

# Montreal World Film Festival

(8/27-9/7/03)

By Maurie Alioff

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,

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is an adaptation of a hit play. The movie portrays a psychological face-off between a former officer in the Serbian Secret Service and an intellectual dissident who has become an influential publisher with a lot to lose.

MWFF opened with a competing movie that was a big surprise for some viewers, but not to admirers of Louis Bélanger's *Post mortem*, a major winner at the 1999 MWFF. The 38-year-old writer/director's new picture, *Gaz Bar Blues*, is a solidly directed, beautifully acted comedy/drama focusing on the male world of a family-run gas station. Set in the late 1980s, its characters (based on Bélanger's real family) are beset by everything from yearnings for wider horizons to the onset of Parkinson's disease. With unforced naturalism recalling Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, Bélanger's movie plays like the blues, transcending the sorrow he laments. "I wanted to show the beauty of this universe," he told me. "In these people, who live on the margins, there's a form of beauty and poetry, friendship and tenderness." *Gaz Bar Blues* won the MWFF's Ecumenical Jury Prize and the Air Canada Public Prize for most popular Canadian film. Festival-goers also ranked it second in the Air Canada competition for most popular film of the entire program.

Of the other Canadian films at the festival, Peter Wellington's *Luck* is also a period piece, a 1970s story about compulsive

gambling. Wellington (*Joe's So Mean to Josephine*), approaches the subject with non-judgmental humour in a movie about a young guy who bets to advance his heroic vision of himself. Luke Kirby is charming and energetic in the role; the picture also features Sarah Polley and Jed Rees, whose dementedly wired gambling addict is a scene-stealer. Incidentally, Atom Egoyan executive produced *Luck* with an eye on the box office, which both Wellington and the prince of Canadian art-house cinema found amusing.

In the festival's World Documentaries section, Barbara Doran's *The Man Who Studies Murder* is an intriguing look at Elliott Leyton, a Newfoundland academic with a mission to understand why people kill, and what murderers reveal about the societies they live in. The public's choice for best documentary was *Sexe de rue*, which champions the right of streetwalkers to live with human dignity. Sadly, the film's director, Richard Boutet, died of a heart attack a few days before its screening.

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, influenced by Frederick Wiseman's documentaries, was an obvious standout in the MWFF's traditional Hors Concours section. As the Cannes Palme d'Or winner tracks a day in the life of a typical high school, Van Sant sees banality and beauty in daily routines that are shattered by kids armed to the teeth with assault rifles and homemade bombs. Inspired by real-life massacres, *Elephant* rejects the facile "explanations" served up by Michael Moore in *Bowling for Columbine*, refusing to see human beings as socially engineered puppets.

Guests at the MWFF included the strikingly beautiful Iranian filmmaker, Samira Makhmalbaf. She was a high-profile presence, running the jury that awarded the First Feature Prize and talking up her new film, *At Five in the Afternoon*. Like her father Mohsen's *The Road to Kandahar*, Makhmalbaf's compelling movie evokes Afghanistan's tragic karma by focusing on a refugee who returns home and finds herself at odds with the country's medieval patriarchy. Swedish actor Erland Josephson, best known for his collaborations with Ingmar Bergman, travelled to Montreal to receive a special prize for his "exceptional contribution to cinema." Quebec producer Denise Robert (*Les Invasions barbares*) and Martin Scorsese, in town shooting his Howard Hughes biography, *The Aviator*, were given the same honour. Scorsese returned the compliment by introducing *Mean Streets* to a packed screening.



Sarah Polley in Peter Wellington's *Luck*.