

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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There were new films by two old New Wavers, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette, and an old film (*Apocalypse Now*) by a faded New Hollywood hero, Francis Ford Coppola. There were fresh visions by such festival favourites as the Coen brothers, David Lynch, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Michael Haneke and Nanni Moretti. There was an impressive slate of films from Asia, including the latest from Shohei Imamura (the 1997 Palme co-winner for *The Eel*), Hirokazu Kore-Eda and Hsiao-Hsien Hou. And there was the bold choice of the DreamWorks animated fantasy *Shrek*, the first Hollywood cartoon to compete at Cannes since *Peter Pan* in 1953.

But as each film came and went, accompanied by the sound of barely stifled yawns or muted applause, it became apparent that something more was happening than just knee-jerk critical negativity. A lot of the works just weren't up to the standards you'd expect from either a major festival contender or an acclaimed director, which may explain why Moretti's small family drama *The Son's Room* ultimately took the Palme - in a year when few things mattered, any act of sincerity loomed large.

Many of the helmers at Cannes 2001 seemed to be trapped in what I call the festival-industrial complex, wherein they keep making movies to fill the ever-gaping calendars of the art-house screening circuit even when they don't have anything particularly inspiring to commit to celluloid (or digital video). Films like the Coen brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There*, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* recycled old themes of weirdness, violence and despair, achieving little more than to remind us of vastly superior earlier works by the same directors. (Such verisimilitude was good enough for the Cannes jury, however, which awarded prizes to all three of these films.)

Other directors, notably the Asian ones, seemed to think that conventional narratives are the last resort of the artless. As a result, films such as Shohei Imamura's *Warm Water under a Red Bridge*, Hsiao-Hsien Hou's *Millennium Mambo*, Hirokazu Kore-Eda's *Distance* and Shinji Aoyama's *Desert Moon* all heard the ultimate Cannes insult of the sharp "crack!" of seats in the Palais des Festivals being swiftly vacated, by bored or vexed scribes who grew weary of watching directors do on screen what Pee Wee Herman was caught doing in his theatre seat.

The self-pleasuring instincts of this year's Cannes contingent weren't entirely limited to the usual suspects. Stalwart Canuck Kunuk impressed many with *Atanarjuat*, which transforms ancient Inuit myth into a dynamic story of love, revenge and personal responsibility. But at a running time of nearly three hours, making it the second-longest film at this year's festival, the movie has about as much of a chance of attracting an audience as Stockwell Day has of becoming prime minister. I expressed this opinion at the film's post-premiere party, after downing too little food and too much red wine, and was told by members of the Kunuk posse that *Atanarjuat* is too good and too significant to be cut any shorter, commercial considerations be damned. I replied that such arguments rarely cut any ice, so to speak, when I try them on my own snip-happy editors, but then Kunuk went on to win the Camera d'Or for best first feature, proving that he's figured out how Cannes works faster than I have.

In the midst of this tsunami of self-confidence, it was a joy to have the master onanist himself, Jean-Luc Godard, show up to remind us of the days when all you needed to be a world-class

filmmaker was 24 frames and an attitude. His beautiful new work *Eloge de l'amour* (*Eulogy to Love*) exhibits both his trademark pompous sloganeering and a new-found humility, but there was no equivocation about his attitude in the press conference following the packed morning screening. Godard is of the opinion, hardly surprising, that most Hollywood movies are crap, especially those made by Steven Spielberg. Why Spielberg? Why not? "I've not met the man. I don't know him. I'm not very fond of his films," Godard said, flicking his cigar in disdain. "His name is very symbolic." But you could tell he was baiting us, by beating up on a guy whose name would be guaranteed to rate headlines, but who wouldn't likely bother sending writ-bearing lawyers to JLG's Swiss retreat.

Indeed, movie-lover Spielberg was likely thrilled to think he rates a slag from a filmmaking legend. "We're all tricksters," Godard said. "We're all here to survive amidst all our problems." The same words could be applied to Cannes 2001. Worst Festival Ever? Maybe. But you just know the Comic Store Guy will be back for more at next year's show.

