

Hot Docs

(4/23-5/2/04)

By Lindsay Gibb

Since the release of *Bowling for Columbine* in 2002, non-fiction films are being picked up by major distributors and seen in theatres more often. This means filmgoers no longer have to wait for something like Hot Docs to come along in order to get their fix of facts. Nevertheless, Hot Docs was more popular than ever this year, with advance ticket sales up more than 300 per cent from last year. Each night the theatres were packed and many films had rush lines well before ticket holders were let in. The Canadian Spectrum opener, *The Take*, had hopefuls lined up two hours

in advance. The anticipation was well deserved. First-time director Avi Lewis and his wife, the popular journalist Naomi Klein, documented the lives of suffering workers in

Argentina who had found themselves out of jobs when the country went bankrupt and factories were closed. The workers banded together to reopen and run the factories by themselves, without management and with equal wages for all. *The Take* gets inside the lives of the workers and the politics of business, showing the difficulty they had obtaining the right to restart production in the abandoned factories. Lewis and Klein become characters in the story, but unlike recent documentaries by Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield, they aren't intrusive; the film is about the workers, not the filmmakers.

Most of the documentaries at this year's festival were of a political nature, with many focusing on war and conflict. In fact, politically motivated films won most of the awards. *The Take*, however, although most deserving, didn't pick up any prizes; rather films about Israel and Palestine dominated the ceremony. Best International Documentary went to Yoav Shamir's *Checkpoint*, a film about the interaction between Israeli

soldiers and Palestinian civilians; the International Critics Award for Best First Documentary went to Juliano Mer Khamis's and Daniel Daniel's *Arna's Children*, a film about an Israeli woman who runs a theatre group for Palestinian children; and *Death in Gaza*, whose director, James Miller, was killed by an Israeli soldier while documenting the lives of children in war-torn Palestine, won the Audience Award. Sadly, the story of Miller's death mixed with the lives of children who live to die for their God and made *Death in Gaza* all the more heart-wrenching to watch. The final scene, which is the most difficult to sit through without crying, is where Ahmed, a child who joined grown men in the resistance against Israel in order to die a martyr for his people, speaks of his sadness over the filmmaker's death. A caption tells the audience that Ahmed has since left the resistance and wants to be a filmmaker, just like Miller.

Another theme at the award's ceremony was films covering the war in Iraq. Estevan Uyarra's *War Feels Like War*, a British film about journalists struggling to cover the real war in Iraq, was given an Honourable Mention for Best International Documentary, and Canadian filmmaker Sarah Goodman won Best Canadian Documentary for *Army of One*. Her film follows three Americans who join the army after September 11, 2001 because they want to do something good with their lives. Each of them has an interesting story to tell, but the film doesn't get as deeply

involved with their lives as it should for a movie that is character-driven; it leaves the audience wanting more. The ending is abrupt, making the film feel like part one of two. It was perhaps undeserving of the Best Canadian Documentary Award.

While the serious, political films dominated the award ceremony, the best films of the festival were some of the more light-hearted, funny ones such as Travis Klose's *Arakimentari*, Eric Chaikin's and Julian Petrillo's *Word Wars*, Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* and Alan Zweig's *I, Curmudgeon*. *Arakimentari* documents the life and work of erotic photographer Nobuyoshi Araki and his surprising relationship with the subjects of his photographs. Although he is famous for boasting about sleeping with all of his models, the Araki exposed in this film is one who loves his late wife but asks his models to tell people that they slept with him, even though they haven't.

Sarah Goodman's *Army of One*



James Miller's
Death in Gaza





Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*

He is a funny character who jokes with the subjects of his photos even while he has them in awkward sexual positions and

frantically explores the streets of Tokyo at night snapping pictures, exuberantly talking to everyone he meets.

Word Wars is also a picture of quirky characters. Like *Spellbound*, this film follows the lives of four contestants in a national Scrabble tournament. They are just as obsessed with words as their younger counterparts, but unlike the kids in *Spellbound*, these guys don't have to know what the words mean, just how many letters they have and how many points they're worth. *I, Curmudgeon* features a cast of characters who are not obsessed with pop-cultural items like Scrabble, but are rather astonished by the fact that they are the only ones that see that pop culture sucks. Featuring interviews with comedian Scott Thompson, comic book writer Harvey Pekar, pornographic filmmaker Bruce La Bruce and a number of other self-proclaimed curmudgeons, Zweig's film strikes a chord with people who find themselves pegged as grumps just because they don't always agree with the majority of society's drones.

Super Size Me was one of the hyped entries at this year's Hot Docs. What makes Spurlock's film truly entertaining, beyond the initial premise to eat nothing but McDonald's for 30 days, is his likeable personality. This is made evident in a scene when he is sitting in his office repeatedly phoning the McDonald's head office to find someone who will be interviewed for the film. When he is told for the 15th time that someone will phone him back later, instead of running a caption saying "McDonald's could not be reached for comment," he holds a Ronald McDonald doll in front of the camera, bobs its head with his finger and says in a high-pitched voice: "You'll not talk to anybody, and you'll like it that way." It's his humour, not his ever-expanding gut, that made his film the gem of Hots Docs.

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