

sex in Cannes

By Peter Godard

It is only appropriate, I suppose that if Cannes is to have its very own urban myth, it would have to be about sex, lots of cash and a cocktail party—this being the Cannes of the fabled annual film festival and all those parties you aren't invited to.

I got the story in the first place from a producer of midbudget soft-core porn, then next from the late Jay Scott—a Cannes regular as the *Globe and Mail's* film critic—then by Jay again when he'd forgotten he had already told me in the first place. It goes like this: A producer, willowy and female (think Gale Anne Hurd; think Sherry Lansing) is standing alone on the rue d'Antibes, near its eastern, less-travelled end, waiting for her ride to a party at Cap d'Antibes. Because it's late and the rue is shadowy, it's inevitable that the Hollywood fat cat in the limo driving by mistakes her for someone in a business other than the movies where a good screwing can be had. "How much," barks our gallant fat cat through the window. But it seems he doesn't recognize her from a meeting some days earlier when she was trying to pitch her next production. "A million six," she says.

By Cannes's own escalating standards, \$1.6 million is not that out of line for a high-priced hooker, a suite at the Majestic, some takeout from Le Royal Gray at the Hotel Gray d'Albion, with maybe a little something thrown in from Chopard Boutique nearby on the Croisette, and a job well done. What distances this story from the truth is the unlikelihood of any producer—anybody at all, for that matter—actually having to buy sex at Cannes. Sex goes without saying at the festival, like drunken Brits at the Petit Carlton bar.

For starters, sex is an understood accommodation between anyone with the slightest smidgen of clout and the 20-something gofers hurtling up and down the Croisette, their arms bursting with party invites, hoping that they will be included. It occurs even on the rare occasion with the press corps. One of Canada's senior critics once found himself staring directly up into the eyes of Jesus as he was pleasuring a much-travelled merchant seaman with a beautifully rendered image of Christ tattooed across his chest and stomach.

However, sex is not all that Cannes is about. Not primarily, anyway. Indeed, after the 51st annual fest in May—which opened with Mike Nichols's cowardly *Primary Colors*, went nuts over *Blues Brothers 2000*, and ended with *Godzilla*—one might conclude that the festival is no longer really "about" anything at all; it just keeps happening once a year, a natural phenomenon like the migraine-inducing mistral swooping south down the Rhone Valley, or the appearance of Roger Ebert in a sports shirt.

A lot can be placed higher on the list of things that make Cannes go than sex—on screen or not. Cannes is power mad, not sex-starved. Smoking would be high up on the list, too (cigarettes, but sometimes stronger stuff). Cannes is probably the most pro-smoking place on the planet next to mainland China, reason enough for the world's press to see it with kindly eyes. And let's not forget meetings, shrimp platters and papermaking. It takes weeks to rid my clothes of that paint-like acrylic odour seeping from those 10-centimetres-thick Danish press kits and copies of *Screen International*.

Even politics outstrips sex. You get invited to the better parties if you're from a fashionable minority than if you've been advertising that you're hot-to-trot. Quentin Tarantino and the tiny African nation of Burkina Faso have led the way in the minority business here for years. But it soon could be the French themselves if they don't produce a Palme d'Or-winning movie. This year's main prize hope for the French, Patrice Chereau's *Ceux qui m'aiment prendront le train*, disappointed, although it has a terrific hip soundtrack which, maddently, pervades eversingle frame. ("Another aging French director trying to show he's still in touch," noted a young colleague from Montreal.) Claude Miller's *La Classe de neige*, a gloomy exercise in High Seriousness, was much too earnest. (The eventual best-picture Palme d'Or winner, Theo Angelopoulos's *Eternity and a Day*, and runner-up, Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, seemed about right to me, although maybe in the reverse order. Neither has a lick of computer animation in them.)

But the sex business is pretty earnest too, and Canadians are pretty good at it—being earnest, I mean. Sex is Cannes at the entry level. Sex is your first-time calling card. Sex puts your product into play, whether it's called *Weekend in Bologna*, from the Gaia Private line which I found in an airless basement corner beneath the Grand Palais, or whether it's something up-scale, like *Babyface* by Canadian director Jack Blum (a Cannes first-timer) with its promise of a mother-daughter twofer. The truth is that the market is where the festival really lives or dies. It's about territories sold-to, not just awards. It's about selling flicks by-the-meter. In fact, it was while looking for further cheap thrills—anything other than Paul Auster's *Lulu on the Bridge*—that I was reminded by someone (probably Robert Lantos) that this was the way Robert Lantos, Canada's leading producer, got his start and his introduction to Cannes, by making sexy little flicks for international distribution.

Eschewing my usual daily Cannes diet of high-minded stuff—I ducked out on Rolf de Heer's much-admired *Dance Me to Her Song*, about a physically handicapped woman's sex drive—I found myself one morning in a cell-like screening room high up in the attic of the Grand Palais, watching *Dark Confessions: Canada. Exotic/Adventure*. "A young American woman travels the world encountering lust, intrigue and danger. 96 minutes." *Dark Confessions* is one of seven—seven!—recent films from Vancouver's North American Releasing, a regular player at Cannes, even though a company representative told me, "Cannes is more for shmoozing than the other markets we go to." Shot at the company's studio in Prague, *Dark Confessions* nevertheless features some corrupt cops who look and think like they're from South Carolina.

Riding high after a reportedly booming 1997—1,420 companies from 71 countries that year—the Cannes International Film Market (MIF) figured it had around 1,500 companies represented this May. Searching further through the lists and lists of films desperately seeking distribution, I found *Fall Canada/UK. Thriller*. "A woman on the run from a madman seduces a novelist into killing her assailant. 94 minutes." Then there's *2 secondes. Canada*. "A young woman bicyclist discovers life after leaving racing. 101 minutes." *2 secondes*, however, is anything but a sex flick even if it is described that way. In fact, it's a neat, likable movie that you find yourself drawn to call "little" because Quebec director Manon Briand avoided—or missed—all the audience-grabbing moments that a studio would have demanded.

Once was, you could find Telefilm Canada in the Palais's bowels in what looked like a closet. The agency decamped to a hotel room this year, a signal both of Canada's declining presence at Cannes, and the reclining needs of its staffers for a quick nap between all that faxing. Down through the airless Palais basement corridors you meet the good folks from Leisure Time Entertainment, offering "the best for less," with the likes of *Black Pussycats*, *Every Inch a Man*, *Softballs* and *Kinky Blondes #2*. The Private Collection people take you beyond their high-end porn—*The Pyramid*, "coming soon on DVD!"—to gizmos like the "Jelly Jewel 8-inch Tool" or Jelly Jewel 10-inch Tool," a pair of of ready-to-use phalli in luminous green, red and blue.

Although Times Square in New York may have cleared them out, the Triple-X folks enjoyed a revival of sorts at Cannes this year with a return of the annual Hot d'Or, the seventh sex-flick awards, not given in 1997, but held in a private villa this year. As a private Triple-X yacht bobbed off the harbour, the pundits and producers of porn on dry land argued about using condoms—"it's like installing seat belts and air bags," said one. Even with health concerns sweeping the industry, the mood remained buoyant. Indeed, the only downer I can report was, alas, also of Canadian origin. Pamela Anderson failed to pick up her special prize for her performance along with soon-to-be-ex-hubby Tommy Lee in their famous "private" Triple-X video, which can be seen worldwide on the Internet.

There must be an urban myth somewhere in that. ●



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