

not so damned after all

The great variety of films and goings-on which made up the Festival of Festivals was confusing, stimulating and disconcerting. Below, Natalie Edwards sorts it all out for those of us who weren't there.

by Natalie Edwards

Proud father Bill Marshall, and midwives, assistants, fairies good and bad, surrounded the birth of the new International Film Festival in Toronto, Festival of Festivals, in October 1976. The birth took a whole week (October 18-24) and was evidently successful. It looks like the world will accept the newcomer as a full member of the species *Festivum Spectacularus* and celebrate its future anniversaries with pomp and presences...

It seemed at one point as if Director Marshall, announcing his brainchild, would be damned if he did and damned if he didn't. The more he shouted from the local rooftops (the biggest, the best, the most...) the more the wary and conservative Torontonians felt he was over-Americanizing his efforts. "I will have to adopt a wait-and-see attitude," said the *Globe and Mail's* Robert Martin. "The Festival may turn out to be a delightful pot-pourri or... a dog's breakfast."

On the other hand, Marshall was equally vulnerable to complaints of too little publicity, particularly as far as the rest of Canada was concerned, most of which had never even heard of Bill Marshall (one-time assistant to Toronto mayor Crombie, and a successful film producer) let alone his budding Festival.

Promises, Promises

In order to try to get the biggest and the best, he had to boast that he was getting the biggest and the best. And then he was accused of boasting. At one point it appeared *hundreds* of films would be screened, and luminaries like Martin Scorsese, Jack Nicholson, Julie Christie, Sergio Leone, Dino de Laurentiis, George Barrie (**A Touch of**

Class), editor Verna Fields (**Jaws**), writer Robert Towne, Nicholas Roeg, new American premieres like **Bound for Glory**, craft workshops, a producers' conference, old hand-tinted movies, all-night showings, and even Truffaut's new film **Small Change** might appear, and that the nightly galas, each celebrating a different international film festival with an appropriate national film, would be occasions to remember.

Well, lots of things were tried, and only some succeeded. Most of the Yanks were no-shows. They also withheld their films. But Dino de Laurentiis did come, and showed 96 seconds of the new **King Kong** too, and Jeanne Moreau appeared in a flash and brought her first directorial effort, **Lumière**, as well. William Wolfe of *Cue Magazine* conducted some workshops, although the most appreciated was one on animation featuring Canadian-born Richard Williams, and guided by Toronto animator Al Guest. And a producers' conference was held, in which ABC TV's vice president Arnie Huberman claimed "We should stop talking about Canadian films, because I don't think there are any such things."

The Festival ended up being a compendium of changed films, missing guests, weak workshops and screwed-up schedules. If that's how you wanted to see it.

On the other hand, Toronto has seldom had such a burst of vitality. Films were available suddenly that few but film fanciers had even heard of. Mixed audiences were watching, and appreciating, new experimental women's films, and listening with interest to the statements of the directors and producers. Although established American moviedom turned its back, young, exciting U.S. directors brought their films and came to talk and argue long hours on the world of film, reawakening our faith in a basic energy and intelligence in the American people. Among these was David Helpert Jr.'s **Hollywood on Trial**, an illuminating look at the days of H.U.A.C. and the Hollywood Ten.

Gala openings included the respected **Dersu Uzala**, a Russian-Japanese co-production directed by Kurosawa, a spectacular paen to the glories of nature and man's place

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Richard Williams and Al Guest at the Animation Workshop

in the universal pattern that should always be shown in its 70 mm splendor on an 80-foot screen, as it was at the Ontario Place Cinesphere; Francesco Rosi's (**The Mattei Affair**) **Cadaveri Eccellenti**, or **The Context** which would have been an endless unravelling of intrigue without the marvellous lined features of the actor Lino Ventura; Alexander Kluge's **Strongman Ferdinand**, a wryly witty exposure of the German penchant for order and power; Moreau's **Lumière**, an interesting work of ambiguous intent that almost seems like a salute to herself; the lush Russian tale **Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven** based on a number of stories by Gorki; and, to replace the intended U.S. premiere opening night, **Cousin, Cousine**, a second feature from the successful young French director Jean-Charles Tacchella, an appropriate choice for a bilingual country, and a film of great popular appeal, dealing as it does in a healthy, wholesome, winning way with love and sexuality.

There were celebrities and workshops, hand-tinted oldies, all-night showings (I can testify to watching Paul Bartel's **Private Parts**, and the classic **Little Shop of Horrors** from the Corman Factory, till 5:30 a.m. at the New Yorker Theatre), chances to see renowned but uncommercial (here) films like Jacques Rivette's **Duelle**, Canadian films, new directors' films, American underground films (like **Underground**, with De Antonio present to discuss it), Australian, Ethiopian, Indian, Brazilian, Chinese and so on - obviously, a rare and rich mixture of far more than the eye could see or the mind retain. There were program notes available at each theatre, an excellent Festival booklet, an added booklet devoted exclusively to Wim Wenders, and helpful Festival workers everywhere trying to help the public locate the three uptown and three Ontario Place theatres, and sort out the schedule changes.

After all is said and done, the two totally unqualified successes of the Festival were Barbara Martineau's **Womanscene**, and the exhibition of new German cinema organized by Jan Dawson, former editor of the British Film Institute's **Monthly Bulletin**, contributor to **Sight & Sound** and frequent program advisor to film festivals. Consultant Tony Watts, operations director Henk Van der Kolk and a staff of 13, \$500,000 expenses and a year and a half of work helped Bill Marshall bring forth this wunderkind Festival, but the stars in its eyes were the new women's and German films.

The German Invasion

The German films were a revelation to all but regular festival fanatics and serious film fans. Here at last were some of the films many had only read about. Two by Alexander Kluge, ex-lawyer and one-time assistant to Fritz Lang, were his 1966 **Yesterday's Girl**, the film that established his reputation and was the hit of the Venice Film Festival, and his recent **Strongman Ferdinand**, starring Heinz Schubert in a tightly controlled and killingly satiric story. From Wim Wenders, disappointingly one of the many expected but non-showing celebrities, we were given his only moderately successful adaptation of the Hawthorne story, **Scarlet Letter**, as well as a full feast of his deliberately paced, unique and thoughtful works: **The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick**, **Wrong Movement**, **Alice in the Cities**, and the recent Cannes success, **Kings of the Road (Im Lauf der Zeit)**. Wenders, like Bresson and Dreyer, attracts a very specific, intellectual, patient, and visually oriented audience. His use of environment is more than suggestive; it is what his films are about, and he gives new meaning therefore to the original German style of Kammerspeil, as he converts its atmosphere-laden theatrical effects of the '20s to an echoing and emptied yet ghost-laden landscape that similarly permeates his expressive films.

Controversial Werner Herzog films, **The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser** and the (probably) hilarious **Aguirre, Wrath of God**, caused much discussion. **Kaspar** is an apparently straightforward depiction of the consequences of the German propensity for study and analysis in place of feeling, concerning a mute lad unearthed from a prison cellar and exposed to the world for the first time. **Aguirre**, on the other hand, seemed to try to mock both the kind of *film* that devotes attention and respect to historic figures, as well as the kind of people who became, or tried to become, historic figures. It is very funny, in a perverted way, but one cannot be sure one is laughing with it; there is a sense that surely no one could have meant it to be so awkward, self-conscious and inescapably absurd.

Two Rainer Werner Fassbinder films were also shown: **The American Soldier** and **Mother Küster's Trip to Heaven**. The latter was a good example of his sparse, economical and popular style, and utilized performers common to many of his films, some of which have been seen in Toronto. Again, the sense of humor is wry and somewhat sour: laughter in Germany right now seems to come from the side of a mouthful of bile.

The serious presentation of these works, with extensive well-written notes, gave the Festival class and prestige, and made the loss of the withdrawn American films, which we can see anyway, of negligible importance.

Womanscene Works Out Well

Barbara Halpern Martineau got her way. The films she wanted, the people she could invite, the discussions she planned, and the cooperation of the posh headquarters of the liberated ladies of Toronto, 21 McGill Street, all were hers during the Festival week. Many noted that these were practically the only showings and guest appearances one could really count on.

It was exciting to see a mixed audience responding to these films, many of which were decidedly feminist and could have elicited furious condemnation by sexist males. Instead they laughed and enjoyed the films with the women. Animated dancing penises amused them, vibrant vulvas aggressively searching for something to devour got a good laugh, and real attention was paid to films about abortion and rape and boredom and exploitation.



Chatting in *Not a Pretty Picture*

Barbara made excellent use of shorts in combination with features, both to soften up or prepare an audience, and to double an effect. *Healthcaring, From Our End of the Speculum*, for instance, was a flat-out documentary on very practical female matters, with explicit illustration. It made the crisp, documentary-like treatment in Marta Mészáros' moving film *Adotpion* all the more exciting and acceptable, accentuating its sense of reality, connecting it to a functional world of women on their own.

Chris and Bernie, a short by Bonnie Friedman about two single mothers who share a house, was matched with the Shirley MacLaine-Claudia Weill China film, *The Other Half of the Sky*, in which we see seven very different women react to a world that challenges all their various preconceptions. The short *Susan*, about an exceptional woman who teaches French during the day and karate at night, was with Liliane de Kermadec's feature *Aloise*, in which Delphine Seyrig's delicate and precise narrative voice reads from the poems of this astonishing artist and writer who was forced to live in a mental institution during the time of World War I. The animated *Teacher Lester Bit Me*, concerning daycare, was coupled with the Norwegian feminist film *Wives* (a counterpart to Cassavetes' *Husbands*) where we see women comparing notes at a school reunion. This film was a great success with the audience, but lacks a Canadian distributor at present.

Some of her pairings were interesting for contrast. The short about an artist who lives an exquisitely beautiful life, was adjacent to the Cuban *Buenos Dias Companeras* in which soot-faced and sweaty female laborers work in the newly burned-off fields.

Sometimes it seemed that men must get tired of this relentless burst of self-interest on the part of creative women, but there was no evidence of fatigue until the delayed showing of Marguerite Duras' *India Song*, and this was probably also due to the late hour and unfortunate projection. For those who had only read of this masterly treatment of life by suggestion, and the spaces that define realities, it was a memorable opportunity regardless.

Extremely popular were the bills of Danish filmmaker Mette Knudson's *Take It Like a Man Ma'am*, with its witty role-reversal dream sequence, coupled with the short animation *The Housewife*; and the short new feature by Joan Micklin Silver (*Hester Street*), *Bernice Bobs Her Hair*,

called the best film version of a Fitzgerald work yet, with two shorts: Anne Wheeler and Lorna Rasmussen's fascinating *Great Grandmother*, illuminating the lives of western Canadian women settlers, and Jan Oxenburg's *Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts*, dealing hilariously with a number of lesbian stereotypes.

Not a Pretty Picture by Martha Coolidge (which had a short regular run at the New Yorker, following the Festival) was a process film concerning a memory of rape, the development of a story about rape, and the performances and self-discoveries of the actors and director herself during the filming. Coolidge managed to balance the intellectual, emotional and psychological aspects of the situation so carefully that the audience was allowed to understand all aspects without any exploitation of just one reaction. Certainly the revelation of process in creativity is one of the most fascinating directions film can go at this moment, and in many ways this particular film was a landmark for its investigation of this style as well as for its successful treatment of a difficult subject. It was paired with a Canadian short *Would You Kiss a Naked Man?* which was intended for school use but made apparently without a realistic look at what schools would use.

Kathleen Shannon's personal and poetic remembrance of her childhood, *Goldwood*, and Anne-Claire Poirier's long discursive treatment of a woman (played with great sincerity by Luce Guilbeault) attempting to decide on abortion, *Le temps de l'avant*, ended the Womanscene programs.

Young and Coming

The Young Cinema collection offered a lot of interesting films, but because their directors weren't well known, or the countries not renowned for film, many ignored them to pick up the biggies instead. Among good little films the Australian *The Devil's Playground*, dealing with seminarians and sex, was for many a good introduction to the look and feel of Australia, while *Harvest: Three Thousand Years*, an Ethiopian film by Gerima, also introduced a geography and point of view unfamiliar to viewers.

Likewise, Canadian films like *Love at First Sight*, Rex Bromfield's smiling snippet on the blindness of love, Forcier's *L'eau chaude l'eau froide*, a tough comedy of despair in Montreal's hard core, and Peter Bryant's relaxed comedy of left-over hippies on the road to nowhere, *The Supreme Kid*, offered equally fresh and original viewpoints from another small but valiant country: ours. Too bad Forcier wasn't at the Festival. Too bad also that Don Owen's outspoken *Partners* was censored off the screen that week. *Partners*, particularly, with its aggressive anti-U.S. imperialist theme and northern family-compact type characters, so distinctively Canadian they seem foreign to most brainwashed and TV-trained Canadians, would have been a lovely film to replace the missing U.S. feature designed to celebrate the L.A. Festival on opening night.

Marshall, interviewed before the Festival, stated his purpose was to educate the public in the world film scene, and to sell two ways: "We want foreign producers and distributors to start thinking of Canada as a separate market, not a hyphenated add-on to the U.S. market. And we want the U.S. and other countries who realize Canada is the biggest market for their films outside the U.S. to start doing co-production with Canadian producers."

"At present," said Marshall, "we're starved except for the U.S. market, to which 98 percent of our box office goes."

Maybe it was this attitude that turned off the Americans. The interesting thing is, their films weren't even missed. □



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from Famous Players Limited*

