

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.

Henry Lewes is a freelance film journalist based in London, England.

WRAPS

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,



Kwan packs each segment with historical background, which pays off best in the Cuba section. Although Cuba was once a generous mixture of Europeans, West Africans and Chinese, today there remain only 300 pure

Chinese and Chinatown has become a tourist trap. While the Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago segments celebrate the successes of their restaurant owners, the Cuban segment is a touching epiphany for a ghost community.

sparkling a stampede. From Vancouver, Kai Ling Xue unveiled *A Girl Named Kai*, which blends Super 8 and 16-mm footage to reveal her inner world of relationships, dreams and travels. Rob Shaw's *Waltz* is a stylish drama starring Siu Ta (of CBC's *This Is Wonderland*) who plays a Vietnamese immigrant struggling to adapt to Canada, yet misses her sister back home. Nearly great, the film falters from a lackluster ending. Moving to the abstract, Luo Li's *Birds* literally drew the connection between Chinese calligraphy and our feathered friends through ink paintbrush and scratches directly applied to film. Similarly, *Free Line* by America's Keum-Taek Jung and *Era Era* by Japan's Yoshimi Shimizu are imaginative pieces that play with form and colour.

Hidden gems were unearthed in a pair of Chinese no-budget, 30-minute films steeped in social realism. Pang Shan's *A Summer in an Ancient City* illustrates the disparity between city and country dwellers from the perspective of a boy who helps a naive country girl recover her stolen money. Ying Liang's *The Missing House* is a stark portrait of an angry, yet alienated young man released from prison who returns home to find it replaced by a hotel. He's then robbed by two men and harassed by cops who catch him drinking in public while, poignantly, the country celebrates a holiday.

The same themes echoed throughout the feature *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* directed by Andrew Cheng. There isn't a single, unifying story here, but a loose collection of vignettes highlighting characters on the fringes of Chinese society: a male prostitute, a female hooker who is murdered, a mother, her estranged son and their puppy, a doctor and so on. Disconnected and lonely, the film paints a portrait of an ambitious society that dismisses those who can't compete. Although *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* doesn't hold together, it reveals a disturbing side to the new China.

The highlight of the festival was part two of Cheuk Kwan's 13-episode series *Chinese Restaurants*. After a plug in *The Globe and Mail*, *Restaurants: On the Islands* sold out the cavernous Innis Hall and generated a rare buzz. Kwan cleverly uses restaurants as a vehicle to explore the Chinese Diaspora. Covering the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, and the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago and Cuba,

On the downside, the festival offered Sara and Cecilia Hydun's *Score!*, an awful teen *Sex and the City* wannabe that couldn't properly frame a close-up, and pretentious shorts such as Peter Chanthakone's *The Revisited Journey*, which describes the hardships of Laotian refugees in 1975 through voice-over and written text on screen. Watching the film felt like reading a Web page. Meanwhile, fine films making the Asian Diaspora film festival circuit, including Karen Lin's *Perfection*, Vincent Tsu's *Walking between the Lines* and Tadashi Nakamura's *Yellow Brotherhood* were ignored. Why?

This year marked the end of an era for Reel Asian. After three years as executive director, Sally Lee left to join TIFF. She navigated the festival through some rough waters (post-9/11, the SARS crisis) and left it in respectable shape. She started to extend its reach into the massive yet scattered Asian community (500,000 in the GTA) and upheld the quality of films with her various programmers. Looking ahead though, Reel Asian faces an uncertain future. Despite encouraging signs, it is still preaching to the converted. *Chinese Restaurants* was the only film this year that connected to the Asian community and attracted new viewers. Reel Asian is in danger of becoming an elitist arts festival. If it

FESTIVAL

wishes to remain relevant, the festival needs to look beyond Queen Street West and aggressively court the broader Asian community, and even take a leadership role in the hot issue of media representation. If the festival fails to seize this opportunity in the coming years, the entire community will suffer.

Allan Tong is a Toronto filmmaker and freelance writer.