

By Barbara Goslawski

It's a banner year for Canadian experimental cinema at the Toronto International Film Festival. I count 10 films that are either pure examples or hybrids, most of them made by veterans. It's encouraging to see that the short film programs are a mixture of genres: gone are the days when the experimental films were segregated into a single program that few could sit through. Due to sheer lack of space, I'll focus on a few of the highlights.

In recent years, Mike Hoolboom and Wrik Mead have become mainstays of the Perspective Canada program and this year is no different. Mead returns for the fifth year in a row with *cupid*, another of his short, single-character psychodramas. This time, Toronto's resident hopeless romantic reveals a jaded side with a tale of all-consuming passion in which the god of love finally gets his. The film's humour derives from its single-shot structure, a bizarre image of Cupid standing at a bar, giant wings protruding every which way, enjoying a pint and a smoke. Originally shot on super 8mm, *cupid* features all of Mead's favourite techniques: pixilation, animation and a grainy image shot through dirty, paint-smearing glass with a gold-leaf border. The result is an off-beat dream state, laced with irony, shattering all traditional images of the innocent *Amour*.

Mike Hoolboom's entry this year is the short *In the Future*, a disturbing prophecy on the final outcome of cinema's ever-extending influence. Hoolboom pushes past the vision presented in *The Truman Show*, predicting a virtual human merged with the medium that dominates him. In a tightly constructed barrage of old Hollywood images, he delves into the past to illuminate our future, producing a brilliant collage of gestures and gazes that are deeply touching in their familiarity. *In the Future* is a culture-jamming film, one of the most concise and poetic of its kind, with just enough ambiguity to make us wonder whether this vision is necessarily bleak.

Hoolboom's colleagues (and former classmates) Gary Popovich and Philip Hoffman return with some of their best work to date. Hoffman collaborates with Wayne Salazar on *Destroying Angel*, a

candid portrait of Salazar, a gay man with AIDS who is struggling to come to terms with a difficult past and an uncertain future. The film chronicles his many relationships, including his friendship with Hoffman and Hoffman's partner, Marian McMahon. Salazar's honesty is arresting, particularly when discussing the daily routine of pills and needles needed to slow down the progress of the AIDS virus. A difficult and moving film, it becomes downright heartbreaking as events take an unexpected and tragic turn with the sudden death of McMahon. Her own insights into surviving past traumas are inspirational, remaining with you long after you have seen the film.

Popovich's *Faultlines* is a multilayered visual journey between civilizations, cultures and states of mind. Ancient Mayan hieroglyphics mix with the casinos of Las Vegas to produce a perverse and fascinating view of modern American culture, one that makes you question just how far we have come. As the images skip across the southern United States into Mexico and back again, the voices on the soundtrack relate stories of love and loss, poignant in their longings for reconnection. This sense of disconnection transforms the imagery and when scenes from the aftermath of the Californian earthquake are added to the mix, the film moves toward its own earthquake, one that leaves no answers, only questions.

Other veterans include Judith Doyle, who returns to experimental filmmaking after directing *Wasaga*, her debut feature. *The Last Split Second* is a provocative portrait of physical trauma based on Toronto artist Andy Patton's eloquent accounts of surviving a broken back and the requisite medical treatments. The film is a seamless weave of text, voice-over, computer animation and optical printing. *The Last Split Second* features stunning imagery, perfectly suited to this tale of sensory perception, with medical scans blending into three-dimensional skeletons blending into car wrecks. The effect is at once thought-provoking and visceral, a breathtaking document of a terrible event.

Actor (*Highway 61*) and director Valerie Buhagiar returns with her third, and best, short *L'Amour, L'Amour, Shut the Door, Por Favor*. This is only her second attempt at

Judith Doyle's *The Last Split Second*

experimental filmmaking, yet she already displays a natural affinity. The film is a surrealist delight, a playful series of human melodramas occurring in a single day. Beautifully shot in black and white, *L'Amour, L'Amour* features an eccentric cast of characters, archetypes that hint at larger narrative structures. The familiarity of these tales eliminates the need for exposition, and Buhagiar is free to mix images in a manner that is intelligent and deceptively simple. This is the type of film that is both pure visual spectacle and profound philosophical statement, a wonderfully absurd mix of laughter and tears.

Not only am I confident that more people will enjoy these films now that they will be mixed in with the others, but I suspect that more people will become interested in experimental filmmaking. In any case, this is a group of films guaranteed to keep the discussions going for some time to come. ●