

# FESTIVAL

## **HOT DOCS:** CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

(4/30 - 5/6/01)

BY LUCILLE DE SAINT-ANDRE

"Who needs April in Paris when you can be in Little Italy on College Street," said Albert Maysles, renowned New York filmmaker in Toronto to show his latest film, *Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, and to give a master class at Hot Docs 2001, Canada's eighth international documentary festival.

Two years ago Maysles received the Hot Docs Lifetime Achievement Award together with his late brother, David, for his groundbreaking films *Give Me Shelter*, *Grey Gardens* and *Salesman*. Maysles, 74, surrounded by adoring young filmmakers, looked as sunny as the College Street. And hey, it's not La Croisette, but it has a certain local charm.

The festival's tally of 1,400 delegates was up from 1,100 last year, and accredited media doubled from 100 to 200, says Chris McDonald, Hot Docs executive director. The delegates came to schmooze, network, do business, attend seminars, symposiums, master classes, party and also catch a few of the very strong 70 films. "We did a lot more marketing this year," said McDonald, "which paid off in record numbers." Sold-out screenings created long queues at the Royal and Bloor cinemas.

So Hot Docs is growing up, changing, losing its innocence. Last year's parties often spilled out of College Street restaurants onto the sidewalks where the delegates, wine glasses in hand, were promptly shooed back inside by the police of Toronto the Good. Now they are squeezed into a very noisy and hot Rogers' Industry Centre. "An overwhelming success, we hit a home run," said Rudy Buttignol, creative head, documentaries and drama for TVO. "We had more commissioning editors, and North American commissioning editors got the Amsterdam hang of it. As a result there was more financing of projects." Buttignol, who helped pitch two projects, was talking about the second annual Toronto Documentary Forum, a two-day pitching event based on the Amsterdam model. It lets filmmakers with some funds pitch their projects before an international panel of broadcasters/buyers in a restricted venue in what we're told is a high tension, ulcer-making ambience.



Gerry Rogers's *My Left Breast*, Best Canadian Documentary at Hot Docs.


The festival had three main streams: Canadian films, international films and a national spotlight, which this year beamed on the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Iceland. Said Torontonian John Hopkins, of Square Deal Productions. "It's better than Banff with its primarily television series, movies-of-the-week and game shows. As a documentary producer you're low on the totem pole at Banff, and you have to work your way through a large crowd of producers and broadcasters. It's also more expensive. In North America, Hot Docs is the best opportunity to pushing projects forward. Everyone wants to talk to you."

Newfoundland filmmaker Gerry Rogers's *My Left Breast* won the \$5,000 Gold Award for Best Canadian Documentary in a revamped awards lineup. With Rogers as the heroic and funny actor/director (see *Take One* No. 32), the film shows her cancer treatment from radical mastectomy through weeks of chemotherapy and radiation. It is both a horror picture and a comedy. Rogers was having a great time at Hot Docs, schmoozing, doing interviews and being on the awards committee. Said Rogers, "Hot Docs...phew...so many films, workshops, films, schmoozing, films and then the people who make the films. Could it get any better?"

# WRAPS

Right: John Walker's *The Fairy Faith*  
Below: Bay Waymen's and Luis O. Garcia's *Spirits of Havana*

It was amazing to see so many films made with genuine passion in contrast to the bare bones of greed and cynicism covered by Hollywood special effects. *Dark Days* is Marc Singer's film about homeless people living underground in an Amtrak tunnel below New York's Penn Station. This 27-year-old British-born former model and scuba-diving instructor stumbled across a colony of almost 100 squatters living in shacks next to passing trains and vermin. During the day, like other homeless folk, they foraged in garbage cans for food and saleable items. At night they descended into the blackness of the tunnel. There, somehow, surrounded by rats with trains roaring a few feet away, they managed to cook and sleep, care for pet dogs and cats and even be good neighbours. An award winner at Sundance, *Dark Days* is at its best with monologues and confessions in which, much to our surprise, we recognize our common humanity. One tunnel dweller, picking through cast-off food, says, as he drops a suspicious morsel back into the garbage can, "I don't like to eat anything I'm not familiar with." Singer and his underground friends, who took on the roles of both actors and crew, went through seven years of scrounging, begging and borrowing to make their grainy black-and-white 16mm film.



*Startup.com*, the festival's opening night film, is a story of a new Internet business directed by Chris Hegedus and Jehane Noujaim. The directors wisely avoided getting bogged down in technical matters and focused instead on organizational and financial problems as they followed two young entrepreneurs in classic cinema-vérité style. Interestingly, Noujaim's close friendship with one of the two young men, brings the clash of business and personal relationships into stark relief.

Shelley Saywell's *Out of the Fire*, which won the Silver Award for Best Canadian Documentary, starts in 1942 when the German army came to a village called Lenin where Fanya Schulman was then a 15-year-old with a camera. When the 2,000 Jews of Lenin were rounded up to be shot, her photographic talent saved her life, and she escaped to join the partisans in the forest. Fifty-five years later, Shulman, who had made a new life in Canada, returned to her village. The most moving moments in the film come when she reconnects with her old guerrilla comrades. Saywell weaves Shulman's photos and her words into a powerful story of survival.



The Canada/France co-production *Ravel's Brain*, which won the Best Direction Award for Larry Weinstein, uses Ravel's music and very unusual and original visualizations to convey a sense of aphasia, a disease from which Ravel suffered in his last five years. It prevented him from writing down or communicating to others the music he could imagine in his brain. Interviews with Ravel's friends are combined with home movies and stills and some unique and dazzling directorial strategies. It's a film of marvellous flare and style.

Bay Waymen's and Luis O. García's *Spirits of Havana*, the festival's closing film is gorgeous, with an irresistible feeling of human warmth throughout. Jazz flutist Jane Bunnett travels through Cuba with her husband, trumpeter Larry Cramer, meeting old and new friends. They travel from Havana to the regional music centres of Mantanzas, Cienfuegos and Camaguey. Jazz fans will love conga maestro Tata Guines's Ron con Ron and groups like Los Munequitos, Los Naranjos and Desandann, a cappella choir that sings in Haitian Creole. We also see Bunnett and Cramer work diligently repairing Cuba's precious old musical instruments. The Cuban music is like a huge river with many tributaries, Bunnett said.

*Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, is a devastating picture of a society in crisis. Lalee Wallace, a poor and illiterate survivor of sharecroppers from the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta, asks one of her many grandchildren and great grandchildren, "You want to go to jail or to school?" Educator Reggie Barnes tries to rescue the region's dysfunctional school system. It's a cinema-vérité piece made by director Susan Froemke, editor Deborah Dickson, and Albert Maysles, whose cinematography won a special prize at Sundance 2001. The audience also really liked *The Fairy Faith*, John Walker's opening film of the Canadian Spectrum, with its tales of legends and lore, lovely and scary little figures gambolling in the hills of Cape Breton Island, the highlands of Scotland, the moors of Devon and, of course, Ireland. If you sit still and look carefully, sometimes you can almost see them.

With 70 films screened, one can usually expect some contrasts in style, but seldom as much as that between *Dark Days* and *Books and the Night*. *Dark Days*, with its black-and-white images and its focus on "the lower depths" and people at the end of their tether seems, deceptively, simple, even "primitive." In contrast, *Books and the Night* director Tristán Bauer provided the most elegant and polished film of the festival. In an amazing performance, actor Walter Santa Ana portrays the late, great Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. Instead of the studied simplicity of *Dark Days*, Bauer uses every resource of film – dramatizations, archive scenes, interviews, stills and quotations. All are blended into a complex film filled with visual metaphors. Each in their own way is a classic.

## CANNES INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL (5/9 – 20/01) BY PETER HOWELL



Jean-Luc Godard

It's tradition. At some point during every Cannes Film Festival, the press hacks covering the event morph en masse into the lemon-sucking Comic Store Guy from *The Simpsons*, the one who imperiously sniffs "Worst episode ever!" when mention is made of any classic film or television show.

The hacks do this despite all evidence to the contrary, because it's considered bad form to admit that it might actually have been worth travelling thousands of miles,

losing many hours of sleep and expending gallons of sweat padding the expense account to cover the films selected by the festival. We are supposed to be critics, after all, but part of this response can be blamed on simple battle fatigue, or what I call the Cannes syndrome. I've learned not to fully trust my initial reaction, either positive or negative, to any movie I see at 8:30 a.m. press screenings, after just three hours of blissful sleep and without benefit of caffeine or other drugs. Whenever possible, I try to catch a second screening of films I think may have fallen victim to the syndrome, and I know other critics do the same.

Thus, last year's Cannes was declared to be the Worst Festival Ever, even though it yielded such second-thought faves as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *In The Mood for Love*, *Yi Yi* and the deserved Palme d'Or winner, *Dancer in the Dark*. And the 1997 festival, the 50th-anniversary edition, was likewise the Worst Festival Ever, despite such competition fare as *L.A. Confidential*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *The Ice Storm* and that year's co-winner of the Palme d'Or, Abbas Kiarostami's sublime *The Taste of Cherries*.

It follows that any assessment of Cannes 2001 must begin with the observation that it was the Worst Festival Ever. But something weird happened this year: the sourpuss mantra might have been right for once. There really wasn't a whole lot to rave about, the Cannes syndrome notwithstanding. Critics began switching to Comic Store Guy mode before the first weekend ended. This was in clear violation of the unwritten rule that you expect the first few screenings at Cannes to be ballast, to allow discerning scribes time to get over both jet lag and the overly enthusiastic plundering of their hotel room mini-bars.

The fest actually began on a high note, with the premiere of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, a bright and bouncing bauble that seemed to herald both the dawn of a new age of movie musicals and two weeks of movie watching that, in the words of festival president Gilles Jacob, would be "a great year on La Croisette." On paper, it looked like a great year, even if patriotic Canadians had no Egoyan or Cronenberg or even McDonald film to cheer on in the official competition. (The best they could hope for on the flag-waving front was a possible Camera d'Or prize for Baffin Island filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, whose mythic tale *Atanarjuat [The Fast Runner]* was screening in the Un Certain regard sidebar.)

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