

Berlin International Film Festival (2/10-20/04)

By Tom McSorley

The 54th Berlinale came and went with no official motto. Since the ever-kinetic Dieter Kosslick replaced Moritz de Hadeln as festival director in 2002, the weighty Berlin catalogues have been prominently adorned with such politically correct Teutonic schoolmarmisms as "Accept Diversity" and, last year, "Towards Tolerance." For a major international film festival to have to exhort its audiences to embrace these messages is at once admirable, though slightly unsettling given that someone somewhere must have thought these self-evident notions still have to be encouraged. Thankfully, the 2004 edition simply unspooled its cinematic riches without daft and delimiting declarations, except for a more modest introductory essay by Kosslick entitled "High Hopes."

No mottos, no slogans. No protest marches either, unlike the 2003 edition when hundreds of thousands marched through the Tiergarten in opposition to the then imminent attack on Iraq by the United States and its coalition of contractors-in-waiting. Instead of high hopes, the mood of the 2004 festival was marked by a solemn resignation to U.S. power and *realpolitik*, spiked with an unmistakable sense of wait-and-see bubbling along just below the surface of a city that has seen more than its fair share of war. Given that this is Berlin, former walled city and *the* urban incarnation of Cold War tensions, maybe it's appropriate that the David Bowie song "I'm Afraid of Americans" kept running through my Canadian head. Of course, Germans are *not* "afraid of Americans," but they are certainly wary of George Dubya's foreign policy.

As we know from the Marshall Plan and the many American "friends" in the films of Wim Wenders and others, post-war Germany is saturated with American pop culture—cinematic and musical. And yet, that relationship is still characterized by ambivalence. Every year, 2004 included, that



Robert LePage's *The Far Side of the Moon*

Right: John Greyson's *Proteus*
Below: Ron Mann's *Go Further*



ambivalence is structured into the Berlinale. Case in point: as the Berlin media and glitterati swoon at the sight of the perpetually bemused Jack Nicholson and perpetually befuddled Diane Keaton (do the people *ever* get out of character?), in town to present *Something's Gotta Give*, others turn to a section of the festival dedicated to another vision of the New Republic: a thorough, thoughtful impressive retrospective entitled, *New Hollywood 1967-1976: Trouble in Wonderland*. The series featured many of the most troubling cinematic portraits of American angst and aimlessness, including *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969). Peter Fonda, another American "friend," was there to speak about his role in toppling the Hollywood his fabled father helped to build. Ironically, the Hollywood of the 21st century now has a deeper, more far-reaching influence on contemporary German and European film industries than ever before.

If Berliners are ambivalent about the USA, the same cannot be said of their response to Canada, or, more precisely, to Canadian cinema. Canada was well represented and well received in Berlin this year. Robert LePage's drama about sibling rivalry and the space race, *La Face cachée de la lune* (*The Far Side of the Moon*), won the International Critics Prize, and Gary Burns's witty and perceptive comedy,

A Problem with Fear, received very enthusiastic responses at its screenings in the festival's Panorama section. John Greyson's South African co-production, *Proteus*, also impressed audiences, as did Ron Mann's engaging and engaged documentary, *Go Further*. In the more experimental International Forum section, veteran documentarian Allan King's sublime *Dying at Grace* was lauded for its courage and compassion.

Over at Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, meanwhile, the festival's flagship Official Competition section was its usual muddle of the latest good and bad Hollywood fare (*Monster*, *The Missing*, *Cold Mountain*, et al.) and emerging international talents such as Denmark's Annette K. Olesen (*In Your Hands*) and Germany's Fatih Akin. Akin, born in Hamburg to Turkish parentage, became the first German filmmaker to capture the Golden Bear in two decades with *Gegen die Wand* (*Head On*), his dramatic and timely portrait of love and cultural collision. The

Competition also featured, with mixed and even disappointing results, the return of veterans like the U.K.'s Ken Loach (*Ae Fond Kiss*), France's Patrice Leconte (*Confidences trop intimes*) and Eric Rohmer (*Triple Agent*), and Greece's Theo Angelopoulos (*Trilogy: The Weeping Meadow*). With the exception of Romuald Karmakar's unfortunate, unintentionally hilarious parody of art-house existentialism, *Nightsongs* (which makes Vincent Gallo's execrable *Brown Bunny* looklike an Antonioni film), the 54th Competition had no real masterworks but no howling embarrassments either.

As *Variety* critic Eddie Cockrell put it, the festival's solid programming and peerless organization signals that perhaps Berlin "is going to give Cannes a run for its money as the pre-eminent European platform for launching new films." High hopes, indeed. Beyond the intra-festival rivalry and struggles for international film festival supremacy, though, there were many remarkable films about life, strife, death and love in our dangerous times at Berlin 2004. Maybe the true slogan of this year's festival, unspoken but urgently felt hovering over the windswept Potsdamerplatz, comes faraway from John and Yoko (who chose, it should be remembered, to live in the USA): War Is Over, If You Want It.

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NSI's FilmExchange (3/2-6/04)

By Peter Vesuwalla

David "Sudz" Sutherland looks exhausted and keeps saying he's about to leave the party and go to bed. It's the second day of the National Screen Institute's FilmExchange Canadian Film Festival held in Winnipeg, and his first feature, *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones*, has just played to a small but enthusiastic audience. Sutherland is about to head back to Toronto for the film's theatrical release and he's hoping ThinkFilm's novel marketing strategy of distributing coupons offering a six-dollar discount to build an audience and create buzz will pay off.

Seeing him again, hanging out at a late-night party in somebody's room at the Fort Garry Hotel,

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



reminds me of the first time I covered the festival, back in 2000, when it was still called Local Heroes. It was at a similar party, possibly in the same hotel room, when all the booze was gone and the conversation turned back to the quest for the Holy Grail: a commercially successful English-Canadian film. After careful, drunken deliberation, the filmmakers