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Media Minder

The Toronto International Film Festival

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For anyone who has ever fantasized about attending a major international film festival, Europe's Berlin, Cannes and Venice continue to be the crown jewels. At Cannes, for instance, who wouldn't want the opportunity of drinking champagne and feasting on hors d'oeuvres while overlooking the Riviera and trying to catch a glimpse of **Clint Eastwood** or **Meryl Streep**? Joe Average-Filmgoer, however, doesn't really get to do or see all that much at those festivals because they are primarily designed for industry personal trying to make production/distribution deals when not in a dark screening room. Film lovers who would like to partake in the celebrity worship, but who also happen to be bargain hunters may want to look North. The Toronto International Film Festival offers a terrific alternative to the expensive and elitist festivals abroad. While lacking the glitz and glamour of its European circuit counterparts, the Toronto International Film Festival makes up for it by providing cineastes an unbeatable mixture of notable, accessible celebrities, acclaimed filmmakers, press conferences, fun parties, and most importantly, a staggeringly high selection of films.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the annual festival is North America's biggest and best film event. This year more than 300 films from 49 countries were screened. The festival generally begins the first Thursday following Labor Day and continues for the next ten days. During that time, Toronto becomes the center of the film world. All the area newspapers, both daily and weekly, devote hundreds of column inches to the festival as each competes to feature more complete coverage. Local merchants, aware of the influx of tourists, get into the spirit by decorating their display windows with appropriate fare such as film take-up reels and movie projectors (along with Giorgio clothing). And Toronto residents walking past the Uptown Theater (the heart of the festival) realize that it is festival week when they see the long lines that extend down the street, around the corner and around the next cor-

ner as well. Because in addition to being a top film festival, Toronto festival audiences are enthusiastic. This is why so many producers want to screen their films. Rarely is a film not sold out, a strange phenomenon considering some of the choices. I have overheard on more than one occasion someone saying, "They'll see anything." And while that may be true, how many times do you have a chance to see the latest film from **Burkina Faso** at the local mall? All of which adds to the pleasure of the festival.

The festival is typically divided into various categories. Toronto, however, is a non-competitive festival and does not offer awards or prizes to films, actors and directors. The "Gala" section is generally the high profile section and includes films with likely commercial prospects. This is the area of the festival that grabs the headlines, but most purists generally avoid these films knowing that they will be in theaters shortly. The "Contemporary World Cinema" sections offers more challenging fare and usually includes a mixture of well-known directors who are offering their newest fare. Other categories include "First Cinema," a particular favorite of mine because it features first-time feature filmmakers, "Asian Horizons," along with "Latin American Panorama," which highlight much third world cinema, and the "Midnight Madness" section, a popular section of off-beat and unusual movies. Festival programmers usually include a tribute to a specific region and this year the focus was entitled "Planet Africa," a section devoted to African filmmakers working in Africa as well as around the world. Two other special programming areas included "Hungarian Rhapsodies" and "Dialogues: Talking with Pictures," a section in which nine renowned film directors were asked to select and introduce a film which has been personally relevant to their work.

I must admit that I like telling people that I am attending the festival for work. There is a look of envy that creeps over their face as they say, "Oh, how nice that you get to watch movies all day." And it is nice. But by the sixth day, I have usually started to hit the brick wall. I start to say to myself, "Are you crazy? Can't you find something to do with your time? You have heard the expression, 'Get a life,' haven't you? Why would anyone choose to watch four to six films a day, day after day?" After walking around a

bit in the fresh air, eating one of those great hot dogs sold on the street, and seeing a really good film, this self-doubt generally subsides.

This is the fourth time in the last five years I've come to Toronto for the Festival. One continual criticism of the festival heard every year is that tickets are too hard to get. Because the attendees are so enthusiastic, it's hard for the local person interested in attending one or two films to get tickets. Festival organizers, aware of the negative remarks, have tried to accommodate the naysayers. The result, however, has been that each year a different method of obtaining tickets is employed. This year seemed to work quite well, at least for me. Toronto really seems to want to help out the out-of-towner by offering an opportunity to receive the catalog ahead of schedule. I spent more than 10 hours reading the one inch thick catalog, consulting the schedule, then figuring out what to see when. Inevitably, there are conflicts and one must decide if one should forego a film certain to get a commercial release in order to see that small independent film likely to never reach a theater, or does one want to be the first on the block to have seen the latest critical success? In all, I got 41 out of 45 of my first choices. All I had to do was fax my request to the main office. This is so much simpler and less time consuming than in previous years. Although I did enjoy standing in line chatting with others about what films they liked and what should be avoided. A local man I spoke to, however, had a more difficult time. He had to go to the office a minimum of four times in order to secure tickets.

The overall mood of the festival this year was a bit down. It is, I believe, a combination of two factors that made this year a less memorable one. First, the financial situation in Canada. If you think that Congress is budget-cutting crazy, then take a look at Canada and you will see an even more severe situation. Canada has long supported its arts community and its film industry in particular. Numerous newspaper reports indicated throughout the festival that cuts were affecting the festival presently, but also hinted that future film productions would be affected as well. One of the highlights of the festival has always been the appearance of a representative of the film at the screening. Usually the director, along with a cast mem-

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ber or two, producer, screenwriter (or in some cases all of the above) appear and answer questions. This year, fewer people appeared and rarely did they stay for both screenings. **Kay Armatage**, a festival programmer, continually reminded audiences of the cutbacks and pleaded to attendees to support the various non-government sponsors.

The other reason the festival was a bit down this year is that this is not a particularly good year for international films. Cannes and Berlin were both seen as lackluster and this carried over to Toronto. I saw some 40 films this year and while I enjoyed many, I would say that nothing really caught me saying to others, "wow, you've got to see ...". This year lacked the film that caught everyone by surprise. There was no film that obviously seems destined to become the art house smash similar to past hits like "Pulp Fiction," "Like Water for Chocolate," "The Crying Game," and "The Piano," all of which were successful at Toronto before opening wide.

While it is nearly impossible to predict all the hits, here are some highlights and trends: "The Kingdom" — Danish filmmaker **Lars von Trier**, director of "Zentropa," has created a nearly 5 hour made-for-Danish TV mini-series that might be called "ER" meets "Twin Peaks." Weird and atmospheric, von Trier's film manages to infuse the numerous characters with much detail and life and the film is filled with sardonic wit. In a hospital that rests upon an ancient marshland, the dead spirits are beginning to return to life and revolting against modern technology. A hypochondriac-spiritualist patient is the first to notice that the hospital is in danger when she notices that the elevator is haunted. In the meantime, severed heads are missing, the fetus of a pregnant doctor is growing at an inhuman rate, and the new head of neurology, a Dane-hating Swede, has just turned a young patient into a vegetable. Welcome to "The Kingdom."

"Salaam Cinema" — In celebration of the 100th anniversary of cinema, the **British Film Institute** invited international filmmakers to make a film. Iranian director **Mohsen Makhmalbaf's** effort is a deceptively simple film that examines the impact that films have had on the 20th century and how they have invaded our mass unconscious. He placed an ad in a local paper saying he was holding auditions for a new film he was making and would cast 100 people. Some 5,000 people showed up and near-riot conditions occurred. The film consists of the various auditions. Most people have no idea of what is involved in filmmaking but imagine that simply appearing

on film will make them a star. A true highlight is a sequence in which people are asked to say which star they look like: a Middle-Eastern woman insists people have told her she looks like **Marilyn Monroe** and a man says he looks like **Paul Newman**, although he admits he doesn't know who Newman is. The film's subtleties and wit take over and we begin to hear the voices of the real Iranian people. Slowly, all the misconceptions and prejudices we have of Iran, thanks to the media, begin to dissolve.

