



FanTasia International Film Festival

(7/17-8/10/03)

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

You'll never run into Gwyneth Paltrow or Sam Mendes at the FanTasia International Genre Film Festival, at least not at this point in their careers. But you will encounter intriguing people like actor Ray Wise. A gracious man who enjoys the kind of movies that FanTasia screens, Wise has a face etched into millions of subconscious minds. When he played Twin Peaks's Leland Palmer, he and David Lynch created the most deeply resonant fictional split personality since Jekyll/Hyde and Norman Bates. But Wise didn't know Leland had abused and murdered his daughter Laura until the end of production. When he found out, the father of young girls "didn't want it to be me. But David said, 'Ray, it's always been you,'" as if, Wise laughs, he had been acting out Leland Palmer's dark karma since the beginning of time.

Ray Wise appeared in two pictures at FanTasia's seventh edition, Jean-Baptiste Andrea's and Fabrice Canepa's *Dead End* and Victor Salva's *Jeepers Creepers 2*. A French film made in the United States, *Dead End* portrays a dysfunctional American family that can't stop driving on a lost highway during an endless night. Spooky and satirical, *Dead End* was named Best International Feature Film by FanTasia's jury. As for *J.C. 2*, its monster is interesting, says Wise, because he's "organic, a force of nature. And you don't know where in nature he came from."

Opening with Korean director Jang Sun-woo's zany opus, *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl*,

FanTasia featured four Takashi Miike pictures, including one of the Japanese "Wild Man's" best, his typically demented 2001 extravaganza *Ichi the Killer*. In this witch's brew of hyper-violence and slapstick surrealism, a blond, pierced, sadomasochistic yakuza, Kakiyama, yearns for his Platonic ideal: someone who will torture him to death. He thinks he might have found his dream in baby-faced Ichi, a reluctant and guilt-ridden monster who slices people to ribbons with razor-tipped boots. *Ichi* took the People's Choice Bronze award for Most Groundbreaking Film while the Silver went to Shion Sono's *Suicide Club* (2002).

Yet another tainted gem from Japan, *Suicide Club* is based on real-life events. This loopy, disturbing movie about teenage kids gripped by an irresistible urge to kill themselves refuses to offer easy answers. Are the smiling kids jumping off subway platforms and rooftops victims of a mass psychosis or participants in a dumb trend like flash mobbing? Maybe they are under the spell of some kind of unfathomable supernatural force that communicates through the body language of a singing girl group. FanTasia's jury deviated from audience opinion and tagged *Suicide Club* as the festival's top innovator.

Almost everyone thought the top Asian picture was Korean visionary Park Chan-wook's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), which intersects hideous physical torment, exquisite visual poetry and a deeply compassionate attitude toward its revenge-crazed characters. They're not bad people; they've been victimized and they want to get back at their tormentors. Unfortunately, once you accept that, Park makes it clear with unrestrained horror and dark humor that somebody is out to get you.

Marina De Van's creepily intimate *In My Skin* (France 2002) received the Gold in the International Film category. The film's heroine (played by De Van herself), a trendy young publicist, accidentally cuts her leg and becomes so fascinated by her wound, she starts to carve out new ones all over her body. Recalling such classics as Polanski's *Repulsion* and Cronenberg's *Crash*, De Van also wrote the script for her directorial debut. Dennison Ramalho's *Love from Mother Only* (Brazil 2002), a People's Choice for Best

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Short, mingles Edgar Allan Poe and voodoo in a tale that plays ironically off its inspiration: a sentimental old song about a dead mother's eternal love. Ramalho finds it amusing that because of his movie's nod to the famous tune he was able to secure most of his funding from the government. The fluidity of his work displays a talent that merits support, but it's nevertheless delightful that bureaucrats would okay hardcore Gran Gguignol in a steamy jungle where a maddeningly sexy witch is played by Debora Muniz, an ex-porn star. Not to mention that the film was written by Pai Alex, a real-life Macumba priest now serving time.

Among the Canadian movies it programmed, FanTasia offered an advance look at Québécois director Éric Tessier's supernatural thriller, *Sur le seuil*. Opening on the inexplicable actions of a demented cop and a suicidal horror novelist, the movie's storyline has struck a chord with Quebec viewers, earning almost \$1.5 million after two weeks in release. On top of that, after hearing about the picture from a FanTasia attendee, Miramax opened remake discussions with producer Nicole Robert.

In 2002, FanTasia was cancelled because its beloved venue, Montreal's Imperial theatre, was undergoing renovations. A year later, it still is. Moving the event to Concordia University in 2003 gave organizers a case of the heebie-jeebies that proved unfounded. The university offered a big theatre, which it upgraded with a giant screen, new projection equipment and state-of-the-art sound. And by the end of the already long event, the inexhaustible Mitch Davis and other organizers responded to popular demand by tacking on two nights of extra screenings.

A movie that did not play FanTasia, Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* toys happily with the Asian Vengeance-Is-Mine story, a blood-soaked genre often graced by transcendent moments. Choreographed by Yuen Wo-ping (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), and featuring icons like Sonny Chiba, Tarantino's movie is a dream about Asian genre pictures, and as a dream, it has preposterous moments. The picture is as playfully ironic as it is action-packed, which is why you can imagine it flowering to life from the collective unconscious of the audience that loves FanTasia.

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Controversy dogged the 27th edition of the Montreal World Film Festival (MWFF). In May, the Venice Festival complained loudly that the MWFF's late start date would cause the two events to overlap. Moreover, an August 27 opening meant that Montreal would still be running during the Toronto International Film Festival's (TIFF) first four days, another overlap that stirred up dismay. MWFF president, Serge Losique, and his VP, Danièle Cauchard, pointed out that 2003 was not the first year they had launched their festival so late in August. They insisted they had good reasons for their action, which in no way was intended to be hostile. Losique and Cauchard also were compelled to explain why the festival had lost its Class A status, a designation for competitive festivals awarded by the International Federation of Film Producers' Associations. (The festival's detailed position on these matters appears on its Web site.)

Long before the talk heated up, the MWFF did a makeover, rejigging its categories and increasing the number of prizes it handed out. At this year's festival, in addition to the World (formerly Official) Competition Awards, and other jury honours, festival-goers had more of a say, picking favourites in new slots like best European, Asian, African and even Oceanic films. The MWFF was asserting a view of itself that many of its fans buy into: the event's "openness to the entire world," as the 2003 press kit puts it. The implication is that while American movies are welcome, they don't overshadow the program. This philosophy must work. According to Cauchard's office, the festival drew 250,000 admissions.

The 2003 MWFF played 439 movies from 68 countries, including a rarity from Sri Lanka, Prasanna Vithanage's *August Sun*. A contender in the World Competition, the movie marshals a cast of 900 to tell three different stories that unfold during the tortured country's vicious civil war. Another civil war is invoked by Serbian Goran Marcovic's *Kordon*, winner of the MWFF's top honour, the Grand Prize of the Americas. A previous winner at the festival, Marcovic's grim new picture concerns the Milosevic government's brutal reaction to the rebellion against it. Also set in the former Yugoslavia, FRIPESCI winner *The Professional*, directed by Dusan Kovacevic,