

# Golden Canniversary

## A Cannes Diary

By Brian D. Johnson

Wednesday, May 7

It's the golden anniversary of world cinema's annual summit, and everyone is here. Jean-Luc Godard is here to talk about the death of ideas; *Beavis and Butt-head*, leering from the entrance of the Carlton Hotel, are here to prove his point. The opening-night film sets the tone for a festival where art will fight a losing battle with flitz. *The Fifth Element* is a sci-fi exercise in haute couture, a pastiche of *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *StarGate* and star power, a movie that marries French style and Hollywood excess in the name of campy deconstruction. Is this the new *nouvelle vague*?  
*Godard help us.*

Photo courtesy of Alliance.

Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* wins the Grand Prix, the International Critics' Prize and the Ecumenical Prize at the golden anniversary of world cinema's annual summit.

The *The Fifth Element's* stars and director zoom in by boat from the aristocratic Hôtel du Cap. Bruce Willis and Luc Besson, both dressed in black and wearing shades, do their best to look invincible. The critics have savaged their film, and when a French reporter politely brings this up, Bruce says, "No one here pays attention to reviews. The printed word is going the way of the dinosaur." Brave words in the land of *Cahiers du cinéma*. But maybe he's right. In Cannes the photo opportunity rules. At the gala opening night, as waves of stars parade up the red-carpeted staircase of the Palais, it is like a presidential inauguration. Throngs of people as far as the eye can see. *The Fifth Element's* Milla Jovovich steals the show, arriving virtually naked, in a chain-mail loincloth and a gold necklace for a bra. She's a golden-anniversary edition of the most enduring Cannes cliché—the bare-breasted starlet—and the cameras devour her. Upstaged and visibly upset, Demi Moore mounts the steps with her husband. Cloaked in an long gown framed by hideous red drapery, she glares at Milla with an envy worthy of *Snow White's* wicked queen. Bruce, looking unbearably smug, gives her consolation kisses for the cameras.

### Thursday, May 8

Jump—start the nervous system at 8:30 a.m. with an excoriating descent into junkie hell, alcoholic annihilation and domestic savagery—Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth*. It's visceral *vérité*, an extended riff of British working-class blues in the social realist tradition of Kenneth Loach and Mike Leigh, with a nod to Scorsese. The narrative unspools slowly, a ragged thread, weaving in and out, often disappearing altogether. The dialogue plays like a bebop stream of profanity, syncopated with the f-word keeping time and the c-word inflected as an accent. The movie's too long and shapeless, but well-acted.

I wade through a crowd of hundreds jammed around the Carlton Hotel chanting "Michael, Michael." Michael Jackson has just made a coquettish appearance from a the top-floor floor window, waving to the multitude—the shy fascist. A weathered French busker with beret and banjo saunters by. "It's not really him," he says. "It's a copy." I have to decide whether to stay and wait with the crowd for another royal flirtation from the Masked One, or go next door, into a basement theatre for a movie about Sarajevo. I chose Sarajevo.

*Perfect Circle* is a simple, *Kolya*-like tale of a father stuck with custody of a couple of kids. Bosnian director Ademir Kenovic started shooting in 1992, during the war. With grand tracking shots, he uses the bombed-out city as a set. Charred trams and white UN armoured cars wheeling in and out of the frame. In the evening I revisit the same ruins and quietly weep through Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo*, another story of rescuing children from the war, but told through the eyes of a TV correspondent. There are some boos at the end from the French, who consider it exploitative. I dunno. It worked for me.

### Friday, May 9

Smashed my shin on one of those little square concrete turrets that they use instead of curbs to keep cars from straying on to the sidewalk. Couldn't see the damned thing for the crowds. It's getting so you can't move on the Croisette. Catch Imamura's *The Eel*. Or most of it. Lots of sex and blood in the opening scenes as a man catches his wife with another man and stabs her many times. Ouch. Find my eyes closing between subtitles about halfway through, which has nothing to do with the movie. Hell, I'm just tired. See Charlie Sheen being mobbed just after midnight as he leaves Planet Hollywood (it's just opened here). He looks thrilled, more thrilled than the fans mobbing him. In the States, Charlie Sheen can't get arrested. Actually that's not true. He just made a court appearance. But if Charlie Sheen wanted to be mobbed in N.Y. or L.A., he'd have to hire people to do it. Hookers, maybe. In Cannes fans are so ravenous for stars that they will swarm anyone remotely recognizable.

### Saturday, May 10

Seeing movies at 8:30 a.m., after just a few hours sleep, is strange. Your mind is fresh, washed clean by dreams. Snapped to attention by the first espresso, you arrive with great expectations. For a moment, anything seems possible. All the competition films are preceded by a series called "Preludes," a montage of clips around a particular theme. Each day it's something different. Scenes of characters wearing stripes. Or of French actors speaking accented English. Scenes of rafts. Tennis. Trees. Tangos. The clips run at a leisurely length—juicy chunks of two or three minutes apiece. "Preludes" become the most luxurious part of the day, an escape into pure cinema—and a hard act for any film to follow. Especially *The*

*Brave*. Directing himself as a noble savage, Johnny Depp is way out of his depth. It's an embarrassment. Like watching warpaint dry. But we're all very kind to him at the press conference. He's got that modest charisma, the Zen version. Actually looks you in the eye like he means it and remembers your name when you ask a question.

I end the day with *The End of Violence* by Wim Wenders. Polished, sophisticated, but morally vacant. Wenders can film blue sky in a way that you wonder why it's blue. But the film is a tired postmodern shrug, a wank. Its only honest emotion is the filmmaker's own ennui, best expressed by a director in the story, who whines, "Why make films in America? Why don't I stay in Europe?" Exactly.

We stay out late at the MTV party and wait for the Spice Girls. Dance in the Orgy Room, where go-go boys and girls writhe in plexiglass booths, their bodies in groping range for anyone desperate enough to slip their hands into latex glove holes. *Repulsion Redux*.

### Sunday, May 11

I run into Michael Ondaatje, on the Croisette, on his way to a photo shoot with fellow juror Paul Auster. Ondaatje is carrying his own Instamatic to the shoot. "I've got some really good pictures," he tells me, with the conspiratorial air of a man making art on the side. He says he's heard that the main theatre in the Palais, the 2,600-seat Lumière, is the darkest theatre in the world, which is why you want to drift off to sleep as soon as the lights go down. Not that anyone on the jury has napped during a screening, he hastens to add. If you do nod off, you might get woken up by a phone. This is the Year of the Cell Phone in Cannes. They're going off everywhere, in press conferences, theatres and meetings.

Actually saw two good movies today, out of competition, both about inappropriate romance. In *Mrs. Brown*, Judy Dench plays a crisp Queen Victoria besotted with a Scottish servant; in *Love and Death on Long Island* (a Canada-British co-production), John Hurt plays a crisp English intellectual besotted with a doltish American teen idol (Jason Priestly cruelly typecast). Tonight is the big ceremony honouring 27 previous winners of the Palme d'Or. Catch bits of it on TV. The big moment is the presentation of the Palme of Palmes to Ingmar Bergman, who is not there. Neither is Quentin Tarantino.

## Monday, May 12

A cool, rainy day. *Kissed* plays at the Directors' Fortnight. The audience sits in rapt silence, broken by warm, prolonged applause at the end as director Lynne Stopkewich and star Molly Parker step onstage for the closing credits. "Every time I see the film, it's different," Stopkewich tells me later. "It becomes like theatre, because the audience always responds differently. It's interesting just to close my eyes and listen to how they're reacting. Here it was very intense, very quiet." Afterward a shuttle bus takes us to a villa in the hills for a midnight party for *Kissed*. On the terrace, overlooking the lights of the Riviera, Parker—the world's first necrophile ingenue—strikes a pose by the pool while fielding questions for French television. Wearing a turquoise gown of Chinese silk, she matches the pool. Earlier in the day, Parker and Stopkewich did the *Kissed* press conference. The first question came from an Australian woman who wanted to know "How does it feel to have made a pornographic movie?" When Stopkewich asked her to define pornography, the woman said it was stuff most people find "disgusting and offensive," which was puzzling, because most people, to their surprise, find *Kissed* sweet and inoffensive. The Australian journalist finally confessed she had not seen the film.

The makers of *Kissed* are getting used to a certain line of questioning, one that links *Kissed* to *Crash* and asks how such a nice nation can make such kinky movies. "All the time," says Parker, "people ask me, 'Do you expect controversy?' and 'What is Canada doing making these films every year?' and 'What does this say about Canadians?' They're difficult questions. It's one thing to ask them within Canada, because we're so obsessed with just what it is we're saying in our films and our literature and everything. It's another thing to try to answer those questions in an international forum. And I still have no answer to them." Neither does Stopkewich. But at the press conference she offers a sound bite: "Our winters are very long."

## Tuesday, May 13

Run into Ondaatje again, at a Canadian cocktail party on the beach. He says, with some amusement, that an eye infection is going around the jury.



Photo courtesy of Malofilm

**Molly Parker with a corpse in Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed*.  
"Most people, to their surprise, find *Kissed* sweet and inoffensive."**

## Wednesday, May 14

This morning *L.A. Confidential*, a slick noirish detective thriller by Curtis Hanson (*River Wild*), draws the most rapturous applause of the festival. Everyone's been depressed by wet weather and lacklustre films, horny for something big and splashy. Well, with *L.A. Confidential*, that's what they get. But it's no *Pulp Fiction*. So far no competition film has emerged as a contender. *The Ice Storm*, Ang Lee's Updike-like slice of moral confession, comes closest. But Cannes is still desperate for a out-of-the-park home run.

Everyone is talking about *The Sweet Hereafter*. Even before most people in Cannes have seen it, it's touted as the favourite to win the Palme d'Or. But it's an awfully intimate piece of work to withstand such expectations. As one prominent American critic remarked, "How does it feel to have the hopes of the entire Cannes press corps riding on one little Canadian film?" I saw *The Sweet Hereafter* in Toronto before leaving, and liked it a lot. The story, based on the Russell Banks novel, centres on a big-city lawyer (Ian Holm) who prods a rural community into suing authorities after a school bus crash kills 14 children.

*The Sweet Hereafter* is a departure for Egoyan. It's the first film that he has not written from scratch. For the first time, he takes his camera into Canada's natural landscape, and focuses on a small-town world of ostensibly normal people. "I had a lot of trepidation about doing this film after *Exotica*," he told me before I left for Cannes. While serving on last year's Cannes jury, he says he was "hugely influenced by *Secrets and Lies*—just the

disarming simplicity of it. It was so liberating to see that a film in this drab location with these very real, drab people could be riveting." Originally, the larger-than-life Donald Sutherland was cast as the lawyer, but he dropped out at the last minute, to be replaced by the smaller-than-life Holm. I'd read the novel with Sutherland in mind. When I saw the film, it was hard to get him out of my head, hard to get used to Holm. But his subtlety makes for a very balanced ensemble: Sarah Polley, Bruce Greenwood and Tom McCamus—they're all extraordinary. The response to the media screening is hard to read. *The Sweet Hereafter* is a quiet tragedy without catharsis, and doesn't lend itself to wild applause. It's also late at night, late in the festival, and the audience is fidgety (especially the guy beside me, who thrashes around like he's got hives). I find myself feeling too distracted, and too protective, to enjoy the film the second time through.

I do some "exit interviews" after the screening, a press ritual peculiar to Cannes. Harlan Jacobson of *U.S.A. Today* tells me he thinks the film is "terrific," calling it "the first real collection of characters that has shown up in this festival—these people are so real that you can just reach out and touch them." Dave Kehr, from the *New York Daily News*, who's not an Egoyan fan, tries to be generous. He calls it Egoyan's "most fluid and natural work," then says, "I wish he'd lay off the metaphors—he's always pushing the intentionality of every scene." Intentionality. Now there's a critic's word, the kind of word Kehr can't use in his own newspaper.



## Thursday, May 15

Robin Williams, promoting a movie that hasn't been made yet, provides a blast of comic relief in what has been a pretty dour festival. Dubs Cannes "Disneyland by Dante." Plus lots of Howard Stern penis jokes—"Ahhh...Rumpelforeskin!"

