

# Floating on becalmed waters

Cannes 1988

BY MARC GERVAIS

**T**he intent of the Cannes Film Festival authorities, so it is claimed, was to bring the Festival back to earth after last year's extraordinary 40th anniversary bash. They succeeded, I am unhappy to report, beyond their expectations. Cannes 1988 was a festival floating on becalmed waters, with nary a ripple of excitement, enthusiasm or significance.

One thing for sure, the refrain heard the last half-dozen or more years is now grown menacing: where has the *Festival* gone? The Market "realities" of Cannes now totally overwhelm the festivities side. It has reached the point where the buyers, sellers, distributors, deal-makers are complaining that the Festival lasts too long – all of this, of course, in terms of the law of diminishing returns and of overall marketing efficiency.

Long gone are the days when a major facet – and surely a most delightful one for those of us who still stargaze – was the constant mixing of communities (actors, directors, producers, critics, etc.) at film showings, in cafés, bars, seminars, parties, on the street. The talk was *film*, not deals; and one had the feeling of an enormous vitality, and effusion of creativity worldwide. Now it is each one in his or her own sphere, busy, busy, scurrying, ferreting, working. The Big Names are now only names, reduced to the role of communities parcelled out to sell the product, hiding out briefly in the mountain villas or in Antibes resorts, their computerized appearances determined by agents, PR types, and the like.

Succumbing to nostalgia, perhaps, I found myself humming, time and again, Charles Trenet's song used by François Truffaut in *Baisers Volés*: "Que reste-t-il de nos amours?" And that, man, was sad.

Nostalgia may be the wrong word. Rather, it may well be a loving lament for what film can be, what it can do, what marvelous things it has done in the past. That feeling, fortunately, has not totally deserted Cannes. Truffaut himself seemed still to be with us in spirit, his face peering out of bookshops all over the place (announcing his "Correspondence"). The British, who have had the most impressive national presence of any country at Cannes

these last few years, did their bit again by honouring, in a dinner gala, one of their most distinguished figures, the octogenarian David Lean. The Swedes were doing their thing by promoting an impressive tribute (in a special edition of their film journal *Chaplin*) to Ingmar Bergman, and also a beautiful documentary, called *Directed by Andrei Tarkovski*, on the creator (now deceased) of *The Sacrifice* by that film's editor (and friend of Tarkovski), Michal Leszczylowski. And from Germany, Ron and Dorothea Holloway presented their excellent documentary on the leader of the new movement in U.S.S.R. film, director Elem Klimov, and on his deceased wife, the dazzling actress/film director Larissa Shepetko. All of these, to be sure, stand out as reminders of what film can be.

Cannes '88 proved rather uninspiring where it counts most: in the quality of the films presented. What Ettore Scola, president of the official jury, said of the official competition held for the vast ensemble of films presented: there were a decent number of rather good films, but a total lack of anything approaching the masterpiece category – the kind of thing you want to write home about (as, for example, last year's stunning revelations from the U.S.S.R.).

Some explained this sad state of affairs by blaming the various Cannes selection committees. The reason, however, probably lies deeper in the objective reality – in the general worldwide quality of the last year's most recent products. The better films admittedly shared a certain stylishness, an academic correctness of form and structure. Most of them expressed a decent concern for human beings, their problems (mostly of the heart or the psyche) and their desires to live happily. But in depth, drive, energy, urgency, the willingness to take a chance, to be different, to re-invent one's own film language, the films of Cannes '88 came up relatively empty.

Where was the conviction, the dedication, the power? A few exceptions, blessedly; but generally the ability to excite, or even to antagonize, was absent. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the prize for "artistic achievement," voted to the most outrageous con artist of them all, Peter Greenaway, for doing his naughty, naughty, British things in *Drowning By Numbers* – but all of it *déjà vu*, Greenaway's clever nihilism neutered by its predictable, repetitious strategies already explored in his previous films. Take ability to shock and to surprise and to befuddle away from a Greenaway movie and what have you left?

To concentrate, then, on the particular films shown, herein are comments on some of the bits and pieces that may or may not give some kind of kaleidoscopic overview, and may help balance the rather negative tone, so far, of this article.

Over the years, France, the U.S., Britain and Italy have benefitted by the overweening number of their films invited to the big official manifestation, whether intrinsic merit has warranted it or not. So, on to the Big Four, as seen by Cannes.

**BRITAIN.** Britain once again did well, very much in the forefront. There was the David Lean tribute, the Festival's most prestigious occasion. Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers*, as mentioned, garnered a minor award. James Dearden, son of the legendary director Basil, made a fine directorial debut with *Pascali's Island*, a nice, stylish story about foreigners in Turkey on the eve of World War I, beautifully acted by Ben Kingsley, Charles Dance, and Helen Mirren. By all accounts, one of the best-received films in the entire Festival was one I missed, Terence Davies' *Distant Drums*, *Distant Lives*, a sort of not-so-funny British version of Woody Allen's *Radio Days*.



Clint Eastwood (left) directs best actor-winner Forest Whitaker (right) and Sam Wright in *Bird*

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**U.S.A.** The U.S. maintained its standing as the world's leading producer of movies. It seems superfluous, in this report, to comment on films which may have already been seen in Canada, but clearly Robert Redford's *The Milagro Beanfield War* with its intelligence, humour, poetry, and social dedication, had few peers. Redford's brief personal appearance – on the way back from Russia with three of his children ("I happened to be in the neighbourhood") – was Cannes' highlight for 1988; and the charming, charismatic, articulate Redford lived up to the occasion. So did Clint Eastwood, for that matter. Gracious, elegant, soft-spoken, Eastwood brings a certain dignity to his real-life presence; and his movie, *Bird* – a sombre study of jazz's brilliant, addicted Charlie Parker – deserved the two awards it received (one of them for Forest Whitaker as best actor). Rounding out the three big U.S. offerings, the George Lucas/Ron Howard fantasy, *Willow*, ended the Festival on a note of mega-energy and reckless fun. Chock-full of allusions to literature, the Bible; Hobbits, other Lucas and Spielberg epics, and dedicated to a sort of mild fascistic cult of the warrior and the beauty of violence (who knows, some presidents might love it), *Willow* is definitely *not* for the kiddies. But then how can you deny the astounding special effects, the breathtaking beauty of the Welsh and New Zealand locations, the crazy fun and energy, and Jean Marsh's astounding performance as the most evil witch of them all? In a totally different vein, Gary Sinise's *Miles From Home* begins wonderfully, reenacting Khrushchev's visit to Iowa in the '50s. But then, succumbing to an all-too-prevalent tendency in American cinema, *Miles* gradually degenerates into another Richard Gere foray into the world of the dim-minded, violent, semi-psychotic loser. Far removed from this was the immense compassion of *Dear America*, Bill Couturie's collage of real letters written by American boys who fought in Vietnam: actual footage, pop music of those times, and the voice-over readings of the moving epistles by a multitude of leading American actors. We are reminded that three million U.S. soldiers went to Vietnam, that 300,000 were wounded, and that 58,000 were killed. But can true enlightenment, however unpleasant, come from this sympathy, when HBO, the producer of this film, refused to allow Couturie to create any context or explanation whatever, not even to mention that some two million Vietnamese also perished as a result of that action?

**FRANCE.** The host country may have reached its all-time low this year with Luc Besson's *Le Grand Bleu*, a kind of Club Med ethics/aesthetics/philosophy concoction, and Francis Girod's *L'Enfance de l'art*, an embarrassing updating of *A Star Is Born*. Fortunately, however, Claire Denis did partially retrieve a shattered French reputation with *Chocolat*, an intelligent, low-key

tale of some French settlers in Cameroon shortly before that country achieved its independence. And coming from quite another planet, Jean-Luc Godard descended once more upon an unsuspecting Cannes with two half-hour episodes of his made-for-TV *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, random musing on film and anything else, some of it funny and clever, some of it jejune, much of it a put-on, a kind of televised lecture on Communications à la Godard. Contemplating the French output, one indeed wondered *que reste-t-il* from the good old days of French cinema, those good old days which, in a sense, still cast their spell on Paris today, where film viewing is still a rich, exciting activity, a veritable treasure trove of choices of the best works of the past and of the present as nowhere else in the world, the irony being that *today's* French output, by and large, is so relatively lacklustre, so relatively denuded of the creative spirit – a testimonial, perhaps, to a culture that has lost its vitality, a prey to its own almost total dedication to consumerism.

**ITALY.** Astoundingly, there was no Italian film in the official competition; and everywhere there were reports about the Italian cinema and its present state of crisis. One hopes that the malaise is temporary. Or is it that Italian cultural life is going through a paralysis even more acute than France's? Big questions, these, far beyond the strictly cinematic.

**GERMANY.** Italy did share, via the co-production route, in *Fear and Love*, by Germany's Margarethe von Trotta, a contemporary version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, replete with feminist overtones – and, in spite of a penchant for the melodramatic, one of the very best films to be seen in Cannes this year. Another fine offering from West Germany was Thomas Brasch's *Welcome to Germany*, an extremely interesting exploration of the psychotic effects still ravaging both German and Jewish culture because of the Holocaust, with a strong performance by Tony Curtis as a Hollywood director returning to Berlin. Add to that the teaming again of Germany's Klaus Maria Brandauer and Hungarian director Istvan Szabo (both of *Mephisto* fame) for the finale of their *tour de force* trilogy on Nazi Germany and you get the impression of a good German film year, even if their latest collaboration, *Hannussen*, strains a bit much for brilliance, at once too strident, too self-indulgent, and too familiar.

**SPAIN.** For some reason, Spanish cinema has never amounted to much, except in the work of that brilliant rascal, Luis Buñuel – and in any case he was forced to do most of his work somewhere else. Cannes nonetheless insists on inviting Spanish movies to the official competition, especially if it happens to be Carlos Saura who has made the movie, *any* movie, in the preceding year. So, Saura's *El Dorado*, a big,

lavish, lushly photographed epic drowning in historical histrionics was on the menu. True to form, it proved not nearly as interesting as many movies from other places, including Argentina's *Sur*, by Fernando Solanas (prize for best director), André Delvaux' pictorially breath-taking, but ponderous, *L'Oeuvre au noir* (Belgium), and a grim, powerful, deeply human study of murder and capital punishment, the Polish *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, which richly deserved the award it won (third best film) for Krzysztof Keilowski.

There were the usual, not-numerous offerings from other countries, ranging from Japan, once so extraordinarily rich in film creativity but for years now a spiritually bankrupt, pathetic shadow of its former self, to India, to smaller countries with very tenuous film histories. There is not a great deal to report from these areas, at least from my experience at Cannes. And this applies even I feel, to China's *The King of the Children*, by Chen Kaige, a story of a school teacher during Mao's cultural revolution, witnessing prudently to the Republic of China's new political climate, but more interesting for its relative openness than for its cinematic interest.

**AUSTRALIA / NEW ZEALAND.** Coming closer to home, at least culturally speaking, Australia for the second year in a row chose a regrettably low profile approach to the Festival. Having already seen recent Aussie product, I can report that the Australian production is still of good quality, growing out of still rich cinematic soil. But Cannes was not the place that highlighted Australian wares this past May, even though *The Navigator*, a wild, "medieval" science fiction fantasy from New Zealand, directed by Vincent Ward, but with co-production involvement from Australia, was invited to the official competition.

**SOUTH AFRICA.** Cannes '88, I am glad to add, was by no means totally bereft of positive significance. Another Southern Hemisphere country with roots in the Empire furnished some of the Festival's most exciting moments – South Africa. Chris Menges, Roland Joffe's cameraman for both *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*, made a stunning directorial debut with a British film about South Africa in 1963. *A World Apart* deservedly won the Prix Spécial du Jury (for second-best film) and best actress for its three main female roles, the marvelous Barbara Hershey (who won last year as well), a remarkable British youngster, Jodhi May, and a fine black actress, Linda Mvusi. Menges tells his anti-apartheid story beautifully, with great emotional impact and political conviction. It is classic commercial cinema done with taste and dignity.

But another film proved truly astounding, this one a *real* South African movie shot in Johannesburg and the Soweto slums. *Mapantsula*, written by and starring a South African actor and former teacher, Thomas



Best actress Jodhi May in Chris Menges *A World Apart*

Mogotane, springs essentially from its own native country (with some serious Australian collaboration through producer David Hannay). What stuns the viewer, however, is that so outspoken an anti-apartheid film could see the light of day in South Africa at all. With *Mapantsula*, the very making of the film becomes an act of true political courage; and its profoundly generous human spirit, denying hopelessness, mindless violence, and cliché stereotyping in character and incident, gives real hope for the future in that land. The movie is tough, anti-sentimental, anti-lyrical. It steadfastly refuses all the obvious cinematic embellishments, those very strategies that make *A World Apart* such comfortable viewing. Indeed, one might well fault *Mapantsula's* cinematography and overall direction as unnecessarily austere, while at the same time realizing how true it rings, how much closer to reality it is than the rather obvious, though very moving, *A World Apart*. The two make fascinating companion pieces, giving a certain relevance to a festival much in need of it.

**CANADA.** 1986 – *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*; 1987 – *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and *Un Zoo la nuit*; and now, 1988 – Francis Mankiewicz's *Les Portes tournantes*, given a prestige showing in the "Un Certain Regard" section. The good news is that Canada has another hit on its hands – and, at least for this writer, probably the most enjoyable film shown in the whole Festival. Some could, I suppose, find the experience somewhat soft and sentimental, for it is shot deliberately pretty and soft focus, and it centres on a boy's journey to the past, to his grandmother – and that boy played with astounding charisma and charm by young François Méthé,



François Méthé and Miou Miou in Francis Mankiewicz' *Les Portes Tournantes*

yet another of the child actors who dominated this festival. But that is to ignore *Portes'* complex structure, its self-conscious romanticizing of culture in a playful complicity with the audience. Mankiewicz never does things by halves; and whether it is ugliness (we saw that in *Bons débarras*) or beauty he is communicating, he goes all the way, and then some, take it or leave it. *Portes*, in following the path of the heart, represents a breakthrough for Québécois cinema, both in its attitude to the past and to culture, and in the aesthetic it espouses. In some ways, it resembles some of the things Canadians have admired in the Australian cinema, pointing to possibilities that are enormously promising.

The other Québécois film given special treatment - this one in "The Directors Fortnight" (Quinzaine des Réalisateurs) - is far more austere, far more along the quality lines long espoused by both French-speaking and by English-speaking Canadian filmmakers, Hubert-Yves Rose's *Ligne de chaleur*. Once again the film, a good one, centres on a fine child actor, Simon Gonzalez, and once again on the ubiquitous Gabriel Arcand (he starred in *Portes* as well) playing the isolated father. These two movies, coupled with last year's flashy *Zoo* and 1986's intellectual *Déclin*, give an image of a very rich, varied, solid - and authentically Canadian - Québécois film industry.

As usual, the "official" Cannes showed relatively little interest in English-Canadian films; but many were on display on the market. This is not the time, nor the place, to go into John Smith's *Train of Dreams*, Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*, Anne Wheeler's *Cowboys Don't Cry*, etc. - merely a sampling to indicate that English Canada, too, has quality films. Indeed, the overall Canadian situation is a very positive one, and it is seen by outsiders as such. Great numbers of Canadian movies were available in

Cannes in one form or another, some of them with real cultural/artistic validity. Our producers, distributors, sellers were busy. People like Rock Demers and René Malo are going concerns here in Cannes: they now have the track records, the solid credibility. And so the Canadian story is a benign one; the Cannes performance, coupled with MIP-TV a few weeks earlier, meant good sales and promises for an even better future. While precise figures in this area are nigh impossible to come by, the advance report is that if this year was less spectacular than last in the sale of film/TV product of Canada, the results were nonetheless excellent; and the majors, so it is claimed, evinced interest as never before.

It takes a year or two for bad effects to be felt; and so the Telefilm problems, the termination of the tax shelter, the weakness of the import legislation, etc. have not yet been felt in all their impact. The ensuing good news, however, about recent additional government financing, may well counterbalance all of that. In any case if Cannes is any indication, the news is good.

It's nice to find a beautiful, positive symbol for all of this. Well, Cannes did furnish one. Last year's dazzling Cannes presence, Patricia Rozema, who happened to direct the best Canadian film of 1987, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (there, I've said it, Genies, etc. notwithstanding), was back, a few miles out of Cannes, totally low key this time, but busy *planning*, working out financing patterns that will permit her to make the films she wants to make. Intelligence, talent, knowhow, values, heart, reasonably youthful energy and dynamism - who could ask for anything more for Canadian cinema? Indeed, folks, we have turned the corner.

Last year, Cannes enjoyed its finest festival in a decade or more. As we have seen, that particular success was not repeated in May 1988. The greatest "révélation" of last year's event was the emergence (or discovery, really) of a new, open Soviet cinema, the sign of broader and deeper changes in the U.S.S.R. that only a few years earlier would have seemed impossible. Well, the Soviets scarcely took Cannes by storm this year, though the movie I did see, Eldar Riazanov's *Forgotten Melody for a Flute*, tended to confirm what we saw the previous May. It is a whimsical, tragicomic film and was quite mesmerizing in its modest way - and that resolutely challenges just about everything that was once considered unassailable in the U.S.S.R.

Elem Klimov, new head of the Film Directors Union, feels it will take another year or two before the new wave really expresses itself in films that reflect the new vitality and creativity. Meanwhile, 30 features that were suppressed during the last seven years will be released internationally - and that could prove interesting indeed.

Was there any comparable revelation at Cannes this year? Obviously not - and yet, a lesser revelation was becoming more and more inevitable. It comes from the Nordic countries.

There were, as always, some films of interest from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. Pekka Parikka's *Pohjanmaa* (Plainlands), for example, gives us a harsh, dark comedy from Finland. A distinguished director, Jan Troell (remember *The Immigrants*?) pours out his love and concern for his native Sweden in a lovely, 185-minute documentary, *Land of Dreams*. The films keep on appearing, financed by these small countries in their conviction that movies are essential to their national cultures. Not too many of these films, however, are outstanding;

and few achieve international distribution - one of the reasons being that one country (the U.S.), to all intents and purposes, controls world film distribution, as we so well know.

Paradoxically, Ingmar Bergman continues to play a role in this Scandinavian reality; and it could be an inhibiting one. Not only has he retired from feature filmmaking, but now, turned 70 and not in very good health, he has announced that his recent immensely successful production for the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (starring Bibi Andersson and other familiar Bergman names), is his last "major" theatrical venture. From now on, he will attempt only "little things".

It seems that Swedish film creativity is semi-paralyzed, unable to fill the gap. Instead, the Swedes, via co-productions, are acting as midwives to a remarkable new Scandinavian development, this one essentially Danish! Denmark, whose last fling at international film glory dates back to around 1910 (except for the works of Carl Dreyer), has for decades kept on financing movies too often of very little interest to most people. But at long last the Danes seem to be bursting into cinematic prominence. Last year, Sweden's Kjell Grede directed in Denmark what may be 1987's best movie, *Hip Hip Hourrah!* A few months earlier, a 30-year-old Gabriel Axel, after waiting for over a dozen years, was finally able to create an almost equally brilliant *Babette's Feast*, which went on to win the Academy Award (Best Foreign Film). And now, Bille August's *Pelle the Conqueror* keeps the Danes on a roll by winning Cannes' *Palme d'Or*, for 1988 - a fine historical drama, no masterpiece to be sure, but quality filmmaking that no one can fail to appreciate. Max von Sydow, after starring in so many Bergman films in the '50s and '60s, gives an acting performance that is memorable.

As if to confirm the trend, old Max then takes the plunge and directs his first feature, also in Denmark. The movie is *Katinka*, a lovely turn-of-the-century tale beautifully photographed and acted. Somewhat deliberate and precious at the beginning, *Katinka* gradually seizes the audience's heart, becoming a love story of matchless depth, beauty, and power. It also brings to the screen a hitherto relatively little-known Danish theatre actress, Tammi Öst, who could well become the next Scandinavian screen goddess... with a little bit of luck and so on.

So the Danes have come into their own, proving to the world that small countries can, through determined effort and intelligent co-productions, create movies both that are uniquely, culturally their own, and that can restore to the cinema its vocation as purveyor of films that reach those indefinable heights we call art, a profound and beautiful expression of what we are.

There just could be a lesson there, somewhere, for the folks in Canada...