

Festival WRAPS

The Atlantic Film Festival

(9/14–9/22/01)

BY RON FOLEY MACDONALD

Like the Toronto International Film Festival, the 2001 Atlantic Film Festival (AFF) was profoundly affected by the tragic events in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11. Air travel was almost impossible during the festival's opening three days, and the whole jury process and a major Hispanic co-production conference had to be cancelled.

AFF directors Gregor Ash and Lia Rinaldo, along with their board and staff, decided to carry on with as many screenings and receptions as possible. Unexpected logistical problems were overcome when the opening night film, Sturla Gunnarsson's *Rare Birds*, was driven down from Toronto to southern Ontario's last rental car. It was procured by five key Atlantic film producers and Telefilm officials who crammed themselves, their luggage, and a 35mm print into a perky subcompact for the 20-hour drive. With no courier services running up to speed after the terrorist attacks, it was the only way for the film to get to Halifax in time.

While the story of that trip will undoubtedly prove suitable fodder for some movie in the future, the Atlantic debut of *Rare Birds* was a standing-room-only success. A light, quirky and very surrealistic comedy starring William Hurt, Molly Parker and Andy Jones, *Rare Birds* is clearly aiming at international markets familiar with whimsical Celtic offerings in the tradition of *Waking Ned Devine* and *Local Hero*. Adapted from Ed Riche's comic Newfoundland novel, *Rare Birds* has the best chance of taking flight of any major Atlantic-Canadian film since *New Waterford Girl*. In fact, *Rare Birds* won the coveted People's Choice Award, the only prize that was in competition this year. While the Linda Joy Foundation gave out its usual full list of development awards for up-and-comers in the Atlantic film scene, the usual craft and sponsorship "Reelies" were shelved until next year. The jury members – Gordon Pinsent and Liane Balaban among them – simply couldn't get to Halifax in time.

Canadian and Atlantic dramatic cinema was strangely absent in 2001, with many big guns holding projects for later release in the fall and winter. Major East Coast-shot films such as *The Shipping News* and *K-19: The Widowmaker* were

At right (top to bottom): Helen Lee's *The Art Of Woo*; Andy Jones, William Hurt and Molly Parker in Sturla Gunnarsson's *Rare Birds*; and Paul Cowan's *Westray*.

still in post and holding for a December release. A clutch of smaller indie features, including *Dragonwheel* from Trish Fish and *Wild Dogs* from Thom Fitzgerald, were still in production in September. That left the field open to some promising first-timers, Helen Lee and David Weaver from Toronto, whose respective films *The Art Of Woo* and *Century Hotel*, got rapturous, sold-out receptions that left audiences talking throughout the rest of the festival. *The Art Of Woo's* deceptively light and playful tone deals with some fascinating issues of identity, art and entertainment; *Century Hotel* is a tour de force of ensemble acting and art direction. André Turpin's superb *Un Crabe dans la tête*, a witty, quicksilver comedy, played to a packed house at its regularly scheduled time due to the fact that the Toronto festival's print traffic people put the print into the personal care of Hot Docs director Karen Tisch. She then flew to Halifax with the two heavy cans of film in her own luggage, ensuring that everything came off on time. Turpin's film, a surprise hit, centres around an extraordinary comic performance by David La Haye as Alex, a deep-sea diver and photographer who is profoundly altered by an encounter in the Indian Ocean.

Documentaries were particularly strong at the AFF this year. Led by a resurgence of the NFB's Documentary East Studio, which includes the Halifax Atlantic Studio, there were several major feature-length works that marked a significant revival in the non-fiction form. Paul Cowan's *Westray* was the leading example of the factual film exploring the edges of fiction. With extraordinary recreations and a breathless dual-narrative style, *Westray* generated controversy over its style and approach. Its screening left most of the sold-out audience in tears. Teresa MacInnes's *Waging Peace: A Year In the Life*, another feature-length documentary co-produced by the NFB, it fearlessly examined the troubled daily life of Dartmouth's Caledonia Junior High School over the space of a year, warts and all. The first film in a projected trilogy, *Waging Peace* caught a rare and unguarded glimpse of a public education system in peril.

The NFB also scored with Donna Davies's film on legendary folklorist Helen Creighton, *A Sigh and a Wish: Helen Creighton's Maritimes*; John Brett's feature on the fishery, *Voyage of the 7 Girls*; and Mary Sexton's intimate profile of her late brother Tommy Sexton, entitled *Tommy: A Family Portrait*, a heartfelt tribute to one of Canada's greatest comic artists and co-founder of the legendary Codco troupe. Other indie docs of note included John Houston's mesmerizing *Nuliajuk: Mother of the Sea Beasts*, about Inuit mythic deities that predate European contact, and actor Anthony Sherwood's directorial debut, *Honour before Glory*, a moving portrait of Canada's first black construction battalion of the First World War.

While the non-fiction work from the region was strong, the same cannot be said for most of the dramatic short work. The short-film training programs, along with many independents, produced so many incoherent projects this year that a mountain of complaints found their way back to festival programmers. A strict series of story re-education camps may be on the horizon before any more of these kinds of shorts go into production. The 2001 Atlantic Film Festival closed with the happy news that audiences had increased by 7 per cent, leaving the impression of a healthy and still-growing film scene in Atlantic Canada. **TAKE ONE**