

Festival WRAPS

Fantasia (7/10–7/31/01)

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

In its sixth year, the Fantasia Film Festival once again packed almost every screening in the Imperial Theatre, one of Montreal's last gilded, red-curtained, classic movie houses. When passersby see the festival's often pierced and dyed aficionados lined up on Bleury Street, snaking around the block past the MusiquePlus studios onto Saint Catherine, they make certain assumptions. Although most realize Fantasia no longer screens mainly Hong Kong martial arts films, Asian Section programmer Julien Fonfrède(?) says that even presumably *au courant* journalists think it's now a monster festival – giant mutant turtles and killer zombies rule.

The misconception irritates the people who run Fantasia. While they are all hardcore believers in the proposition that movies were born to be wild, they've always had more on their minds than just providing cheap thrills. "We do like our jolts and shocks with a little bit of grey matter attached to them," International Section programmer and peripatetic Fantasia icon Karim Hussain told me during the festival.

In fact, Hussain and his colleagues want Fantasia to be all about new shapes and forms that challenge viewers rather than lull them into thumb-sucking complacency with old favourites and routine genre pictures. Indeed, Fantasia succeeds in juggling amusing schlock, art-house fantasy and

movies that straddle the line. It creates a primal funhouse atmosphere while offering enlightenment to the assembled. The fans have their goofy rituals like stomping, cheering and shouting "Daniel!" when a guy in shorts removes microphones and other things from the stage. But when the tone shifts, and their serious attention is called for, they go as rapt as any international-film-festival audience.



After opening with Hironobu Sakaguchi's realer-than-real digital animation, *Final Fantasy*, which doesn't pose any threat to flesh and blood actors, Fantasia came up with rare items such as Japan's *The Fuccon Family*. A series of three-minute animations, directed by Yoshimasa Ishibashi for the popular weekend comedy show *Vermillion Pleasure Night*, it depicts an American family living in Tokyo trying hard to adapt comfortably. The Fuccons are ultra-straight-assed, 1950s sitcom caricatures played by department store mannequins with frozen smiles and robotic body language. After every conversation the Fuccons explode with inappropriate laughter, even if the situation involves severed body parts.

Yoshimasa Ishibashi's *The Fuccon Family*

Also from Japan, the demonically prolific Takashi Miike (he shoots at least three movies a year) was represented at Fantasia with *Visitor Q* and *Dead or Alive 2: Birds*. The latter is a rainbow-plumed, touching parable about two hitmen who re-experience their childhood friendship and decide to raise money for third-world kids by murdering and robbing gangsters. *Visitor Q*, shot on video, is so cheesily outlandish, it's funnier than it is distressing. A demented take on Pasolini's *Teorema*, complete with miracles, the movie features the sickest family in celluloid history. In the process of making a documentary, dad enjoys filming his son getting beaten and humiliated when he's not in bed with his prostitute daughter. As for mom, she tries to escape her son's brutal assaults on her via a heroin addiction. Festival-goers selected *Visitor Q* as the year's best Asian film.



Satoshi Kan's *Millennium Actress*

In an entirely different category of Japanese cinema, Satoshi Kan's *Millennium Actress* and Kyoshi Kurosawa's *Séance* also took awards (respectively, Artistic Innovation and the Critics' Prize). Kan was at the festival for the world premiere of *Millennium Actress*, which turned out to be a dazzling accomplishment. A tale about the lifelong romantic yearning of an elderly woman who was once a movie star, the picture also depicts the entire history of Japanese cinema. The look of each of its periods is brilliantly visualized, but the unrequited love story relies on too many aestheticized repetitions to draw you in completely.

Based on Bryan Forbes's *Seance on a Wet Afternoon*, Kurosawa's film concerns a medium who, with the aid of her husband, kidnaps a little girl. Depressed by a poisonous sense of failure, she uses the child to prove her psychic gifts. Kurosawa, currently Japan's most celebrated moviemaker, later turned up at the Toronto International Film Festival with his more recent film, *Pulse*. In *Séance*, he aims at the best of all approaches to horror: the subtlety and restraint of films like Hideo Nakata's *Ring* (being remade by Dreamworks) and Jack Clayton's *The Innocents*. Unfortunately, the film is a little too wan to sustain the metaphysical chills of its best moments.

In its Canadian premiere, Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World* was a Fantasia highlight. The suburban world of this story, based on Daniel Clowes's eerie and hilarious comics, seems to have been hollowed out by some kind of invisible ray. Enid (Thora Birch from *American Beauty*), the film's heroine, struggles to define herself in this vacuum: she overdramatizes, mocks everything in sight and dresses in flamboyant outfits that

change in every scene. But she's not just a wisecracking female who would be at home in a 1940s career-girl comedy. Accompanied by sidekick Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson), Enid shifts intellectual gears quickly and smoothly, changes identities at the drop of a hat and, as it turns out, is genuinely open-minded and compassionate.

Another American film at the fest, Michael Walker's *Chasing Sleep* suggests a 21st-century Edgar Allan Poe story with input from Roman Polanski and David Lynch. In a surprisingly dark performance, Jeff Daniels plays a man who reacts to his wife's disappearance by descending into a state of unrelenting paranoia and creepy hallucination involving the house he never leaves. The methods Walker uses to portray madness are perfectly controlled, a gift he has in common with Brad Anderson in his Fantasia entry, *Session 9*, and Winnipeg's Jeffrey Erbach. The latter's unsettling shorts, *Under Chad Valley* and *Soft Like Me*, were screened at the festival with Christophe Ali's and Nicolas Bonilauri's French film, *Le Rat*, a poeticized excursion into the inexplicable blood rituals of an elderly serial killer.

And then there was Fantasia's revelation – José Mojica Marins, the Brazilian schlockmeister and performer whose crackpot visions of damnation make Bunuel's *Chien Andalou* seem almost Disneyesque. The festival showed *The Strange World of José Mojica Marins*, a documentary directed by André Barcinski and Ivan Finotti about "Coffin Joe" that won a jury prize at Sundance, and two of his unleashed features, *Awakening of the Beast* and *This Night I'll Possess Your Corpse*. *The Strange World* is a hilarious portrait of a man who grew up in a movie theatre and has never trusted Batman and Robin's relationship. Wildly popular in Brazil, the anarchic Marins, a.k.a. "Coffin Joe," has frequently been harassed and censored. At this point, it should be clear why Karim Hussain likes to refer to Fantasia as "dynamite made of celluloid, godamnit. And we scream in the night. Sometimes." **TAKE ONE**

Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World*

