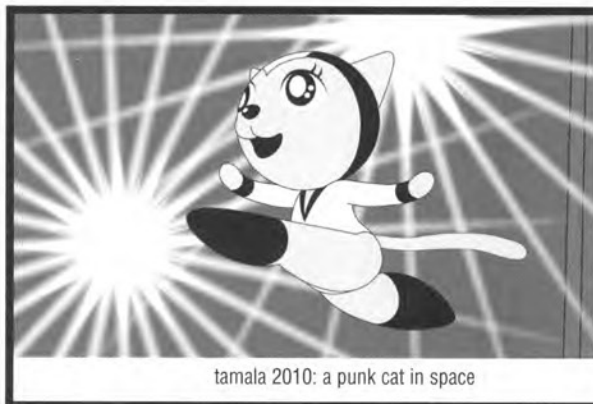
The 16th annual Images Festival ran in downtown Toronto from April 10 to 19. It's the artsy-fartsy festival: right-brained, underground, non-linear and *definitely* not Hollywood. These films ("movies" sounds inappropriate)—whether long or short, projected in cinemas or galleries—are about texture and aesthetics, not characters and stories. Music video producers and television-commercial houses mine this festival for new visual styles and innovative filmmakers, turning today's avant-garde into tomorrow's coffee commercial.

The opening night film was the trippy Japanese anime *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space*. From the first frame, *Tamala* sucks the viewer into a dazzling universe rendered in black and white but feeling as vivid as colour. We follow a cute, little feline who travels in space, sleeps a lot and casually drops the word "fuck" in the middle of sentences. The story has something to do with Catty & Co., a conglomerate that controls 96.72 per cent of the world's GDP, but is secretly an ancient cat cult. Detailed visuals hold our interest for most of the film but the story is a mess.

The acclaimed *Decasia* by American Bill Morrison is a disturbing pastiche of decaying nitrate films accompanied by a swirling dissonant symphony (scored by Michael Gordon). The images themselves are banal (i.e., children walking with nuns, people waltzing), but the overall effect is gripping. However, this 67-minute film is unrelied by any rise and

fall in dynamics, visually or musically, and overstays its welcome halfway.

The artist spotlight fell on Germany's Harun Farocki, whose impressive oeuvre was awarded a mini-retrospective. Farocki's documentaries chronicle the post-war psyche of Germany. *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* is a dry, yet disturbing 1988 study of Auschwitz. *How To Live in the German Federal Republic* from 1990 is the closest Farocki will ever get to a comedy. The film stitches together 30 scenes from instructional films about how to properly behave in public. The most striking scene was of a teacher *repeatedly* chastising a little boy for not looking at the street before stepping off the curb; very German. The vintage *Inextinguishable Fire* consists of Farocki



tamala 2010: a punk cat in space



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