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NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Toronto Fest Showcases Prestige Fall Films

By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Sep 26, 2007

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Features

Arriving at the Toronto International Film Festival, you're greeted with the cinematic equivalent of a vast smorgasbord—349 films from 55 countries. Any journalist there must whip up her own mini-feast—or go the way of the *gourmands* in *La Grande Bouffe*, who stuff themselves into oblivion. This 32nd TIFF, I focused on the big prestige films that launch in Toronto prior to awards season, balanced with more rarefied art-house fare. Unlike in previous fests, no single project emerged as a critic's darling. My own sample turned up many worthy, if flawed films, with Joe Wright's *Atonement* and Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* several cuts above the rest.

The much-heralded American offerings included *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, directed by Andrew Dominik, and *Into the Wild*, scripted and directed by Sean Penn. The Brad Pitt starrer revisits the story of Jesse James, a Civil War vet, who with brother Frank (Sam Shepard) embraced bank robbing as a living, becoming an American legend. The opening scene finds the James gang waiting in the woods to rob a train. A creepy young acolyte (Casey Affleck) approaches Frank James but is summarily dismissed, thus planting the grudge that will prove lethal to brother Jesse. The rest of this 152-minute film tracks James' growing paranoia, as he maneuvers to smoke out his enemies' designs.

Yes, Pitt in a dark dye job looks born to the role and delivers a haunting account of the charismatic outlaw, flashing a dangerous slow-burn smile, as if amused by the notion of his own doom. (Though overexposed by the media, Pitt joins the short list for this year's TIFF Testosterone Award for Hottest Actor, with heavy competition from Guillaume Depardieu, Clive Owen, George Clooney, