

ReelWorld Film Festival (3/31-4/3/04)

By Allan Tong

Riding the subway north to the fourth ReelWorld Film Festival in North York, Toronto, I spotted a young Asian man hand-in-hand with his black girlfriend. Twenty years ago, I would've been the only coloured face in that train, never mind an interracial couple. Times change. Immigrants have transformed the face of Canada, especially in cities such as Toronto where half the population is now non-white. The faces in Canadian film and television remain overwhelmingly pale, however.

ReelWorld was launched four years ago to highlight filmmakers of colour and films about people of colour. Not only does ReelWorld showcase their films, the festival offers filmmakers generous awards to further their careers. To reach its audience, the festival is entrenched in North York, home to growing populations of blacks, and South and East Asians. Although the Famous Players Silvercity cinemas and Novotel, where seminars take place, are comfortable, I am dubious about the festival's location, which is too remote to attract the downtown movie-going audience and entertainment media. Furthermore, while ReelWorld does an exceptional job of attracting black and South Asian audiences, it fails to connect to the city's 500,000 East Asians, despite good films.

This year's festival was a low-key affair. It lacked the panache of last year when a star such as director Ernest Dickerson (Spike Lee's former cinematographer) delivered a lengthy Q&A and premiered his film (*Good Fences*). This year there was no guest speaker and no film dominated the festival, although a BBC documentary, Ben Anthony's *Al-Jazeera Exclusive* (the American invasion of Iraq seen through Arab eyes), and a short, Sharat Raju's *American Made* (about a Sikh family hitchhiking in Muslim-phobic America), attracted devoted audiences and created some buzz.

The Canadian entries reflected the overall malaise, with only a handful of shorts standing out. Erma Elzy-Jones's *Man Made* is a sly comedy about women of the future finding their ideal "man" through technology. Similarly, Sugith Varughese's *Tongue Tied* takes a clever look at pickup bars. Ed Gass-Donnelly skilfully adapted a Judith Thompson play, *Pink*, into a six-minute monologue delivered by a

Sharat Raju's *American Made*



white South African girl who attends her black nanny's funeral. While visually rich, Ingrid Veninger's and Charles Officer's *Urda/Bone* and Monica Guddat's *456 Downtown* are really music videos disguised as dramas.

This year's documentaries upheld Canada's reputation in the genre. Peter Farbridge's *Change from Within* profiles Margaret Bolt, a principal who turns down a lucrative job in America to rebuild a crumbling Jamaican school. In this uplifting film, Bolt teaches her students to value self-respect, discipline and education. Mary Guevara's *New Arrivals* examines the plight of Filipino professionals languishing in demeaning jobs (maids, gas station clerks) in Canada. Only 16-minutes long, the film has enough compelling characters to expand. *I Made a Vow* is a fine antidote to white-bread television series that capture newlyweds walking down the aisle. Directed by Juanita Peters, it spotlights a couple from Preston (Nova Scotia's oldest black community) in the nervous days and minutes leading up to their wedding.

However, the real highlights of ReelWorld came from New York. The best film of the festival was *Bomb the System*, a coming-of-age tale about a graffiti artist in lower Manhattan. Written, shot and edited in less than a year on a shoestring budget, *Bomb the System* is director Adam Lough's debut. Its harsh portrayal of New York inter-city life, its dark, moody streets, and jarring Steadicam work is reminiscent of Daren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*. With a solid script and performances, *Bomb the System* is what the ReelWorld Film Festival should be all about. Equally gritty was *Take Out*, directed by Sean Baker and Shih-ching Tsou. In the tradition of *Bicycle Thief*, *Take Out* is a day-in-the-life of a Chinese illegal who delivers take-out food on bicycle to pay off a loan shark. A handheld digital camera captures real locations and real customers. The style is too rough for its own good and detracts from the force of the story but like *Bomb the System*, *Take Out* takes us into an exciting underworld that mainstream films ignore.

Juanita Peters's
I Made a Vow



Ed Gass-Donnelly's
Pink



Ingrid Veninger's
and Charles Officers's
Urda/Bone



The New York films were a refreshing jolt. There remains a tendency at ReelWorld to favour “nice” politically correct films over controversial fare. With filmmakers of colour relegated to the fringes of the industry, it’s here that North America’s most unique and cutting-edge voices will emerge. ReelWorld is in prime position to launch these careers. But will it? Will the industry respond or continue to overlook filmmakers of colour? To be fair, Canadian film and television have recently launched funds and initiatives tailored to filmmakers of colour, but there remains a huge lag between Canada’s real, diverse population and what it sees onscreen. At a jam-packed seminar, seven gatekeepers (all white), facing an audience of filmmakers (all people of colour), wrestled with this notion. The seminar climaxed when a 63-year-old black mother of two told the panel that she heard these same issues discussed 20 years ago. She pleaded with the gatekeepers to have the courage, like ReelWorld, to put more people of colour on-air and onscreen. She hit it on the nose when she said, “When you don’t see yourself, you don’t venture in.”

Allan Tong is a Toronto filmmaker and freelance journalist.

Images Festival

(4/15–24/04)

By Lindsay Gibb

The one thing that a festival such as Images (which now includes film, video, new media, performance and installation) suffers from is an overabundance of pretentious work. Another is the lack of tangible storylines to satiate the average filmgoers’ needs. After one screening, I heard the person behind me say, “now I need to go home and watch some television.” For the initiated, however, and those who were willing to try something different, this year Toronto’s Images Festival was full of innovative filmmaking and performance pieces.

Pretend, Julie Talen’s opening-night film, told the story of two young sisters who wanted to keep their parents from getting divorced. Talen created a collage by simultaneously taking moments in the different character’s lives and capturing them in squares scattered across the screen on top of blurry lines of colour. The film, mixed with digital video, was a stunning piece of art. However, with a profusion of abstract ideas at play, many of the films shown at Images truly tested the limits of the average person’s attention span, and many of the feature-length ones would have benefited from a shorter running time. Harun Farocki’s *War at a Distance* was one such film. Using war-training films and footage of bombs dropping, this 58-minute piece showed that in preparation for war, the focus is more on the machinery than on the people. The film ended up feeling like an instructional video and quickly became painfully boring.

The short films are the real gems at this festival. One program, called *A Fine Balance*, began with Shiho Kano’s gorgeous *Lily in the Glass*. Lighting is the key to this film, which pays close attention to the petals of a lily glowing brightly in a glass against black surroundings. Water pours into the glass, and reflects light that twinkles and dances across the table. Each snippet in the life of the lily lasts for seconds and then disappears in a wave of blinding white light. On the same program Inger Lise Hansen used time-lapse photography to show the deterioration and movement of land and sea. *Adrift* captures high-speed shots of ice breaking up and