

INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL—AMSTERDAM (IDFA) (11/18–28/04)

BY HENRY LEWES

AMSTERDAM is a well-ordered city of busy canals and swift clanging trams. It feels safe, and for most of the population it is. Yet shortly before IDFA opened, the Dutch documentarist Theo Van Gogh was murdered on one of its streets in broad daylight, and his death cast a shadow over the event. In her opening address, festival director Ally Derks emphasized how the issue of freedom of speech had always been at the heart of IDFA. "This is the reason we set up a fund seven years ago to aid production in developing countries. We understand that freedom must always be defended—and extended."

Although IDFA is a big festival, its centre is the welcoming de Balie Café, where everyone meets. Nearby were the 11 screens, where over 10 days some 280 films from 50 countries were shown, among them eight from Canada. Alongside the screenings were the daily seminars and workshops, the Docs for Sale market, and the Forum, where pitching took place for production funding. Working at the heart of the organization was Montreal filmmaker Peter Wintonick, who knows IDFA back to front.

"This is the mother of all documentary festivals," said Wintonick, "One hundred and twenty thousand members of the public pay to see the films and there are 120 festival directors looking for films to show in their own countries. I think I've organized about 20 events this year, which is fun. I make sure the right people are on the right panels with the right films and the right moderators. There are also 125 commissioning editors and television broadcasters from all over the world with 50 types of funders and foundations taking part in the pitching forum. It's a chance for young

filmmakers to rub shoulders with a powerful elite of gatekeepers."

Among the stimulating events were classes on Ethics and Aesthetics, Non-Linear Digital storytelling and a Scenario Workshop. The discussion on *cinéma-vérité*

was outstanding for the combined heavyweight presence of American pioneers of the movement—Richard Leacock, Albert Maysles, Frederick Wiseman and Robert Drew. Wiseman's observation was: "Why do you need a definition?" Robert Drew added: "It's just a name. I called it candid photography long before it was called *cinéma-vérité*." Albert Maysles capped the argument with: "Why not call them movies?"

The Canadian films came in several categories. Under Reflecting Images, which was described as "special documentaries with challenging content and form," came Avi Lewis's *The Take*, Hugo Latulippe's and François Prévost's *What Remains of Us*, Peter Raymont's *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire*, Peter Chappell's

F E S T I V A L

and Catherine Peix-Eyrolle's *The Origins of AIDS* and Oren Siedler's *Bruce and Me*. About *Bruce and Me*, Siedler said, "It's a personal story about my unusual relationship with Bruce, my charming, eccentric, white-collar criminal father. It reveals an unconventional father/daughter relationship. My week was made when Albert Maysles stood up during my Q & A and pronounced the film 'outstandingly excellent.'"

The film is self-therapy on a grand scale. In it, Siedler has searching discussions about her childhood with her mother, grandmother and father, which meant filming in America, Australia and Havana, Cuba. Considering her rootless hippie upbringing and her father's unrepentant lifestyle, her normality comes across as extraordinary. However, in ending her film with the words "Does anyone know how to relate to anyone else?" she leaves open the question of whether the therapy was successful.

Khalo Matabane's *Story of a Beautiful Country*, shot entirely in South Africa, was sponsored by the Jan Vrijman Fund, which supports documentaries in developing countries. Petr Lom's *Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan* was in the Silver Wolf competition, which has a prize of 10,000 euros. Just one Canadian film,



Caroline Martel's *Le Fantôme de l'opératrice*

Caroline Martel's *Le Fantôme de l'opératrice* was in the category of First Appearance, for young and new film directors, who, during the festival, were offered master classes in research, production and marketing. *Le Fantôme* romps light-heartedly through the history of telephone exchanges from the days when every well-brought-up girl longed to be a switchboard operator, to the present practically human-free communications industry. Guided by the perky voice of a phantom operator, the film cuts between archival material of quaint old commercials, solemn lessons in diction, company-organized keep-fit weekends and images of row upon row of switchboard operators. If this film has a fault, it is the lack of any social criticism of those long-ago organizations where women were expected to be unquestioning robots.

Martel excitedly commented that "there was a buzz around my film and I have to send tapes to the many television stations that have requested one. There were four screenings which went well, although the Dutch didn't laugh as much as the North Americans. In the market it was one of the most-watched films. I also took part in the Mediamatic Workshop on interactive documentary production, which was really great but how did I ever find the time!"

Avi Lewis's The Take



Image courtesy of the NFB.

What sort of films will IDFA be looking for in 2005? When festival director Derks was asked to identify trends in the program selection, she pointed to the humanism in many of the films. "Maybe they have been less political. Last year we had all these films critical of America. This year I also got films about bowling, rodeos and stunt women. Maybe there's a trend." Well, there you have it, an indication from IDFA's most influential gatekeeper.

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W R A P S

Baun Mah's A Chink in the Armour



AT THE EIGHTH TORONTO REEL ASIAN International Film Festival experimentation abounded and features were scarce. Tammy Cheung, the Frederick Wiseman of Hong Kong documentaries, shone in the filmmaker's spotlight while the national focus fell on China. As always, the "best small film festival in Toronto" (according to *Now* weekly) was well organized and offered some challenging programming but lacked the excitement found in previous editions.

TORONTO REEL ASIAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

(11/24-28/04)

BY ALLAN TONG

Breaking from tradition, opening night showcased short films instead of a feature. Never a good sign. Doan La's *Dragon of Love* brought down the house with its portrait of an Asian tomcat who falls for a black woman and gets more than he bargained for. Toronto's own Darlene Lim delivered a funny, honest look at four post-grads entering the adult workforce in *Hitting Zero*. America's Kip Fulbeck examined the well-worn theme of Asian identity in *Lilo and Me*, but added a Disney twist. Fulbeck tickled the audience with juxtapositions of himself with *Mulan*, *Pocahontas* and others as he explored his Asian/Caucasian heritage. Fulbeck's film is an example of an emerging sub-genre in Asian films: mixed breeds exploring their identity. Then, the audience fell asleep during O. Nathapon's glossy but tedious *Bicycles and Radios* from Thailand, about two people who develop a relationship over a radio talk show.

Reel Asian's strength lies in discovering Canadian talent through its shorts programs. Local first-timer Baun Mah adopted Michael Moore's tongue-in-cheek style with his sardonic *A Chink in the Armour*, which skewers every Asian stereotype from bad drivers to math geniuses to martial artists. To test the latter, Mah pitted a bunch of unsuspecting Asian civilians against a squad of deadly fighters in a gymnasium,