

Festival WRAPs

The Montreal World Film Festival (8/23–9/3/01)

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

There were no splashy celebrations for the 25th anniversary of the Montreal World Film Festival, but the festival did publish a souvenir – an illustrated history of itself – and programmed more sidebar events than usual. Following an opening night party, which, for some reason, was attended by the current Miss Canada in crown and full regalia, the specials included free outdoor concerts by the No Smoking Orchestra, the gypsy rock band led by Emir Kusturica. Once again, the celebrated moviemaker (*Time of the Gypsies*, *Underground*) demonstrated that his feverish brilliance is matched only by his intensely Balkan, grunge/hippie persona.

A tribute to Sophia Loren confirmed that the 67-year-old legend still glows with a one-of-a-kind blend of earthy seductiveness and regal bearing. On the WFF's first weekend, Sophia, in a coral suit and turquoise necklace accenting her brown skin, wafted into an overheated press conference right out of *La Dolce Vita*. It immediately became clear that for some of the rapt devotees in attendance, she was literally the Divine made flesh. When a dishevelled obsessive in the crowd tried to make a case out of her answering questions in English, he got shouted down while a stunned Sophia regained her composure. Accompanied by director Lina Wertmuller, she went on to talk about motherhood, professional experiences, her role in Wertmuller's romantic fable, *Francesca and Nunziata* (which screened at the fest), and being directed by her son, Edoardo Ponti, in the Italy/Canada co-production, *Between Strangers*.

At the end of the festival, its president, Serge Losique, awarded another special Grand Prize of the Americas to Jackie Chan, who didn't raise the same degree of emotional temperature as Loren but charmed journalists and festival-goers nonetheless. Nine days later – September 11 – Chan was scheduled to be at the top of the World Trade Center for a 7 a.m. shoot for his film *Nosebleed*, but a last-minute cancellation saved his life. Reacting to another twist of fate, hard-bitten industry types at the WFF cried openly when they heard about the death of Spanish actor Francisco Rabal. "Paco," who had made dozens of films, including milestones by Buñuel (*Nazarin*) and Antonioni (*Eclipse*), had received a lifetime achievement award at the WFF and was on his way back to Spain when he became sick on the plane. The pilot made an emergency landing in Bordeaux, but doctors failed to revive him.

The festival's market, expanded and gave itself a polish this year, hooking up with Radio-Canada to run an online competition of short films in the fest's official selection. The successful competition played out on its Web site, SilenceOnCourt.tv, the world's only francophone Internet forum for shorts, which is linked to *Silence, on court*, a weekly program on ARTV, the

new Radio-Canada-owned arts channel. Michel Coulombe, co-editor of *Le Dictionnaire du cinéma québécois*, programs both the site and the TV show. Says Julie Huguette, who seeks out creative and long-term industry partnerships for SilenceOnCourt.tv: "We premiered at the festival to show the vitality of short films. Although the festival programs shorts, they don't get much attention. We wanted to create a networking opportunity for young filmmakers working in this special field."

The WFF opened with Denis Chouinard's *L'Ange de goudron* (*Tar Angel*), one of three Canadian pictures in competition. In the crisply directed film, an Algerian immigrant (Zinedine Soualem) learns to his horror that his son (Rabah Aït Ouyahia) may have clouded the family's future by joining a group of radical activists. Chouinard, co-director of *Clandestins* (*Stowaways*), became fascinated by Montreal's ethnic melting pot when he made his first forays outside the white-bread, inward-looking suburb he grew up in. "I've always been very curious," the 37-year-old moviemaker told me, "and for me, this was a field of exploration." *L'Ange de goudron* took two festival honours, the FedEx Award for Best Canadian Picture and the Telefilm Canada Prize.

The other two indigenous competitors were Francis Leclerc's painterly *Une jeune fille de la fenêtre*, and Catherine Martin's *Mariages*. In his debut feature, Leclerc (son of Félix, the late singer/poet/Quebec icon) tells the melancholy story of a country girl (Fanny Mallette), who, burdened by a heart condition, expands her horizons in the bohemian world of 1920s Quebec City. Martin's film, which won her a best screenplay prize, also ventures into a carefully rendered past to focus on a young woman (Marie-Ève Bertrand) at odds with a repressive Victorian society.

