



Festival WRAPs

The Vancouver International Film Festival (9/27 – 10/12/01) BY JACK VERMEE

Given the events of September 11 and the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan, celebrating world cinema at an international film festival might, on the surface, seem like a trivial thing to do. Of course, any real thought about a film festival's *raison d'être* would lead to the opposite conclusion – it's now more important than ever to open windows onto other cultures and bring to light the diversity of human experience. The Vancouver International Film Festival's 20th edition – prescient motto: “Same Planet, Different Worlds” – was better suited than most to open those windows and, in the process, provide audiences with what, given record attendance figures, they seemed to crave. More than 140,000 people attended the event, with ticket sales eclipsing \$800,000 for the first time in the VIFF's history.

Festival director Alan Franey, citing as a “cultural victory” the VIFF's success in the wake of so many unexpected challenges, noted that local audiences were “keen to come together and enjoy the festival experience and the pursuit of art. There was a renewed spirit of camaraderie and civility apparent at the theatres, while attendance at screenings of non-fiction films was notably stronger than ever. Never has the festival's chartered mandate [to increase the understanding of other nations through the art of cinema] been more relevant or well supported.”

While all of this speaks well of Vancouver's filmgoers, they still had to come to grips with 440 screenings of 306 films from more than 50 countries; a task of Herculean proportions. It's no surprise that the hottest tickets in the festival were for two films that specifically dealt with Afghanistan: *Jung (War): In The Land of the Mujaheddin*, a harrowing documentary that captured the National Film Board Award for Best Documentary Feature; and *Kandahar*, Iranian master Mohsen Makhmalbaf's fictionalized account of one woman's return to that Afghan city. The police had to be called to one screening of Makhmalbaf's film after a man showed up at the advance ticket outlets and vowed to “stop the screening.” Thankfully, nothing came of his threat.



Katherine Isabelle in Robert Cuffley's *Turning Paige*, the deserving, if out-of-left-field winner of both the Telefilm Canada Award for Best Emerging Western Canadian Feature-Film Director and the Rogers Video Western Canada Screenwriter's Award at the Vancouver International Film Festival.

The more powerful of the two, *Jung (War): In The Land of the Mujaheddin* – a film that, inexplicably, is still without a Canadian distributor – chronicles the destruction wrought on Afghanistan via 20 years of war by following a surgeon and a war

correspondent on “an excursion into human grief.” The setting up of a hospital for victims of landmines is the aim of the team the filmmakers follow; what their cameras catch is the casual horrors visited upon civilians on a daily basis. Italian documentarians Alberto Vendemmiati and Fabrizio Lazzaretti were commended for “courageous and uncompromising filmmaking” by the jurors, who went on to say they chose the film “for its extraordinary cinematic language achieved under the most difficult of conditions.” Is there a distributor out there with enough courage to pick it up?

In what was (wrongly) considered to be a not-so-good year for Canadian film, the deserving, if out-of-left-field winner of both the Telefilm Canada Award for Best Emerging Western Canadian Feature-Film Director and the Rogers Video Western Canada Screenwriter's Award, was Calgaryan Robert Cuffley's debut drama *Turning Paige*. Focusing on a teenage girl (the excellent Katherine Isabelle from *Ginger Snaps*) who has her beliefs about her mother's death challenged by her estranged brother (Philip DeWilde), *Turning Paige* is an unsentimental, realistic drama that, despite being set in snow-filled Moncton, has a distinct prairie sensibility. Completely in tune with its young protagonists and featuring a stellar acting crew (Nicholas Campbell, Brendan Fletcher and Torri Higginson also star), it was made for less than a million dollars and marks Cuffley and co-writer Jason Long as two prairie boys with a great future on the Canadian film scene.

The winners – again completely deserving – of the Telefilm Canada Award for Best Emerging Western Canadian Director of a Mid-Length or Short Film took everybody by surprise, mainly because they weren't even old enough to attend the festival, officially restricted to 18-year-olds and over. Jeff Cunningham's and Adam Locke-Norton's *10-Speed* was made while Cunningham was a student at Point Grey Secondary School, and it's an amazingly accomplished, wonderfully acted and edited *American Beauty*-like tale with a nine-year-old in the Kevin Spacey role. Young Tim just wants a 10-speed bike but the effort he expends kicking against the pricks – brother, parents, teachers – is enough to drive insane even the healthiest among us. The film is so funny, sad and well done that more than one person refused to believe that 17-year-olds wrote and directed it.

While Vancouver filmmaker Linda Ohama's portrait of her 93-year-old grandmother – Hiroshima-born Asayo Murakami, who came to British Columbia as a picture bride in 1923 – won the Federal Express Award for Most Popular Canadian Film, followed closely by Zacharias Kunuk's Nunavut-set *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, it was local filmmaker Jill Sharpe's *Culturejam: Hijacking Commercial Culture* that seemed to best catch the current Vancouver *Zeitgeist*. Echoes of the APEC and G-7 Seattle protests could be heard in this smart anti-corporate documentary that looks at the phenomenon of culture-jamming, wherein media savvy social critics wreak havoc on all aspects of commercialized culture from billboards to publishing. The audience at the premiere gave Sharpe and producer Lynn Booth one of the most raucous receptions I've ever heard at the VIFF.

The VIFF award that means the most outside of Canada is the Dragons and Tigers Award for Young Cinema, awarded to the director of a first or second feature from Pacific Asia. This year's jury – Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival director Eduardo Antin (known as “Quintin”), critic Adrian Martin from Australia, and Hong Kong filmmaker Stanley Kwan – settled on Taiwanese director Hsiao Ya-Chuan's debut feature *Mirror Image*, a Wong Kar-Wai-influenced tale about a young man bored by his job at the family pawnshop and by his fate-obsessed girlfriend. In the jury's words: “a superbly made film which mixes distance and passion, and achieves an engaging lightness of tone.”

Other award winners of note included: B.Z. Goldberg's, Justine Shapiro's and Carlos Bolado's *Promises*, a documentary about Israeli and Palestinian kids coming together in friendship, which captured the Air Canada Award for Most Popular Film (it eked out a win over the sunny *Amélie*, the festival's opening night gala); and Geir Hansteen Jorgensen's dramatic comedy about refugees in Sweden, *The New Country*, which garnered the Chief Dan George Humanitarian Award.

For the 20th anniversary, the VIFF mounted a minor retrospective of past festival faves as chosen by filmmakers, critics and programmers. Some highlights: Jim Jarmusch chose Alan Greenberg's 1982 reggae documentary *Land of Look Behind* while *Cyberman* director Peter Lynch chose Patrick Keiller's dense and idiosyncratic 1994 documentary, *London*, which, to everybody's pleasant surprise, played to full houses at both its screenings. But kudos for stamina go to Guy Maddin – he wrote the world's longest (and most over the top) program notes for his retrospective choice, Jan Svankmajer's 1988 classic *Alice* – who went to the screening and introduced the film, attended a screening of the short film he made for the band Sparklehorse and entertained questions, and then attended a screening and Q&A session for *Careful*, conducted by the person who chose the film for the A Look Back series, *Last Wedding* director Bruce Sweeney. Now that was a Q&A session worth participating in – fast, furious and hilarious. And so much more fun than almost anything Hollywood could offer up... **TAKE ONE**