Tonight *The Sweet Hereafter* has its gala premiere. Alliance hosts a prescreening dinner at Oasis, a lovely restaurant down the coast with preposterous French cuisine. Guests include David Cronenberg, flown in by Alliance at the last minute to lend moral support. Later the daily *Hollywood Reporter* grumbles that Alliance shuffled the journalists at its fancy dinner into a dark corner (no complaints here—plenty of light at my table) and a busload of dinner guests never reached the premiere because the driver couldn't find the Palais. Apparently, the 11:30 p.m. screening goes well; Egoyan gets a standing ovation. The party starts at 1 a.m., at the Carlton Beach. A jazz quartet plays soft standards, champagne flows. But with just a few hundred guests, it seems underpopulated, and sombre, especially after the exuberant *Crash* bash at the same venue last year. Cronenberg tells me how strange it was to be sitting in behind Egoyan, watching him go through the same stress, in the same theatre—perhaps in the same seat—that he went through this time last year. And Atom seems nervous about coming to Cannes as the official favourite. Sarah Polley talks about how weird it was to be protected by busloads of police at the premiere, how it reminded her of demonstrations back home.

Meanwhile, Alliance's Robert Lantos notices a waiter walking around with a box of Cuban cigars. Wondering if Havanas are being given away for free at the party—the party he paid for—he goes after the waiter, planning to grab a few. Turns out the cigars are being sold. Lantos, who is already smoking one, doesn't buy any. In the lobby of the Carlton Hotel, I run into the six directors of *Cosmos*, an omnibus of short films linked by the travels of a Montreal taxi driver. Lovingly shot in black and white, *Cosmos* is a charming piece of serendipity, a serious film that does not take itself seriously. And after playing in the Directors' Fortnight program, it wins an award from the International Confederation of Art Cinemas. It's a rather obscure prize, but *Cosmos* producer Roger Frappier, and his six young protégés, are thrilled.

## Friday, May 16

On deadline for Maclean's. I spend the day writing and miss the screening of Abbas Kiarostami's *The Taste of the Cherry*. It is almost a rule of thumb in Cannes that the film you miss will win the Palme d'Or.

## Saturday, May 17

I have to choose between the new Wong Kar Wai (*Happy Together*) and a repeat screening of the Kiarostami. Opting for instant gratification, I go for Wong Kar-Wai, because he's so cool and kinetic. It's a gay love story, with a torrid sex scene off the top. Extra-texture images, flipping between black and white and colour. Half way in, I start to feel impatient (once again) with sheer style, and haunted that I've made the wrong decision. Today's *Hollywood Reporter* calls *The Sweet Hereafter* the favourite to win the Palme d'Or, says the buzz is gathering up and down the Croisette, whatever that means. The jury makes the decision. And who knows what they're thinking?

## Sunday, May 18

Awards night. Jeanne Moreau does her grande-dame routine as emcee. Jury president Isabelle Adjani stands off to the side, looking like she's about to burst into tears. (Later sources tell me that the jury's

fractious deliberations actually did reduce her to tears.) Mike Leigh championed Imamura's *The Eel*; Nani Moretti went to the wall for Kiarostami's *The Taste of the Cherry*. Neither would budge, so the jury split the Palme d'Or between the Japanese and Iranian films, awarding the runner-up Grand Prix to *The Sweet Hereafter*. Receiving his award from John Travolta, Egoyan puts on a brave face and makes a point of thanking Canada. Later, he explains himself: "I have a freedom to make my films that I don't think I would anywhere else," he says. "I've had that freedom since the beginning of my career, and I cherish it." As for losing the Palme, he says, "To be honest, at a really crass level, nobody in North America knows the difference between the Grand Prix and the Palme d'Or. It looks the same in the ads." Egoyan also wins the International Critics' Prize and the Ecumenical Prize—making a total of three Cannes awards. Not too shabby. Champagne all around.

## Monday, May 19

Behind the Palais, they are stuffing red carpets into a garbage truck. The billboards are coming down on the Croisette. The white sales tents along the beach are being folded up. By the time I reach the airport, Cannes seems like a distant dream, a circus by Fellini, and already I'm nostalgic for the "Preludes." ■

***The Fifth Element*: A movie that marries French style and Hollywood excess in the name of campy deconstruction. Is this the new *nouvelle vague*?**

Photo courtesy of Columbia Pictures

