

Atlantic Film Festival

(9/12-20/03) By Ron Foley Macdonald

Thom Fitzgerald's suicide drama *The Event* took home five awards at the Atlantic Film Festival (AFF) in Halifax this year. The New York-born, Nova Scotia-based filmmaker walked off with honours for writing, art direction, editing, direction and acting (female) for his Halifax/New York-shot ensemble piece which had already impressed audiences at the 2003 Sundance Festival. Fitzgerald's film was the first to shoot in New York City after the events of 9/11. Its large cast of Canadian (Don McKellar, Brent Carver) and indie American favourites (Olympia Dukakis, Parker Posey) guaranteed the film a wide release in Canada and the United States in the fall.

This year's AFF saw an increase in attendance (17 per cent) despite a substantial drop in Atlantic feature films. While some major works were not ready in time—the CBC miniseries on the Halifax Explosion entitled *Shattered City*, Fitzgerald's upcoming *Three Needles* and Daniel MacIvor's latest feature, *Wilby Wonderful*—the festival compensated with a substantial increase in documentary and short films. The annual East Coast get-together was launched in its first weekend by a raucous co-production conference with the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, making the bars, restaurants and meeting places around the Lord Nelson Hotel, the festival headquarters, overflow with garrulous Irish, English, Scottish and Welsh producers all in search of precious co-production money. Whether they found any ready cash in Halifax this year will probably be answered in next year's lineup of films. Meanwhile, American producers and Nova Scotian crews were busy shooting the American movie of the week, *The Elizabeth Smart Story*, with Halifax standing in for—you guessed it—Salt Lake City. Go figure.

The features that unspooled onscreen received the usual uncritical hometown hosannas, with Newfoundlanders Anita McGee and Mike Jones impressing the locals with *The Bread Maker* and *Andy Jones: To the Wall* respectively. Haligonian hearts were all-a-flutter, however, with Andrea Dorfman's follow-up to her debut film *Parsley Days*. Entitled *Love that Boy*, it strangely didn't make

it through the TIFF screening committee while McGee's more uneven romantic comedy did. Strange, these things. *To the Wall* is a straight-up performance film from one of comedian Andy Jones's one-man shows. The former *Codco* member's onstage frenzy copped him best acting honours (male) from the five-person AFF jury, which included director Tim Southam, filmmaker Shandi Mitchell, writer Sue Goyette, actor Barry Dunn and documentarian Victoria King.

The non-fiction work from the region was particularly impressive in 2003. St. John's director Barbara Doran had two documentaries in the festival: *The Man Who Studied Murder* and *The Invisible Machine*. Both explored the darker edges of human activities. *The Man Who Studies Murder* is a portrait of Elliott Leyton, an expert in serial-killer behaviour based at Memorial University in Newfoundland. *The Invisible Machine* was an even scarier examination of American arms research linked to a number of supernatural events in Canada's easternmost province. Hands-down, the most successful documentary at the 2003 AFF was Jason Young's very personal and exceptionally persuasive film *Animals*. A feature-length autobiographical farm confessional revolving around Young's own attempts to get to know the livestock he was planning on eventually eating, *Animals* quickly caused something of a sensation at its sold-out, standing-room-only screening. The jury also found favour with the film, rewarding it with awards for cinematography, music, and the coveted Rex Tasker Award for Best Atlantic Documentary. Produced through the NFB's Atlantic Studio in Halifax, the film was shot almost completely on Young's farm in the Annapolis Valley. With such a strong reaction from the East Coast, the film looks like it may go on to be something of a vegan rallying point when the NFB puts some muscle behind an upcoming national launch.

A strong selection of Canadian features including *Les Invasions barbares*, *Luck*, *Nothing*, *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*, *The Republic of Love*, *The Corporation*, *Hollywood North* and *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones* revealed 2003 to be an exceptional year for Canuck cinema. So much so that *Seducing*

Doctor Lewis won the Audience Award, the only prize voted on by the cinema-going public. Isabel Coixet's West Coast weepie *My Life without Me* received the jury's nod for Best Canadian Feature.

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Don McKellar and Olympia Dukakis
in Thom Fitzgerald's *The Event*.