

Karim Hussain's *Ascension* is a cryptic second feature (after the filmmaker's *Subconscious Cruelty*), about three women ascending what seems to be a never-ending spiral staircase. The film is audacious, to say the least, and undoubtedly distributor-defying, but *Ascension* deserved a big-screen debut at an event like the New Film Festival. Kudos to them for providing Hussain with a forum.

Where festival types did seem a bit out of the loop was in their ultra-proud proclamations about nabbing Martin Scorsese's *The Blues* series for PBS. Undoubtedly, this is an important anthology, with movies about blues artists by directors such as Clint Eastwood, Mike Figgis, Wim Wenders and Scorsese himself. But before the films aired at the New Film Festival, they were already being screened on the local PBS station, meaning anyone in Montreal with cable could watch the series from the comfort of their own home. A bizarre claim of a coup for the festival, and probably more than somewhat embarrassing.

Still, given this oversight, Losique's heavy-on-hot-air charges about Montreal's New Film Festival are direly unfair. Taken together with FanTasia, the city's mid-summer celebration of cult cinema, these events are probably the most crucial in Montreal's overcrowded film festival landscape. Losique's pre-emptive diatribe says less about the New Film Festival's importance and more about the lack of his own.

Matthew Hays is the film critic and associate editor for Montreal's weekly Mirror.



Barbara Doran's *The Man Who Studies Murder*

\$

the Magical Life of LONG TACK SAM

COMICS

10¢

EXTRA SPECIAL
ORIGIN
ISSUE

St. John's International Women's Film and Video Festival

(10/15-19/03)

By Wyndham Wise

Radio deejays begin the day with "Canada, Newfoundland's youngest territory." T-shirts read "Free NFLD" and "Newfoundland Liberation Army." The only time zone in North America that is marked by the half-hour. Welcome to the parallel universe that is Newfoundland and Labrador.


The St. John's International Women's Film and Video Festival—which advertises itself as "Hot Chicks. Hot Flicks. What more could you want?"—is a small gem of a festival that seems retro at first glance but is refreshingly free of politically correct, male-bashing cant.

It's a festival that draws on the extraordinary rich artistic and filmmaking community that is St. John's, making it not only the friendliest film festival this writer has attended in many a moon—reminiscent of the very early days of the Toronto festival—but also a revelation with regard to the deep pool of filmmaking talent on the Rock.

Now in its 14th year, the St. John's International Women's Festival opened with the only dramatic feature on display, Anita McGee's ambitious St. John's-set romantic comedy, *The Bread Maker*, and closed five days later with Barbara Doran's NFB-produced *The Man Who Studies Murder*, a documentary about Elliott Leyton, author of the best-selling book *Hunting Humans*. In between there were plenty of parties, workshops, panel discussions and dozens of documentaries and shorts from the Rock and away, including Canada, United States, Russia, United Kingdom, Australia, India and France.

The Bread Maker, McGee's debut feature, was the perfect film to get things going. It stars St. John's itself in a supporting and unpredictable role, full of moody moments, colourful houses and glorious sunny outbursts. Written by its star, Newfoundland's Sherry White plays Honey Reddigan, a pretty, struggling *Harlequin* romance writer who puts in time at the Sweet Bea bakery overseeing the assembly line as she daydreams of rippling bodices and heavy breathing, and pounds away at her keyboard during the night. As the hero of her stories, she is in control and all the men are compliant, but her real romantic life is messy. White gives a fresh, unrestrained performance but is ultimately undone by her own script. McGee's second film in the festival, *Portrait of a 70 Foot Artist*—a look at Andrea Cooper, a St. John's-based photo collage/performance artist—is a more modest short but ultimately more successful film. Cooper has inhabited the persona of a 70-foot, 1950s-style glamorous babe—going by the names of Marilyn, Sugar and Texas—striding over or reclining on the buildings of St. John's in a push-up bra. Her iconic and strikingly sexy images playfully toy with the notion of Barbie dolls, "playing house" and the objectification of female beauty. Her work has appeared on city billboards, telephone polls and is hung in art galleries across the country.

Undoubtedly the highlight of the festival was Ann Marie Fleming's superbly crafted *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*, the filmmaker's spirited biography of her great-grandfather who was one of the biggest acts on the American vaudeville circuit in the late 1920s and '30s and an internationally celebrated Chinese acrobat and magician. The film combines clever animation—which tells of Long Tack's "true"



origins in various comic versions—impressive archival footage of the American vaudeville theatres and interviews with family members spread out across the globe. Long Tack and his two beautiful daughters were major stars, but now he is largely forgotten, so Fleming tracks his path around the world looking into the history of a man she has never met. She exploits her impressive filmmaking skills in constructing one of the most entertaining and enlightening Canadian feature documentaries since Peter Wintonick's and Mark Achbar's *Manufacturing Consent* (1993).

The festival closed with Barbara Doran's *The Man Who Studies Murder*, a chilling look into the work-a-day world of Elliott Leyton who has made a lifelong study of murder within the cultural context of a society. Leyton points to a murder rate of one per 100,000 in his home province and the United Kingdom, and the stunning 10 per 100,000 in the United States, the highest in the industrial world. He explores the reasons for this disparity, pointing out that the British removed the notion of personal vengeance from socially acceptable behaviour in the 14th century. Americans, on the other hand, actively promote revenge and retribution in their popular culture—i.e., the "Rambo syndrome"—and this combined with a constitutional right to bear arms provides for a murderous mix.

The festival also featured a full slate of workshops and panels, including a Spotlight on Bravo!FACT and a lively critics panel with Katrina Onstand of the *National Post*, Geoff Pevere of the *Toronto Star*, Matthew Hays of Montreal's weekly *Mirror*, and hosted by Dr. Noreen Golfman, professor of film studies at Memorial and chair of the festival's board of directors. A revelation, at least from this observer's point of view, was the reception at NIFCO, the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-operative, which has some of the most sophisticated, up-to-date digital post-production hardware in the country. Outfitted like a substantial commercial studio in downtown Toronto, NIFCO is a stunning example of what government grants, a filmmaking community with considerable depth, a commitment to be the best and the street-smarts of Jean Smith, its current executive director, can do. Other co-ops would be green with envy if they really knew what was happening on the Rock.

Wyndham Wise is the editor-in-chief of *Take One* and editor of *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film*.