

Toronto International Film Festival

(9/4-14/03) By Kathleen Cummins

There were 42 Canadian features, including co-productions, and 39 Canadian shorts in this year's Toronto International Film Festival. There were the usual themes of fear, paranoia, death and sexual anxieties. There were a few hits, particularly from Quebec. However, the real story for Canadian cinema at this year's festival may have more to do with the programming rather than the films. One couldn't help but notice that a significant number of Canadian films were not featured in the Perspective Canada program. Many of our key filmmakers such as Guy Maddin, Deepa Mehta, Ron Mann and Allan King were featured in other programs, for example Special Presentations, Galas and Masters.

What does this tell us about Perspective Canada's present role in the festival? Would Maddin and Mehta say they are no longer in need of the program? Should we ask if Perspective Canada is even necessary anymore? Yet, what about our emerging filmmakers? Where would they be without Perspective Canada? Everyone agrees that highlighting Canadian voices is valuable and even necessary. The question is *how*. How will the Canadian presence be preserved and protected in a healthy and respectful manner without the risk of being ghettoized? Perhaps the PC program is experiencing

a similar trend to that of women's film festivals, once in abundance worldwide but now a testimonial to the past? Is this what Perspective Canada has become? No one would argue the PC program has done a great service to Canadian cinema, particularly because TIFF has grown to such international prominence. Like those women's film festivals, it's a cultural marker of how far we've come in the past 20 years. Now it may be time to look beyond the past and establish where we are going with this little engine that could.

THE DOCS

This year, two Canadian documentaries were honoured by the AGF People's Choice Award; Ron Mann's *Go Further* and Mark Achbar's and Jennifer Abbott's *The Corporation*. As first runner-up, *Go Further* is an entertaining and fun film about a very serious topic: environmental sustainability. The publicity surrounding *Go Further* made much of Woody Harrelson's presence, but the film never falters off its course, deploying Woody as more of a device to promote its message about alternative living and our mainstream drive toward the death of the planet. The second runner-up, *The Corporation*, is a dense exploration into the meaning, the power and the future of corporations. Based on the book by the same title, the film is a damning investigation into how and why corporations function the way they do. Everyone has blood on their hands in this film, especially us, as Achbar and Abbot reveal



Woody Harrelson in Ron Mann's *Go Further*.

how we are all entangled in a codependent, nefarious relationship with the corporate economy. To Achbar's and Abbott's credit, the film doesn't just point its finger and walk away; it manages to offer some answers to the complex set of questions it poses about our economy, our environment and our legacy as human beings.

Although *Totem* received minimal attention, Gil Cardinale's moving film about the Haisla people's struggle to reclaim their sacred G'psglox totem pole from the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm is a powerful and vital example of how Native peoples in this country are still systemically mistreated and misunderstood. There can never be enough of these films.

SHORTS

The award for Best Canadian Short went to Constant Mentzas for *Aspiration*, an imaginative meditative film about time. This film won over the more hyped Dale Heslip's *The Truth about Head*, which had already won awards at this year's Worldwide Short Film Festival and the Critics' Week at Cannes. I did not see all the shorts in the program, but what I did manage to see, ranged from worthwhile to awful. Charles Officer's *Pop Song* is a finely executed drama and Brian Stockton's *Saskatchewan 2* is a charming collage of vintage and contemporary images of his favourite province.

FEATURES

The Toronto-City Award for Best Canadian Feature Film went to Denys Arcand's *Les Invasions barbares*. Arcand's sequel to *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* is surely his best film since *Jesus de Montréal*, displaying all the qualities of a master director. Like his dying male protagonist, Arcand surrounds himself with old familiar faces, as well as the talents of a new generation of Quebec actors, namely Marie-Josée Croze. The film had already picked up a Best Acting Award for Croze and a Best Screenplay Award at Cannes.

The Citytv Award for Best Canadian First Feature went to Sudz Sutherland for *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones*. This is a wildly entertaining film about a porn enthusiast overcoming addiction and blocked artistry in order to find and keep true love. Sutherland manages to balance the serious undertones of the subject matter without ever compromising the more farcical



Isabella Rossellini in Guy Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World*.

elements, which prevents the film from swaying into the overindulgent realm of the artist/addict cliché. Although the basic premise of boy-meets-girl, boy-and-girl-break up, boy-wins-girl-back scenario is familiar territory, Sutherland navigates this terrain with panache and integrity, and it doesn't feel like a first-time effort.

Winning no awards, Guy Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World* certainly was one of the highlights of this year's festival, garnering a healthy applause at the press screening.

Featuring meta-icon Isabella Rossellini, the film conjures up every possible old Hollywood musical cliché, from the backstage love triangles to the corrupt and greedy producer to the bright-eyed innocent "star waiting to be born." Maddin's deconstructionist ironic love letter to Busby Berkeley is also a love letter to Canadian cinema in general. Maddin manages to make a regional, low-budget movie built around the iconic status of an international celebrity without compromising his integrity as an auteur or the Canadian-ness of it all. Not bad, and it found an American distributor.

Other features of note were Louis Bélanger's moving *Bar Blues*, evoking the early cinema of Claude Jutra, Michel Brault and André Forcier (notably *Bar salon*), and featuring a nearly all-male ensemble of terrific Quebec actors. Carl Bessai's *Emile* is effective essentially because of a studied and restrained performance by Ian McKellen. Scott Smith's *Falling Angels*, based on the Barbara Gowdy novel, captures late-1960s suburbia to perfection, right down to the really bad eye makeup. Callum Keith Rennie as the militant macho dad and Miranda Richardson as the mordant mother provide the emotional spine for the film. However, the film most likely to find a mainstream audience is Charles Martin Smith's historical adventure piece *The Snow Walker*, based on a Farley Mowat story, and featuring American Barry Pepper (*Saving Private Ryan*). The film is a solid example of classical narrative genre storytelling. Already proving a box-office smash in Quebec are Jean-François Pouliot's *Seducing Doctor Lewis* and Émile Gaudreault's *Mambo Italiano*. Both comedies, these films are wonderful examples of what mainstream narrative filmmaking should be—well crafted and entertaining without compromising intelligence and inspiration.

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Background image: Sudz Sutherland's *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones*