Films Transit, NFB and four pix to Berlin

BERLIN - The 34th annual Berlin International Film Festival wound up here on Feb. 28, after 12 days of hectic activity. Berlin '84 was marked by the return in force of American big-budget product (Terms of Endearment, Star 80) and a free-wheeling selection at the young directors' Forum, and the impressive presence of smaller film-making countries, notably Holland, Austria and Spain.

Canada, however, was thinly represented at the FilmFest screenings: only four Canadian productions were selected (out of a reported 20 submissions), two of which were shorts. Aoud Bagatelle, an NFB short featuring the poetry of Earl Birney, was a Competition short, while Gilles Groulx's feature musical Bagatelle, a Canadian fable with gangsters, cocaine, sexuality through the Freudian analysis of homosexuality, was screened in Berlin.

The Canadian film which generated the most interest in Berlin, however, was an independent production, Mother's Meat & Freud's Flesh, which was screened in the Info-Show, a grab-bag of independent and low-budget productions.

Canada had twin booths in the Films Transit of Montreal sitting side-by-side in the giant Cine-Centre hall. The NFB screened 15 films in the Market, including War, whose Oscar nomination encouraged interest during the FilmFest. Films Transit was in Berlin to promote feature films and Rien qu'un jeu and La turlute des années dures, as well as a variety of other Quebec productions.

As well, buyers representing Prima Films, Spectra Films, Radio-Quebec and Les Films Rene Malo were scouting for product. Finally, Canadian film festival officials were out in force, scouting for their 1984 festival lineups: David Overbye (Toronto Film Festival), Serge Losique (Montreal World Film Festival), and Dimitri Epipides and Claude Chamberlin of Montreal's New Cinema Festival.

"Its important for Canada to be well-represented here," argued Jean Lefebvre of the DOC's film festivals bureau. "This is one of the most important markets in the world."

But the one Canadian film screened in Berlin stood out markedly from the traditional short/documentary/NFB fare which festival-goers often expect from Canada was Mother's Meat & Freud's Flesh, an independent ("not low-budget, no-budget"), experimental film by 23-year-old Montreal director Demetrios Estelacopolous. Mother's Meat is a 90-minute, 16mm. underground film, which ostensibly parodies the Freudian analysis of homosexuality through the "story of a mother and her boy." The film relies on loud colour, wild discontinuity and patent absurdity, a formula which clearly pleased the audiences at the sold-out Filmkunst 66 art-house in Berlin.

The "mother" of the story is played by Esther Vargasi, an outrageous bleached-blonde, the sort one might expect to meet in a Brooklyn laundromat or on the beach in Lauderdale. Her son, Demira, (played by director Estelacopolous, is a lustless and emotionally-dependent porno actor. When Demira's mother calls from New York to invite herself to "visit for a while", Demira signs himself to listening endlessly to his mother's inanities. During her visit, Demira alternately struggles against his mother, and consults with a lecherous psychiatrist/dentist who is dedicated to unravelling Demira's Oedipus complex and curing him of his homosexuality.

"Mother's Meat & Freud's Flesh," reads the film's blurb, in what must be the most candid (and accurate) press release of all time, "treads a thin line between the grim quality of low-budget pornography and the creativity of the art film. Stereotyped characters, waves of dumb lines, and a cartoon plot are balanced by moody lighting, innovative camera work and the happy/sad minimalism of the Trio soundtrack. This marriage gives the film its ambiguous edge.

Director Estelacopolous is unhappy with easy comparison of his film to Pink Flamingos or other John Waters films, professing to underline his "affinity to Walt Disney."

The critical reception for Mother's Meat indicates that he succeeded. The left learning Berlin daily Der Tagesspiegel, for example, panned the slate of New York avant-garde films at the festival, and bemoaned the German underground for its "impotence," while in the same breath praising Mother's Meat for its "Struktur und Dynamik."

The film is now slated for young directors' festivals in Italy and Sweden, as well as a gay film festival in New York. No Canadian dates have yet been arranged.

Jean Lefebvre, the federal department of Communications' film festival's bureau chief, underlined that the Berlin festival should be of special interest to Canadian filmmakers, given its openness to "author films."

"Unlike Cannes, Berlin provides a very large audience for films which are not in competition, and which have a strong content and political tone. In Berlin, author films not only have a big audience in the Forum and the Info-Show, but are also strongly represented in the Market. A film such as Les bons debarras, which did well here in 1981, is ideal for Berlin."

"But Canada -- perhaps like Australia -- is now past the 'discovery stage' with festival-goers. Canada doesn't arouse curiosity as being 'new' anymore. And festival directors will not allow us to be complacent, so success in Berlin, Canadian films are simply going to have to be very good."

David Winch

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TORONTO - Repping the Taiwan film if I Were For Real at the Berlin Film Festival market Feb 25 was Canadian Russell Chan. The film, which has been banned both in the People's Republic and in Hong Kong, prompted Fest organizers to disclaim any responsibility for films screened at the market and "stress our traditional good relations with the People's Republic of China."

Chan, who first saw the film -- a satire of daily life in post-Gang of Four China -- in Toronto was so impressed that he wanted to represent director Wang Tung's first feature-length effort.

In Canada, a pay-TV web has expressed interest in licensing the film, turning down, according to Chan, a Chinese government offer to supply ten free pic on condition if I Were For Real would never be shown.

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