



Mark Achbar's and Jennifer Abbott's *The Corporation*

## International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)

(11/20–30/03)

By Roberta B. Cowan

Films for Thought was the inspiration and an appropriate title for the IDFA 2003 festival in Amsterdam. It is perhaps a reflection of turbulent times or an indication that today's 20- and 30-something documentary filmmakers have serious things to say about the state of their world. Films for Thought? Absolutely, but I'm 30-something.

"This was the first time I saw a generational split that clearly divided the audience between the younger generation and the boomers, or my generation," said Rudy Buttignol, a Silver Wolf judge and creative head at TVOntario. Messages delineated that split: corporate greed, poverty, power, environmental destruction, racism, rampant materialism; the list goes on. "Messages are fine, but a panel can't judge a subject. You have to judge a film, and the way it's made," said Joyce Roodnat, arts editor of the influential Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad* and a Joris Ivens Award judge.

While Roodnat was impressed with some message-laden films, for example *The Corporation* by Vancouverites Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, which she said was the "jury's darling," other films left her convinced that many of those competing for the prestigious Joris Ivens Award should have been in less rigorous categories. Some senior producers, so-called baby boomers who were probably once themselves hippies, were almost angry that films like *Surplus: Terrorized into Being Consumers* and *The Corporation* were given awards, whereas the 20- and 30-year-olds were thrilled with these films because they spoke to them and reflected the way they see world affairs. "I was also thrilled

with them," Buttignol said. "In some cases, the older generation's criticisms are about intellectual laziness, but maybe they just don't like the messages."

Eric Gandini's *Surplus* (Sweden), a brilliant but batty exposé of first-world "consumption slaves," won the Silver Wolf Prize for Best Short Documentary, while *The Corporation* won the Special Jury Award, an award that is not given annually but rather reserved for "exceptional" documentaries. Awarded for its "brilliantly argued essay, which takes us on a scintillating intellectual journey into the heart of global capitalism," *The Corporation* packed cinemas and was, hands down, the talk of the town. Achbar and Abbott left Holland heroes.

First prize in the Joris Ivens Award competition for Best Long Documentary went to Yoav Shamir's *Checkpoint* (Israel), which is a vérité about the humiliation Palestinians suffer daily when they pass through checkpoints of heavily armed, often very young, soldiers throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Jonathan Karsh's *My Flesh and Blood* (U.S.) and Pavel Medvedev's *The Very Best Day* (Russia) shared the International Critics Award in the First Appearance program, while *My Flesh and Blood* won the Audience Choice Award for its portrayal of a family, headed by a single mother of four, which takes in sick, mutilated and physically damaged foster children.

IDFA screened 230 films over 10 days, and despite the typical festive buzz and exhilarating discussions, trundling quietly alone across the Leidseplein in the Amsterdam sunlight (or moonlight) between screenings became a welcome respite before confronting the next war zone, pit of despair or jaw-droppingly revelatory exposé of inhumanity. Most of the subject matter this year was heavy.



Vikram Jayanti's *Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine*

In her opening remarks in 2002, Ally Derks, IDFA director, said “many of the films reflect the feeling that the world is on fire.” The cinders were still smoldering in 2003, but the chaos of a blazing fire morphed into a momentous and unambiguous critique of globalization and American hegemony. The plethora of films dealing with post-9/11 discrimination, the war on terror and the fall-out over Iraq made it seem, as Derks said, “that the real weapons of mass destruction were our own governments and the mass media—weapons of mass deception.”

A special program called USA Today was included in the 2003 festival, which examined the many facets of America's superpower status. One of the films in this category was Sarah Goodman's *Army of One*, a fascinating look at three directionless young people who join the U.S. army after 9/11—a failed dancer craving her father's approval, a streetwise Bronx boy who is chuffed about joining “the biggest gang in the world” and a feisty stock broker who

dreams of killing Osama—and are all seduced by what the army has to offer. Like many from their “me” generation, they want instant solutions to their problems. Brought up believing what they inhaled from television, the one thing they have in common is absolutely no sense of who they are. The army offers them an identity, feeding their need for a quick solution, but two years after joining, life is not what they expected.

“One film that I liked very much was *Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine*, which was reminiscent of and structured like that of a Greek tragedy,” said Roodnat. In *Game Over* (a Canada/U.K. co-production), Vikram Jayanti brings Gary Kasparov back to the scene of his 1997, controversial nine-day chess battle against the IBM computer, Deep Blue. The victory by Deep Blue marked a turning point for some scientists who believe they witnessed the birth of the artificial intelligence. “This film did not have a social message, no fighting, no war, nobody got beat up, but it was a battle. A senseless battle,” said Roodnat, adding, “stories aren't often told like that today, and I loved it.”

*Roberta Cowan is an Amsterdam-based journalist covering European affairs for Canadian and European newspapers and magazines.*



Background image, this page and opposite page: Anne Marie Fleming's *The Magical Lillo of Long Tack Sam*

## Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival

(11/26–30/03)

By Allan Tong

It wasn't easy being an Asian filmmaker in Toronto last year. SARS hysteria crippled the city's filmmaking industry—also hit by the soaring loonie—and unfairly stigmatized the nation's largest Asian community. Amid this backdrop, the seventh Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival unspooled, exhibiting a strong lineup of films from the Asian diaspora.

The five-day festival (voted Toronto's best small festival by *Now* magazine) opened with Greg Pak's *Robot Stories* (U.S.), a *Twilight Zone*-like collection of four sci-fi films that were funny, poignant, even erotic. The standout segment from this collection was *The Robot Fixer*, featuring a stoic mother (a note-perfect Wai Ching Ho) who sublimates her grief for her comatosed son by completing his childhood collection of toy robots. The lone Canadian