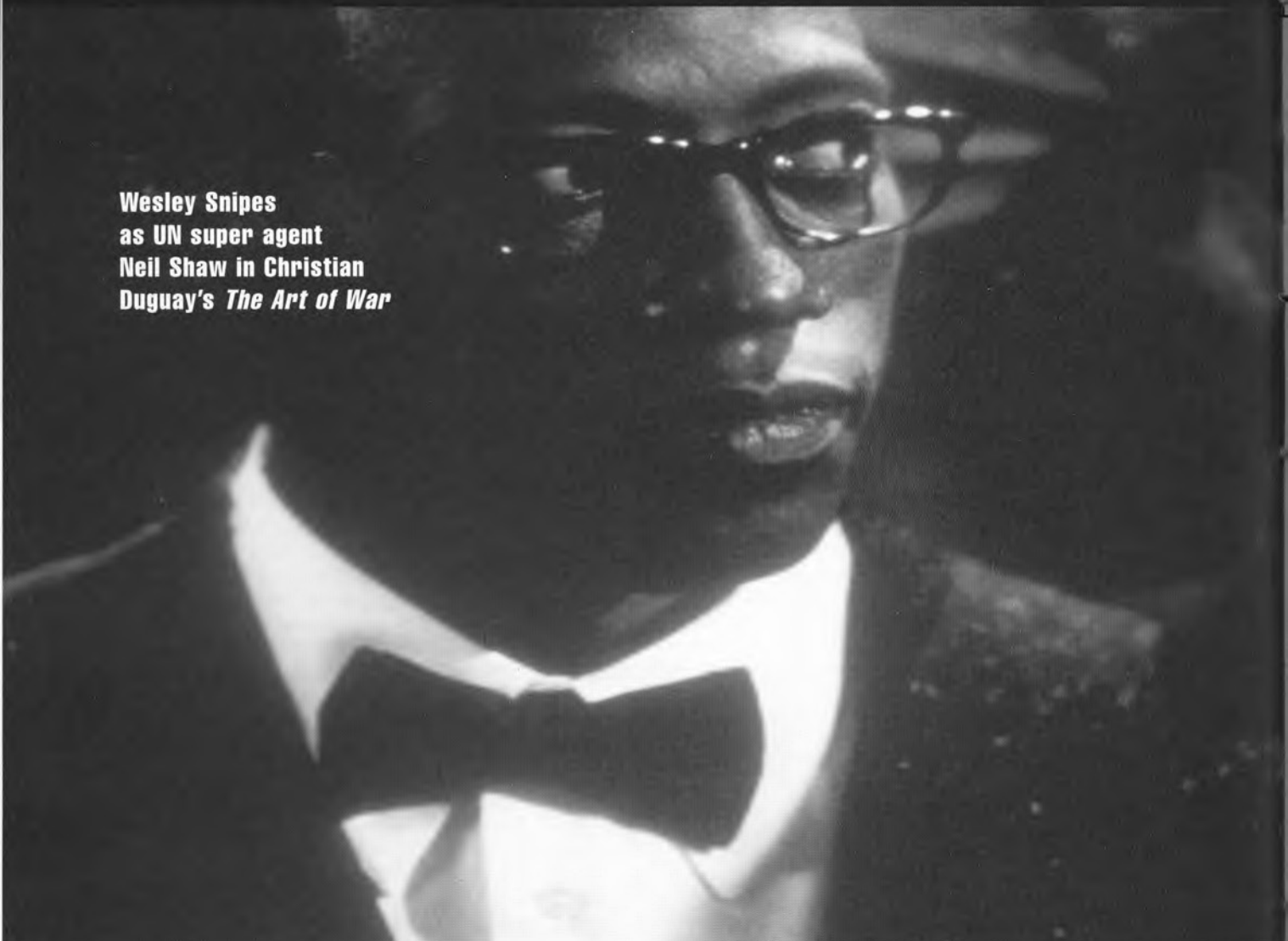


REVIEWS REVIEWS



Wesley Snipes
as UN super agent
Neil Shaw in Christian
Duguay's *The Art of War*

THE ART OF WAR

2000 100m prod Filmline International exp Elie Samaha, Dan Halsted, Wesley Snipes p Nicolas Clermont d Christian Duguay sc Wayne Beach, Simon Davis Barry ph Pierre Gill ed Michel Arcand pd Anne Pritchard ad Jean Morin, Pierre Perrault c Odette Gadoury sr Donald Cohen s ed Bernard Gariépy-Strobl Hans, Peter Strobl sfx Louis Craig, Les Productions De L'Intrigue m Norman Corbeil with Wesley Snipes, Anne Archer, Maury Chaykin, Donald Sutherland, Marie Matiko, Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, Michael Biehn.

The film opens in Hong Kong on Millennium Eve. At an up-scale, year-end costume ball, special UN agent Neil Shaw is mingling with the party-goers. His mission is to compromise a high-ranking North Korean general and force his country back to the peace table. This he does, but he is spotted by the general's bodyguards. He escapes with a spectacular dive off the roof, which is broken by a parachute.

Shaw is summoned to the office of his superior, Eleanor Hooks,

who works for the Canadian UN secretary-general. His next assignment is to place a listening device on the Chinese ambassador who is scheduled to give a speech in New York about an impending American/Chinese trade agreement. The ambassador is killed during the speech, Shaw chases the assassin, who escapes. In the confusion, it appears that one of his teammates, Bly, has also been killed by the masked assassin. The police surround Shaw, thinking that he is the one who killed the ambassador. He is arrested, but during his transfer to prison, the van is bombed, and he is kidnapped by members of a Triad gang.

