

# festival wraps

**DURING THE BIG SPRING** SARS scare of 2003, the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival decided to push on despite cancellations from foreign filmmakers and distributors. Nevertheless, this year's box-office sales had doubled last year's figures before the festival had even unspooled a single film. Hmm...maybe that would make a good documentary subject for next year; however, finding an interesting subject is only part of the filmmaking process. Some stories that may not look good on paper are magnificent on screen when the filmmaker is able to inject some style into the filming of an otherwise tedious tale.

and come together to form new faces and new points in time.

Victor Kossakovsky's *Hush!*, a more extreme case of visual storytelling, is an almost silent picture shot from the point of view of an apartment window in St. Petersburg, Russia. There are no voice-overs and no explanations, just an 86-minute edit of a year in the life of the street outside the filmmaker's apartment. Comedy is found in little things such as the street cleaners sweeping dust around the streets, and hardly achieving any effect at all. The ridiculous nature of everyday things parallels with the

raising his baby. The words "Fade Out" set up a shot of the crying child slowly weakening as she drifts into sleep, "Foreshadowing" means little Ella is discovering her shadow on the fridge door and "Flashback" is Ella looking reflective, as the camera fades into her ultrasound video and back to the present.

Apart from being a film of a father and daughter with little sentimentality involved, *I Used To Be a Filmmaker* was also one of the rare cases of the filmmaker appearing as a character in his own movie who wasn't self-centred.

## HOT DOCS

(4/25-5/4/03)

BY LINDSAY GIBB

This year there were many unconventional documentaries at Hot Docs, some more worthy than others.

One film that attracted a good deal of praise was Stefan Nadelman's *Terminal Bar*. The short, experimental, digital video utilized photos from the filmmaker's father's collection to tell the story of the bar he (the father) used to run and the patrons who came in and out of his life. The stories, told through the elder Nadelman's voice-overs, reflect his memories of each photo. We see the evolution of characters from young, bright-eyed regulars to beat-up-looking old men. The way the film is crafted is much more than just a slide show or PowerPoint presentation. Photos float across the screen, break into pieces

beauty of other normal occurrences: rain bubbles in puddles, a pigeon ruffles its feathers on the window ledge and lovers playfully push each other around until they fall into a huge puddle in the middle of the road.

A second experiment in documentary narrative was screened before Jonathan Karsh's *My Flesh and Blood*, which was the opening night gala. Judging by the description of Jay Rosenblatt's *I Used To Be a Filmmaker* in the program notes, it could have been a sappy ode to his baby girl, Ella, but it turned out to be a funny play on the technical side of filmmaking as told through images of the filmmaker

Unfortunately, there were a number of films where the appearance of the filmmaker was distracting. John Haslett Cuff's use of himself in *Crimes of the Heart*, while not extraneous, is definitely self-centred. In fact, the entire film is really just about him and why he sabotages his relationships with women. Though slightly annoying, at least *Crimes of the Heart* doesn't profess to be anything but a film about an unapologetic narcissist. The worst case of the visible documentarian is where the filmmaker keeps popping up when the film is supposed to be about something else. Claudia





Carole Laganière's *THE MOON AND THE VIOLIN*

Heuermann's *A Bookshelf on Top of the Sky* is an example of an otherwise engrossing film about the fascinating and talented jazz musician John Zorn. But Heuermann constantly interrupts her film by talking about her ever-changing plans to make the movie we are watching. In a film about an interesting subject, the tribulations of the filmmaker herself pale in comparison.



John Kastner's *RAGE AGAINST THE DARKNESS*

Nick Broomfield, who was honoured with a retrospective and Outstanding Achievement Award, has based his career as a documentarian on the use of himself as a character in his films. Although his presence usually adds humour, his style can be disruptive. In *Biggie and Tupac*, his latest effort, the interview with

Suge Knight, the rumoured conspirator in the death of rap stars Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, benefits from Broomfield's voice-overs about how scared his cameraman was to be in the presence of this dangerous founder of the Death Row recording label. In fact, without this insertion, the scene would have simply been Knight's "message to the kids." He refused to talk about anything relevant to the point of the documentary. But despite the moments when

Broomfield's presence seemed necessary, there were too many scenes of him driving around in his car and talking to the camera about how his documentary is coming along. His 1984 film *Chicken Ranch* is better at telling its story of the women who work at a legal, drive-in brothel in Nevada. We don't see or hear from Broomfield until

the subjects of the documentary make him a character, and by then it's the end of the film.

To honour of the 10th anniversary of Hot Docs there were a number of free screenings for students during the day and for the general public at midnight. Due to the popularity of some films, this was also the first year that the festival held repeat screenings. Two humorous documentaries were treated to repeat screenings: Mike Johnston's *My Student Loan*, made by a man who admits he knows nothing about making films but is simply trying to find another means of income to pay off his student loan, and Albert Nerenberg's *Stupidity*, a quest to find the absolute definition of this illusive word. As well, Werner Herzog's stunning *Wheel of Time*—which only came to the festival as a last-minute replacement for José Padilha's *Bus 174*—was screened a second time.

But ticket sales did not dictate which films were honoured at the awards ceremony. Two Canadian films about the elderly stole the hearts of the jury, and so Carole Laganière's *The Moon and the Violin* won Best Canadian Documentary: Short to Mid-Length, and John Kastner's *Rage against the Darkness* won Best Canadian Documentary: Feature Length. The latter tells the story of two sisters wrenched apart because one needs a nursing home and the other a retirement complex. Following these two women, we see the introverted sister come into her own with her new friends at her retirement home, while the other more flamboyant and outgoing sister becomes a shut-in, repulsed by her new setting. It's a slightly depressing tale but it definitely makes the viewer reflect on the shortness of life. It made me want to run out and visit my grandma.

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