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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-Filmoer, 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 corner 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 Burkin 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 sections 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, its 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 indicate 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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on film will make them a star. A true high-
light 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 Ira-
nian people. Slowly, all the misconceptions
and prejudices we have of Iran, thanks to
the media, begin to dissolve.

“We welcome to the Dollhouse”—NYU
grad Todd Solondz became a hit of the
festival and his film proves that he is some-
one 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 ne-
glected 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 balle-
rina. Dawn takes momentary revenge on
her sibling by sawing off her doll’s head
one evening. What makes the film so ap-
pealing is that it never sentimentalizes, like
“The Wonder Years” for instance, the pro-
cess of growing up. Instead, Solondz’s is
relentless in showing the miserable life of
this misfit.

“One 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 com-
mercial release but am happy that her new
work was in Toronto. Her film follows the
working days and nights of the local Chi-
nese 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 show-
ning 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 de-
tails a bit longer than Western filmmakers
would dare. Like the Czech New Wave film-
makers of the early 60’s, Ying makes the
ordinary seem jeweled.

 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 execu-
tion 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 make film
each witness in a dramatic fashion. Adding
to the drama was the presence at the festival
of the accused man’s brother. His willing-
ness 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 ex-
amined 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 vio-
lence 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, cos-
tume 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 re-
ceived 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 Plummer
as a disturbed women 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
Blak 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 filmmakers the oppor-
tunity to see a lot of films and to actually
meet and talk to screen idols like Ullmann.
If you have a chance, go. 😊