La bella Sophia





Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* closed the Montreal World Film Festival and won The People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Screening in the festival's Panorama Canada section, veteran Bob Clark's genuinely felt *Now & Forever* depicts a coming-of-age relationship between a small-town prairie girl (Mia Kirshner) and a First Nations boy (Adam Beach of *Dance Me Outside* and *Windtalkers*). Another western-Canadian picture on view was Canadian Film Centre graduate Andrew Currie's *Mile Zero*. After the film's explosive protagonist (Michael Riley) gets dumped by his wife (Sabrina Grdevich), he spins out of control, kidnaps his young son (Connor Widdows) and runs off with him. Currie explained to me that he made the film in response to his own marital breakup. "Suddenly, there was another man tucking my son in at night while I was alone in this empty apartment. It made me feel really irrational things."

Among numerous other highlights, *Abandoned*, Hungarian filmmaker Arpad Sopsits's study of blighted innocence, shared the WFF's Grand Prize of the Americas for best film with the must-see *Baran*, which develops an exploration of Afghan refugees in Iran into a love story with spiritual dimensions. The movie's writer/director Majid Majidi has won the WFF's top prize twice before, in 1997 with *Children of Heaven* and 1999 with *The Colour of Paradise*. And in a year when the festival ran a sidebar on German cinema, three movies from that country took prizes, including best director for Oliver Hirschbiegel's thriller, *The Experiment*, a harrowing portrayal of a brutalizing psychological probe.

At the 1986 WFF, Jean-Jacques Beinx won the number one prize with his sensuous and achingly beautiful *37, 2^e le matin* (*Betty Blue*). In August, Beinx returned to the festival with his first feature in eight years, a perversely comic thriller called *Mortel transfert*. The picture stars *Betty Blue*'s Jean-Hughes Anglade as a psychiatrist who may or may not have killed a masochistic, kleptomaniac female patient. Also from France, Catherine Breillat's *À ma soeur* (*Fat Girl*), the director's latest excursion into the turbulent currents of young female sexuality, features several strong performances, including one by Canada's Arsinée Khanjian as a terminally self-absorbed, French bourgeois mom. As for Patrice Chéreau's English-lan-

guage *Intimacy* – a *Brief Encounter* for the 21st century – it plays as a depiction of raw, anonymous sex in search of emotional fulfillment. And Jean-Luc Godard's *Éloge de l'amour* is as masterful in its visual poetry as it is obsessively, even stupidly anti-American.

Speaking of American, Leon Ichaso's *Piñero*, which screened in competition, is a compelling biopic about Miguel Piñero (played by Julia Roberts's ex, Benjamin Bratt), the late poet/playwright who started writing in jail, co-founded the celebrated Nuyorican Poets Café, and wrote street rhymes that anticipated hip-hop. Todd Field's *In the Bedroom* picked up a nod from the international press with its delicate look at an average New England family getting sucked into violence, and Larry Clark (*Kids*) raised eyebrows with *Bully*, a warped true-life story about a group of gorgeous looking, hopelessly vacant high schoolers who brutally murder one of their peers.

The festival pulled off a coup with its closing movie, the North American premiere of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (*Amélie*). Already a blockbuster hit in France, the picture scored at the WFF, and as I'm writing, has earned \$2 million in Quebec alone, lending credibility to Miramax's prediction that it will surpass the record-breaking U.S. box-office earned by *Life Is Beautiful*.

In stark contrast to *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*, the manic and grotesque fantasies Jeunet co-directed with Marc Caro, or his solo work on *Alien Resurrection*, the new picture is a fanciful comedy with a backbeat of romantic yearning. In it, Amélie Poulain, an elfin café waitress (Audrey Tautou), concocts elaborate schemes to make people a little happier, or pay for wrongs they've done. The creatures in her life range from a suicidal goldfish to human beings who suffer from preposterous compulsions and whacky phobias. Ultimately, the film is about unlocking the compulsions that stop people from living out their destinies. For sure, *Amélie* brought a feel-good mood to the closing day of an upbeat 25th anniversary festival.

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