

Vancouver International Film Festival

(9/25-10/10/03)

By Dale Drewery

What a difference a year makes. Last October, I was scratching around for more to say about British Columbia filmmakers. This time round, I don't know where to begin. The local film community outshone everyone at this year's Vancouver International Film Festival, producing some very good movies.

It takes courage to create a film in which the main characters are drug addicts and prostitutes. It takes even more skill to make you care about them. Writer/director Nathaniel Geary deserves credit on both counts. His debut feature, *On the Corner*, won the \$12,000 Citytv Award for Best Feature Film from Western Canada. It's an unflinching portrait of life on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a part of the city Geary is well familiar with. His years as a mental health worker in the area have given him the gift to look beyond people's problems and see the lost souls inside. *On the Corner* is not an easy film, but, if you get the chance, go see it.

Word has it that if, at the festival's closing night gala, someone had won the Woman in Film and Video Vancouver Artistic Merit Award other than Gina Chiarelli, the recipient would have waded into the audience and given it to her anyway. Chiarelli turns in a brilliant performance as a schizophrenic in Pete McCormack's *See Grace Fly*, the story of a woman sliding into the depths of her disease. More remarkable than her performance, however, is the fact that funding agents rejected the film. *See Grace Fly* was made for a mere \$65,000, not much more than the cost of a wrap party on an American blockbuster.

There is something quite delicious about a corporation handing out a prize to a film that takes a run at corporations. This year's Federal Express Award for Most Popular Canadian Film went to *The Corporation*, a documentary



about the nature, evolution and impact of these pervasive entities. The idea for the film was hatched back in 1997, when filmmaker Mark Achbar met University of British Columbia law professor Joel Bakan. Bakan was interested in the relationship between law and the economy, Achbar in the issue of globalization. *The Corporation* was the middle ground. Since a company is, by law, a legal person, the film ambitiously explores the idea of the corporation as a psychopath, using criteria culled from *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. It is a clever device, providing the viewer with a fascinating psychopathic checklist, from "callous unconcern for the feelings of others" to "incapacity to experience guilt." As you can probably guess, the diagnosis is conclusive. Corporations are certifiable.

The Corporation is a film that explores an issue rather than tells a story, and at two hours and fifty minutes in length, it's an important distinction. What kept me watching, however, are some compelling characters, like Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface—the world's largest commercial carpet manufacturer. He is a man haunted by the company's environmental record and determined to make Interface sustainable. We meet Mark Moody-Stuart who, as chair of Royal Dutch Shell, sits down to talk with protesters on his front lawn while his wife serves everyone tea. And we hear from a commodities trader who openly

FESTIVAL

admits that when he heard the news of the September 11th plane crashes his first thought was of the price of gold and silver. Flawed, conflicted people...just like the rest of us.

Earlier this year, Vancouver jazz musician Linton Garner died at the age of 88. However, the new documentary celebrating his life, *Linton Garner: I Never Said Goodbye*, suffers from a confusing treatment. The story itself is straightforward enough. Twenty-five years after the death of his more famous brother, Erroll, Linton creates a musical tribute. Although that's the thread that pulls the film together, it really doesn't come together until it is half over. But when it finally does, it's quite a tale. As young men, the Garner brothers played with the giants of the jazz world. Although Linton moved to Canada, and Erroll, a brilliant musician best known for his composition *Misty*, lived in Los Angeles, the two brothers remained close. Then, in 1977, a day before Linton was about to visit, Erroll died unexpectedly. Linton promised himself he would create a body of music in his brother's memory. Last June he presented his moving tribute to a sold-out Vancouver audience.

Although *Falling Angels* hails officially from Saskatchewan and Ontario, the film's director, Scott Smith, is a B.C. boy. So, for that matter, are stars Callum Keith Rennie and Katharine Isabelle, along with screenwriter Esta Spalding.

The film, based on the novel by Barbara Gowdy, tells the story of the Fields, a suburban family in the late-1960s plagued by a tragedy that occurred years before. Despite some weak moments, *Falling Angels* is a good film and an enormous step forward for Smith. His 1999 debut film *rollercoaster* received accolades but no major distribution deal. These days he's being singled out as the B.C. filmmaker to watch.

Perhaps I'm suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder, but my favourite film at this year's festival was just six minutes long. It's called *The Big Charade*, and the film's creator, Jesse McKeown, won the Keystone Award for Best Young Western Canadian Director of a Short Film. It's a tongue-in-cheek trailer for a phantom film about a young man, played by Brendan Fletcher, who journeys into the ruthless underworld of charades in order to revenge the murder of his father, played by Ian Tracey. The short comes out of a program called Kick Start, sponsored by the Directors Guild of Canada and British Columbia Film. It teams up promising young directors with film mentors, in this case director/producer Lynne Stopkewich. *The Big Charade* is a beautifully shot, finely edited little gem that will eventually be shown on television. But be sure not to blink, or you're liable to miss it.

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Charles Martin Smith's *The Snow Walker*.

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