



## The Toronto International Film Festival (9/6–9/16/01)

BY LUCILLE DE SAINT-ANDRE

At the first press conference last July, Toronto festival director Piers Handling remarked, jokingly, he feared "a crash for the 26th" after the successful run of the 25th Toronto International Film Festival and no one could have been more surprised than Handling and his frazzled organizers when the crash came true.

The second half of the 26th festival came down with the bombing of New York's twin towers at the World Trade Center. Not only did it ruin the parties, celebrations, fun and gossip, but scheduled stars and directors did not appear. Some were stuck in Venice, some made it to Toronto at the last minute, and some, like Jeanne Moreau were stuck at the fest. Her gala, *C'est amour-là*, a biography of the late writer Marguerite Duras and her love affair with a much younger man, was cancelled at Roy Thomson Hall but shown at the Uptown Theatre the next day. Moreau told a rapt press conference: "It's very hard to find words about Tuesday's events, and it's very good we are together as friends so that we can talk about these things and learn from each other. When you live in terror and segregation you can't create art. Why should we stop living if other people kill?" It was only her second time at the Toronto festival since she came as a director with her film *Lumière* in 1976, the first year of the event.

On the whole, the 326 films were pretty strong this year. To mind come politically significant films, in the present climate, such as *No Man's Land*, about the Bosnian war, the Israeli documentary *Promises*, about Israeli and Palestinian children, the Second World War thriller *Enigma*, the unspeakably gory South Korean *Address Unknown*, and the latest film by Peter Watkins, *La Commune*.

The powerful *No Man's Land* by director Denis Tanovi deals not only with the Balkan war, but war as a whole. A cameraman in the Bosnian army, Tanovi directs from authentic front-line experience, having filmed more than 300 hours of footage during the siege of Sarajevo. *No Man's Land* deals with three soldiers trapped in a no-man's-land trench; a Croat and a Serb, who are wounded, and a third man lying on an unexploded mine. The story widens to include the United Nations and the foreign press, all looking for a solution for mankind's seemingly intractable dilemma. *Promises*, a documentary by Justine Shapiro, B. Z. Goldberg and Carlos Bolado, seeks to bridge the gap between the

children of Israel and Palestine, and the barriers to peace in the Middle East. Being young and flexible, they are willing to meet their counterparts with director Goldberg playing the friendly facilitator. Heartbreakingly, the new friendships are doomed to be stillborn amid the continuing strife.

*Enigma*, based on Robert Harris's best-selling novel, is the Second World War thriller about the famous Nazi code and the crucial turning point in the war when the British broke the code in 1943. Starring Dougray Scott and Kate Winslet, the screenplay is by playwright Tom Stoppard and is directed by Michael Apted (*Gorky Park*, *The World Is Not Enough*). The South Korean film *Address Unknown* by Kim Ki-duk (*Birdcage Inn*, *The Isle*) is so full of blood and guts of both dogs and people that several critics walked out because of the excessive butchery. Peter Watkins's *La Commune* (based on the events of the Paris Commune in 1871), was the longest film at the festival, clocking in at six hours. It took the famed British director a decade to make. The press screening was quite empty as critics, checking on other films, came and went. Historically, the film is certainly worthwhile as it highlights heretofore little-known events such as hungry Parisian commoners fervently seizing the reins of power to challenge the newly elected National Assembly.

Carl Bessai's *Lola*





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Cheek's *Chicken Rice War*

Among the Canadian films presented were many debut and second features. Perspective Canada's opening film, André Turpin's *Un Crabe dans la tête*, showed a light touch with Turpin's protagonist, an underwater photographer (David La Haye), whose need to be liked makes him unable to say no to any potentially messy relationship. A diving accident alters his awareness and causes him to face reality and his problems. Carl Bessai's *Lola* is about a young woman (Sabrina Grdevich) who, to the annoyance of husband (Colm Feore), doesn't know which end is up. She takes off and escapes into the alternative life of Sandra, and "comes to realize" what she's done with her life. *Suddenly Naked* by Anne Wheeler (*Better than Chocolate, Marine Life*), is about Jackie York (Wendy Crewson), a forty-something novelist with writer's block who has the means to live like a rock star. (The Writers Union of Canada estimates the annual income of a Canadian novelist is between \$5,000 and \$12,000). Jackie chain smokes and eats constantly without getting fat. She meets a twenty-something, smart novelist (Joe Cobden), and after initial denial, comes clean about her passion for him and, presumably, is able to cut down on her food bill and write some more.

*La Femme qui boit* (see review in *Take One* No. 33), by Bernard Émond, is a powerful film about one woman's disintegration in the rigid Quebec society of the 1930s, who is never able to become her own person and turns to alcohol to cure her pain. Sturla Gunnarsson's *Rare Birds* is a delightful romp set in Newfoundland about Dave Purcell (William Hurt) and his failing restaurant, The Auk. When his friend Alphonse (Andy Jones) helps him invent a rare bird sighting near The Auk, he attracts well-heeled birdwatchers and gets into all sorts of trouble. He asks Alphonse's sister-in-law (Molly Parker) to help out and falls in love with her. It all comes out right in the end.

The documentary *The Struma*, by director Simcha Jacobovici (*Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies, and the American Dream*), is about the little-known tragedy of a ship of refugees that went down in 1941 near Istanbul with 769 Romanian Jewish men, women and children on board. The *Struma* was a converted "gentleman's yacht" bound for British-controlled Palestine and caught in the political minefield between the Germans, British, Russians and Turks. When British diver Greg Buxton, whose two grandfathers had perished in the *Struma* tragedy, decided to raise the ship, Jacobovici knew he had a great story. They encountered objections by the Turkish government but were able to establish that a Soviet submarine had torpedoed the *Struma*.

Among all the heavy festival fare were two delightful films; the German *Emil and the Detectives*, and *Chicken Rice War* from Singapore. German children have been reading Erich Kästner's classic since it was first published in 1928. In the film, directed by Franziska Busch, Emil is sent to Berlin, robbed and beset by misfortune until he meets up with the cheeky Pony and her gang who help to pursue the evildoer Grundeis and set everything right. Winner of the Discovery program, *Chicken Rice War* is about the Chans' and the Wongs' two-generation feud over their secret chicken rice recipes. Serious trouble ensues when their children, Fenson Wong and Audrey Chan, star in *Romeo and Juliet* at their university and fall in love. Singapore director Cheek's dialogue presents an interesting mixture of Chinese dialect, English, Singlish and a dose of Shakespeare. "There is so much sadness and grief in the world today that I just love to make people happy," said the smiling young Cheek.

This year's People's Choice Award for the most popular film at the festival went to *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Best Canadian Film Award went to Baffin Island filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, about an ancient Inuit myth, which earlier won the Camera d'Or first best first feature at Cannes. Best Canadian first feature was *Inertia* by Winnipeg's Sean Garrity and the NFB-John Spotton Award for best Canadian short film went to *FILM ( dzama)* by deco dawson, also from Winnipeg. TAKE ONE

Jeanne Moreau in *C'est amour-là*