"Welcome to the Dollhouse" — NYU grad **Todd Solondz** became a hit of the festival and his film proves that he is someone to watch out for. Solondz's film is set in suburban New Jersey and focuses on Dawn Wiener, a homely, bespectacled 7th grader who has no fashion sense, no friends and no real prospects. Picked on, abused and neglected at school, Dawn cannot find relief at home either. Her parents are not even subtle about showing their preference for Dawn's prettier younger sister, a perky young ballerina. Dawn takes momentary revenge on her sibling by sawing off her doll's heads one evening. What makes the film so appealing is that it never sentimentalizes, like "The Wonder Years" for instance, the process of growing up. Instead, Solondz's is relentless in showing the miserable life of this misfit.

"On the Beat" — Two years ago I saw **Ning Ying's** film "For Fun" and loved it. I was disappointed that it never had a commercial release but am happy that her new work was in Toronto. Her film follows the working days and nights of the local Chinese police force. Since this is a film about the police one would expect a lot of action. There are no car chases, no investigation, no murders and no crimes. Instead, there is bureaucracy. Ning Ying is a master of showing the absurdities of the Chinese system which places a great deal of attention on doing things properly and orderly. Her films emphasize the ridiculousness of the trivial. She takes added delight in lingering on details a bit longer than Western filmmakers would dare. Like the Czech New Wave filmmakers of the early 1960's, Ying makes the ordinary seem bejeweled.

"Procedure 769" — In 1992, California reinstated the death penalty and a man was put to death in the gas chambers of San Quentin State Prison for the first time in 25 years. A Dutch film crew sought out to interview the various people who witnessed the event. This is the first time that execution witnesses detail the procedure. The film features interviews with family members of both the murder victim and the accused killer. Without creating a traditional "talking heads" documentary, the filmmakers manage to film each witness in a dramatic fashion. Adding to the drama was the presence at the festival

of the accused man's brother. His willingness to examine his life and what his brother has done in a responsible way was touching and deserving of respect.

"Cyclo" — Two years ago **Tran Anh Hung** debuted with "The Scent of Green Papaya," a beautifully crafted film that examined Vietnam prior to the war. This film looks at post-war Vietnam and focuses on the world of the bicycle rickshaw drivers. Stylistically, the film is a 180 degree turn from the earlier work. At least initially. While the first was stylized and filmed in a sound studio, this is gritty because it is filmed on the streets. It looks at the corrupt world of the cycle driver, a world of gangs and violence and unrealized dreams. Some may be turned off by the excessive violence and bloodshed.

"Flamenco" — Spanish filmmaker **Carlos Saura** has made three previous films featuring the flamenco dance tradition including the wonderfully crafted "Carmen." With this work, filmed by award-winning cinematographer **Vittorio Storaro**, Saura strips away all narrative conventions and simply films the dancers in an abandoned train station. The use of lighting, color, costume and composition is astonishing. There is an artful quality to all segments and a contagious feel to the action that makes one want to dance in the streets upon seeing the film.

One trend that continues is the strong presence of gay themed films. At Toronto, some dozen films are a part of this growing sub-genre including: "Stonewall," a fictional account of the infamous Stonewall Riots, "The Celluloid Closet," a documentary based on **Vito Russo's** book which examines the depiction of gays/lesbians in the cinema, "Frisk," an adaptation of **Dennis Cooper's** novel about sadism and murder, which received boos and jeers from the crowd, and "Man of the Year," a docu/drama/comedy about the trials of a gay man who is selected by "Playgirl" magazine as the year's ideal man. In this category, the most disturbing film is "Butterfly Kiss" which features an amazing performance by **Amanda Plumber** as a disturbed woman who kills gas station attendants.

Other films that received good word of mouth include: "The White Balloon," "The Grass Harp," "Margaret's Museum," "In the Bleak Winter," "Georgia," "A Judgment in Stone," "La Haine," "War Stories," "Go Now," "Heavy," and "Antonia's Line."

And finally, one personal memory will be the opportunity to say hello to **Liv Ullmann**, whose second directorial effort, "Kristin Lavransdatter" was screened this year. Toronto affords filmgoers the opportunity to see a lot of films and to actually meet and talk to screen idols like Ullmann. If you have a chance, go. 🍷