He again escapes in a spectacular manner and is now on the run from the police, the FBI and Triad hoods. He arrives at the apartment of another teammate, Novak, who has the tape of the bug that was placed on the ambassador. She is about to translate it when she, too, is killed. Shaw finds one of the killers still in the apartment, takes care of him, and retrieves the tape. He now needs a translator to help him. He tracks down Julia, who was

working the reception for the ambassador. She doesn't trust him, but when the killers come after her as well, she has no choice but to reluctantly take Shaw up on his offer of protection.

After a couple more very violent escapes from the Triad thugs, Julia and Shaw narrow their search for answers to a mole in the UN who is trying to sabotage the trade agreement. The final showdown takes place in the UN headquarters at night. Julia has discovered that Hooks is the mole, and Shaw's old partner, Bly, killed the ambassador and faked his own death. Shaw arrives in time to save Julia and force a showdown with Bly, whom he kills. A short time later Hooks is murdered by a Triad hit man. Shaw and Julia retire to the south of France, where Julia has always dreamed of visiting.

Thirty million dollars (and counting) worldwide at the box office for a Canadian film. It sounds like an oxymoron, but it's true and no one is paying attention. Producer Nicolas Clermont (*Bethune: The Making of a Hero, Eye of the Beholder*) and his independent Montreal production company, Filmline International, have scored a major hit with Wesley Snipes' *The Art of War*, which opened on 2,600 screens in Canada and the U.S.A. (the largest single opening for a Canadian feature, ever), and in its first week grossed over \$10 million, placing second on the Variety list for the first week of September, another Canadian record. In a country that places a high premium on original, even quirky, art-house features, which inevitably do poorly at the ticket window, the emergence of a genuine box-office success story — in other words, a film the general public actually wants to see — is such an anomaly as to be dismissed. It can't be Canadian you might say. Well, it is. *The Art of War* is Canadian from its producer (the aforementioned Clermont) on down. Its credits include director Christian Duguay, who has experience with this sort of thing (*The Assignment* and *Screamers*), cinematographer Pierre Gill (*Eldorado, Liste Noire*), music composer Normand Cobeil (*The Assignment, Les Boys* and *Les Boys II*), editor Michel Arcand (*Sunshine, Un zoo la nuit*) and co-stars Donald Sutherland and Maury Chaykin (who between them have more credits than can be possibly listed here). The point being that no matter what you think of *The Art of War* as a movie, dismissed by many critics as a standard action thriller in the James Bond mold, its success cannot be dismissed and it marks a significant shift in the paradigm that is Canadian cinema.

Many Canadian producers and directors no longer feel compelled to limit themselves to the straitjacket imposed upon them by festival programmers and critics who traditionally have stamped their blinkered vision of what a Canadian film should or should not be. Quebec directors such as Duguay, Yves Simoneau and Pierre Gang all have worked in English and on a large scale in features and MOWs. Even such cinematic cultural icons as Denys Arcand and Robert Lepage are now working in English to attract a larger audience. The trouble is that festival programmers and critics have not caught up and are still constrained by the belief that to be successful at the box office somehow means that the film isn't Canadian. It's a sellout to Hollywood values. Quite frankly, these people have become bores, and Canadian filmmakers are marking new ground whether film-festival programmers like it or not. And as for the critics, they just have to get their collective heads out of the sand.

The Art of War is considerably better than the previous Wesley Snipes/Wayne Beach vehicle, *Murder at 1600*, but not as good as typical James Bond fare. However, for what it is worth, the script

is coherent, if a bit dense, the action first-rate, and Maury Chaykin as the doughnut-dunking FBI agent lends his considerable talent for offbeat humour to the proceedings. Snipes is obviously looking for a character he can parlay into a franchise, and Neil Shaw might be it, although the complex machinations of the UN is not an ideal subject for xenophobic Americans. It's an entertaining waste of 100 minutes and the only Canadian film I have ever overheard discussed at the local watering hole. For the first time in memory, this reviewer caught fragments of a conversation that went something like this: "What did you do Friday night?" "Not much. I went to a movie." "Oh, what did you see?" "*The Art of War*," came the response. "How was it?" "Good. I enjoyed it." What else needs to be said? Is there anyone out there paying attention? ●

PAUL TOWNEND

STARDOM

2000 88m prod Alliance Atlantis, Serendipity Point Films, Cinémaginaire, Ciné b p Robert Lantos, Denise Roberts d Denys Arcand sc Denys Arcand, J. Jacob Potashnik ph Guy Dufaux ed Isabelle Dedieu pd Zöe Sakellariopoulou c Michel Robidas sr Claude La Haye, Marcel Pothier m François Dompierre with Jessica Paré, Dan Aykroyd, Robert Lepage, Charles Berling, Camilla Rutherford, Thomas Gibson, Frank Langella.

Tina Menzhal plays for the women's hockey team in Cornwall, Ont. At a team practice, a local photographer snaps some shots of her which he hopes to sell on the open market. They get into the hands of a local talent agent who sees the potential in Tina's fresh-faced beauty. She is called into the agency and given the full model "treatment." Tina is hired for her first

Jessica Paré, left, with Dan Aykroyd in Denys Arcand's *Stardom*

