

festivals (2)

footsteps in the city

What is it like to get swallowed up by a city? To attend ten days of film festival and to feel you still have found no focus? Ron Blumer tells it like it was, for him.

by Ron Blumer



The heart of the Complex Desjardins where music helped to draw attention to the festival

How does one assess the success of something as vast as a ten day film festival. Were the films good? Did the buyers buy and the distributors sell? Did Dino Risi meet Brian De Palma over a drink at the Meridien and conclude a multi-million lira deal? Did Sergei Bondarchuk get his wife a new pair of nylon stockings?

Talking to the red-eyed festival groupies at week's end and comparing notes, one feels like a fisherman; the best ones inevitably got away. And the festival as a whole was like the crowd scene of a low budget movie, a bit short of extras. At \$5.00 for the evening shows with no discounts, the price per film was inaccessible high for the masses and the festival certainly was not a sellout.

The dearth of people was somewhat exaggerated by a lack of focus in the physical organization of the festival. The films were shown at a large impersonal multiscreen cinema, and the events and headquarters were two blocks down the street in a hotel and huge shopping complex. In a sense, the festival was swallowed up by the city and one got the impression that there was no one place, no bar or restaurant one could go to, and be sure of seeing festival participants. One's life that week was an endless scurrying up and down St. Catherine Street bumping, as it were, into strangers in the night.

The World Film Festival of Montreal is a wonderful thing and long may it live, but if it is to stay healthy, its organizers at the Conservatoire d'Art Cinématographique had better wake up to a few hard cold facts. One of the first things that leaps to mind is the fact that Montreal is not Cannes. This would be belabouring the obvious if the entire super structure of the festival were not so painfully apeing every last detail of that great mother earth festival of the Riviera. We start with the very poster which seems an almost exact copy of the kitschy, plastic Botticelli school of art favored by the Cannesians. Also the way in which the films are presented is a steal: the "Compétition officielle," and the special sections "Hors-concours," on the one hand, various national cinemas and for those films that don't fit anywhere else, the homages, and the Marché on the other.

The film market which is like ten film festivals in itself.

The Marché is a presentation by the producers themselves, hermetically sealed from the rarefied structure of the rest of the official festival with no place in the glossy brochures, often little publicity for the films, little forewarning of what is coming up, and last, but not least, no audiences for the excellent films presented. The idea, and the reality at Cannes, is that the festival provides screening opportunities for producers to present their films to the assembled multitude of critics, distributors and buyers. In this way, they gain publicity and sales. At Cannes, this critical mass is present and the Marché screening rooms are sometimes jammed. At Montreal, the few buyers and critics present were just too bleary eyed to attend the films presented in this catch-all category. The general paying public were excluded from these morning and afternoon screenings and the huge theatres at Cinéma Le Parisien were frequently completely empty.

Montreal is in an excellent position to mount a successful festival. Because of the language, it is an ideal halfway house for European producers to meet American distributors and

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Jurors Carole Laure and Alain Délon are joined by Robert Stack and wife as a satisfied Régine takes it all in at her disco

visa-versa. But it must be recognized that we do not and cannot have the tradition and general impact that Cannes has. With this in mind, the proliferation of categories without audiences seems a silly affectation. Even the competitive stance of the festival seems a little strained. Does anyone, after all, really care who has won the Montreal World Film Festival? For critics, distributors and the public alike, a festival is simply a place to see films, old films, new films and those precious films from all those countries that do not generally have access to the American market.

Carping aside, the essence of a film festival is, of course, the film, and for the critics who could keep their eyes open, there were films by the carload. At any one time from nine in the morning to eleven at night there were up to five movies showing simultaneously. Simply in terms of the mountains of 35mm film cans sitting in the lobby of the theatre waiting for shipment, the festival was an impressive spectacle.

Given the quantity of films, the tendency was to do a lot of film shopping, popping in and out from theatre to theatre, in mortal fear than one might be missing something better. These are hardly ideal viewing conditions for the savouring of some of the slower films that drone out of the near and far east. The pressure, however, is there, and one just cannot afford to miss films that are very unlikely to ever grace Canadian screens again.

What follows is a very iconoclastic selection of seven of my favorite films out of the large number so sampled. Canada, particularly in the guise of CBC drama put on an impressive showing. Acting and technical standards were so high that one is led to believe that we have acquired a feature film industry through the back door of television. **Tyler** by Ralph Thomas won the award as best Canadian film out of competition, and it was characterized not only by strong acting and a convincing plot, but was also blessed with a story which had some fiber to it. You had the impression that you were watching a film which was about something real in both human and social terms. **Drying Up the Streets** by Robin Spry, was also made for the CBC and was equally impressive in terms of story and acting. The film follows a reformed drug addict searching for his 18 year old daughter on Toronto's Yonge Street sin strip. In terms of Spry's own political evolution, the film is not without its ironic overtones. In the late sixties, Spry was making films about the then fashionable drug consumers in films like **Prologue** and **Flowers on a One Way Street**. The hippies have grown up and are now the bad guys corrupting today's youth into drugs and prostitution. Surprisingly, the for-



A jovial German press conference for *Flammende Herzen* (actors Peter Kern and Barbara Valentin, directors/producers Walter Bockmayer and Rolf Buhmann)



A modest Serge Losique accepts gifts and praise from the president of the block committee Harold Greenberg

merly wicked police have now been romanticized into the good guys whose only aim in life is to protect our children. Either Robin Spry is showing us his true conservative colors or more likely, he picks his film subjects according to which way the wind is blowing.

Some of the films which I found particularly interesting came from small countries whose product is rarely seen in Canada. A film called *Insiang* was a first feature from the Philippines and had a freshness and directness of appeal missing from what we mistakenly think of as more sophisticated films. *Insiang* is the name of a young girl living in the congested urban slums with her corrupt mother and trying to maintain a bit of human dignity. The characters seem so real as to have been wrenched off the streets and the settings and situations give us a rare view of the way in which much of the world actually lives.

Chuquiago is a film which was shot in secret in Bolivia to be distributed God knows where. It is a minor masterpiece consisting of four vignettes of people from various classes in society showing how they deal with the political realities of Bolivia today. The film was unusual; it provided no easy leftist or rightist answers to the question of how politics affects people. We see, for example, a party member drunkenly lord-ing his petty power over his associates in a tavern. There is a portrait of a rich upper class girl torn between her family and her revolutionary boyfriend. Through the device of the four films, so quick to sacrifice depth for strident message.

Meanwhile back in shallow old Europe there were two films which were enjoyable and immensely popular with the festival audiences. The two were the black comedy *La belle emmerdeuse* from France and the blacker comedy *Un Borghese Piccolo Piccolo* from Italy. The first film (interesting in that it was written and directed by its stars Elizabeth Huppert and Roger Coggio), tells the story of a beautiful young woman peacefully engaged in the business of trying to slit her wrist. Pauline has everything in life, a good job, lots of lovers, a promising future, but she has just turned thirty and has decided that life is boringly not worth it. She sets about, elegantly staging her own death. (What *do* you wear to your own funeral, my dear?) The comedy comes from the fact that everything goes wrong from the plumbing in the fatal bathtub, to a chubby ball of Italian uselessness, Roger Coggio, who has latched onto her and is determined to woo her with his wonderful spaghetti. The climax of the film has everything in the plot crashing together in a scene worthy of the Marx Brothers.

The Italian petty petty bourgeois film is funny in a much subtler way. It tells the touching story of a government functionary grooming his slob of a son for a ministerial sinecure. The film takes a surprise plot turn in the middle and our quiet chuckling during the low key first half of the film turns to quiet groaning in the bloody and macabre second half. It is not a perfect film, but it is one which puts the audience through changes and certainly ensnares us in its emotional nets.

The final film which managed to make some impression on my festively bloodshot brain was again a Canadian film, *Blood and Guts*. As its title suggests, the film is about wrestling, and it is a formula which works. The director, Paul Lynch, was a bit like a magician who has shown us how he has hidden the rabbit in the hat and yet still wows us when he does the tricks. The convention in wrestling is to have a good guy and a bad guy in the ring. The bad guy accompanied by the boos of the crowd always wins the first part of the fight whereupon the battered hero rises phoenix-like from the mat to pummel the villain into the ground. This, it transpires, is exactly the plot of the movie, with the final victory taking place in the wrestling ring. What may have been a corny film, however, is saved by the realism of the settings and the realism of the situations in which the seedy company of wrestlers went their way through rural Ontario in their struggle to survive.

No review of the World Film Festival of Montreal would be complete without a description of the main social event of the week, if not the social event of the year. I am referring, of course, to the Fellini like gathering assembled by Harold Greenberg and company on the set of *City on Fire*, a film being shot in the East end of Montreal. The invitations to press and dignitaries called it a "block party" — rather amusingly since the block in question was a replica of the main street of a small mid-western town, built specially for the film. The store fronts and mailboxes and telephone poles were all destined to be burned to a crisp later in the month by the Wenger family, a special effects team from Los Angeles.

Gorging themselves on the hors-d'oeuvres and hot dogs were the stars of this "blockbuster," Shelly Winters, Barry Newman and Susan Clark. The most delightful moment came when everyone was hushed to silence and Greenberg announced that it was his son's twenty-first birthday. After the cast of thousands reluctantly sang Happy Birthday, the Wengers blew up a couple of cars to the cheers of the assembled multitude. Top that Régine. □