



Takashi Miike's *Audition*



Donald Cammell's *Wildside*



Jang Sun-Woo's *Lies*

# FANTASIA FILMS

# FESTIVALWRAPS

## THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL (09/07-17/00)

Don't pay too much attention to what the critics say about this year's Toronto International Film Festival: they'll tell you it was a bad year for Canadian film but they're only half right. Yes, it was a bad year if you were looking forward to the follow-up films of some of our brightest young talents. Artists who burst out of the starting gates with their debut features in past years skidded into the bleachers during this festival. What Canadian critics have unofficially dubbed as "the curse of the second feature" instantly morphed into an inescapable reality.

Without fail, the problems in each case originated in the script. For some reason our filmmakers insist on following the writer/director model, presumably in an attempt to hide the Hollywood-style narratives that many inevitably construct. Perhaps in trying to do too much (many often produce the films as well), they end up spreading their talents too thin. There is, however, no excuse for Colleen Murphy's remarkably inept follow-up to *Shoemaker, Desire*. Murphy is a multi-award-winning playwright and cannot be forgiven for laughable dialogue and implausible motives. Part serial-killer study, part love story, there's so much going on in *Desire* that, to a certain extent (a very small one), it's understandable that Murphy had to resort to a trite shorthand version of a movie. John L'Ecuyer's *St. Jude*, while not nearly as flawed, nevertheless disappointed. He made a valiant effort to soften the raw energy of his debut feature, presumably to reach that ever-coveted wider audience. As with much of L'Ecuyer's filmmaking, *St. Jude* illuminates the dark underbelly of mainstream urban existence. The beat of the street, captured so well in *Curtis's Charm*, becomes a discordant mess of artificial speech and maudlin sentiment. The resulting fractured focus left both audience and cast, (particularly Lianne Balaban, star of *New Waterford Girl*, as Jude) struggling to extricate some modicum of cohesion.



Molly Parker in Lynne Stopkewich's *Suspicious River*

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Then there was *Suspicious River*, the much-anticipated sophomore effort by Lynne Stopkewich. Stopkewich dazzled audiences and critics alike with her debut, *Kissed*, a richly nuanced mix of black humour, morbidity and a uniquely playful portrait of a necrophiliac. *Suspicious River*, on the other hand, is a darker film but relentlessly so, in a way that demands careful justification. Stopkewich does not succeed, at least not to date: rumour has it that she plans to change the ending. Good thing, since the current version's summary haphazardly invokes a number of highly serious issues to no avail. This kind of laziness with regard to such issues is quite simply offensive. Besides the unanimous yawn elicited by Denys Arcand's *Stardom* (the festival's opening night film), Toronto new waver John Greyson produced an equally major misstep with *The Law of Enclosures*, an adaptation of Dale Peck's novel. Rather than return to the style of his previous adaptation, *Lilies*, which was also a love story told in mixed-up time frames, Greyson rekindled his earlier penchant for complex concept films. His familiar strategy of fusing often unrelated elements falls flat this time as he struggles to create dramatic tension and sympathy out of an interesting intellectual exercise that was best left on paper.

With such a glut of bad films, it's easy to write it off as a bad year for Canadian cinema. The reality of the situation is not that simple though. In my mind, the Toronto International Film Festival's 25th anniversary will be remembered as a year of extremes, one that included an equally surprising number of Canadian features that displayed a calibre of excellence and a consistency previously lacking in any Canadian program. I'd rather remember 2000 as a year with surprisingly memorable films. At the top of the list are two films by Quebeckers who seem to have found the antidote to the curse of the second feature. Denys Villeneuve's *Maelström* and Arto Paragamian's *Two Thousand and None* were two of the best films (from any country) that I have seen to date. *Maelström* was a perfect choice to open the prestigious Perspective Canada program. Not only is it the best Canadian film of the year (in my opinion) it is the first Québécois film to be awarded the honour (and isn't it about time!). As with *Un 32 août sur terre*, Villeneuve fuses the real with the magical; in *Maelström*, he weaves a similarly unique perspective on destiny and remarkable twists of fate. The film concerns a successful and self-reliant businesswoman who slowly descends into a hell of her own construction. Masterfully



John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps*

spicing this contemporary urban tale with ancient folk-tale standards, Villeneuve conjures an absurd yet heartfelt vision of revenge and redemption.

Paragamian's skilful invocation of life's absurdity in *Two Thousand and None* is equally refreshing. His style, though, does not blend extremes to achieve its end, but simply joins them. Adroitly switching between comedy and drama, Paragamian manages a sympathetic tone throughout, all the while keeping up the invigorating pace. This film about one man's struggle to come to grips with his upcoming demise is refreshingly warm, funny and deeply inspiring. Other solid efforts included Robert Lepage's *Possible Worlds*, starring Tilda Swinton and Tom McCamus in a brilliant weave of love story, murder mystery and parallel universes. Winner of the Citytv Award for Best Canadian Feature, Gary Burns's *way-downtown* is a hilarious and incisive satire on downtown office culture. John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps*, a playful and intelligent genre-bending horror/farce, is certain to be a hit with critics and audiences alike. If this one doesn't dispel the stodgy reputation of Canadian film – especially with audiences – nothing will. The rookies held their own this year as well, with solid first efforts from Jim Allodi with his thoughtful comedy, *Uncles*, and Anthony Couture with the quirky *Red Deer*. The dark horse of this year's festival, *Red Deer* was the film that in the end we all wished would succeed: a low budget first effort, finished on 16mm, *Red Deer* has "labour of love" written all over it. Luckily it was clever and entertaining too.

This year, the shorts programs included in Perspective Canada seemed overrun by an inordinately high proportion of "calling card" films. Thankfully, a few innovative gems stood out from the herd. *Ernest*, by Keith Behrman, is quite probably the best film to ever come out of the Canadian Film Centre's cookie-cutter style residents' program. Behrman's subtle yet richly nuanced style perfectly elucidates the anguish and trauma of an awkward teenager who must deal with the added stress of his father's ridiculous world view. Anita McGee's *New Neighbours* offered a hilarious insight into a familiar travail as she (literally) shakes up the repressed world of an aging spinster with a skilful mix of live-action and animation techniques. *Sea in the Blood* by Richard Fung, one of the most poignant films of

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the year, is a brutally honest yet lyrical account of terminal illness, painful memories and missed opportunities.

The aforementioned year of extremes in the Canadian programming was also reflected in the international programming. For the most part it was a phenomenal year in this category, with many of the world's masters offering up new films, including Chantal Ackerman, Raoul Ruiz, Edward Yang, Nagisa Oshima, Claude Chabrol and Bela Tarr. Of course, reactions were mixed but the sheer variety and numbers are worthy of note. Major disappointments included French wunderkind Olivier Assayas and his relentlessly pedestrian costume drama *Les Destinées sentimentales* and the uncharacteristically sappy *Bread and Roses* by Ken Loach. Personally, I got a big kick out of Takeshi Kitano's parody of Japanese action/adventure Mafia pics, *Brother*. Apparently, die-hard Kitano fans found this effort rather tired and predictable. But for those of us unfamiliar with this filmmaker's work, it was a riot. It was certainly a highlight of the festival for me. More seriously, though, two of the best films of the year were part of the international programming: *In The Mood For Love* by Wong Kar-wai and Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*. They may just be masterpieces (a second viewing will undoubtedly verify this) and they will certainly reward repeat screenings. Varda's simple tale of the joy of discovery is inspiring, while the master of playful aesthetics, Wong Kar-wai, offers the vision of a mature artist – a subtle and delicate expression of those uncontrollable yearnings of true love.

The undeniable benefit of the 25th anniversary year was the inclusion of some of the films screened in the festival's rookie year. Watching vintage films like *Dersu Uzala* by Akira Kurosawa was a welcome trip back in time, along with the Maysles Brothers' documentary classic, *Grey Gardens*, and Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road*, touted by many as his masterpiece. One of the most satisfying and rewarding outcomes of this section of the festival was the happy coincidence of the inclusion of both Barbara Koppel's first film, the now classic *Harland County USA*, and her latest film, *My Generation*. Besides the fascinating insights into one person's career that such an exercise inspires, these two visions of America's contradictions, and the changes that have occurred over almost three decades, are the perfect complement to the slew of memories invoked as we celebrated 25 years of "the little festival that could." ●

BARBARA GOSLAWSKI

## THE ATLANTIC FILM FESTIVAL (09/15-23/00)

The 20th Atlantic Film Festival (AFF) managed to uncover a few trends amid the many screenings, workshops and parties. The three big winners were all intimate, low-budget works that point to a smaller-scale, much more risky approach to both dramatic and documentary filmmaking. Two features dominated the proceedings: Andrea Dorfman's *Parsley Days*, which picked up the Best Actress prize (Megan Dulong) and the cinematography award, and Barry Newhooks' Newfoundland digital video (DV) flick, *The Bingo Robbers*, which copped writing, acting and soundtrack awards. Both were made on minuscule budgets with little agency or distributor interference in the scripts or direction. Whether either film goes on beyond the festival is moot. It seems that local Atlantic writer/directors have decided not to wait for the lumbering funding process to tell them whether they can make films anymore. This defiant do-it-yourself attitude popped up throughout the AFF program. DV features from Vancouver, Marc Retaileau's *Noroc*, and Scotland, May Miles Thomas's *One Life Stand*, show that this new wave is not an isolated phenomenon. And while many established producers were still waiting for Heritage Minister Copps to refill the feature-film funding tank (she finally announced more money for the fund at the Vancouver International Film Festival), it would seem that the DV future may have already arrived.

Meanwhile, Halifax seems to have become the festival of second choice. The relaxed atmosphere and still-human scale attracted the top echelon of Canadian directors, including François Girard, Bruce McDonald, Don McKellar and Denys Arcand, whether they had new films in competition or not. And the slow trickle of Toronto producers – including Cheryl Wagner, Camelia Frieberg and Wayne Grigsby – is finally beginning to make a difference to the Atlantic scene. Most have brought new work with them, and Grigsby, in particular, seems most adept at getting his projects to full funding despite the lineup at the federal-funding trough. Perhaps the most tantalizing film not shown at the festival was the Grigsby-produced, David Wellington-directed MOW, *Blessed Stranger: After Flight 111*. Based on the events surrounding the aftermath of the crash of Swissair Flight 111, it's a rare, powerful and effective "torn-from-the-headlines" work that missed the festival deadline by a single day. Sparked by a terrific lead performance by Kate Nelligan, the film would have made a singular impact in a public screening. [Ed's note: *Blessed Stranger* was broadcast on CTV in October.]

The most honoured documentary at the festival was Matthew Welsh's astonishing examination of two brain-damage victims attempting to recover their basic motor skills. Entitled *Breakaway*, the film scored Best Atlantic Documentary and won Welsh a Most Promising Director statuette. Intimate and very moving, it's the kind of out-of-nowhere film that almost perfectly makes use of the festival's ability to build word of mouth and a larger market for what is essentially a small but visionary piece of factual filmmaking. As the festival closed, word circulated yet again that the monstrous shoot for *The Shipping News* was headed back to Nova Scotia with Kevin Spacey still in the lead and Lasse Hallstrom as director. ●

RON FOLEY MACDONALD

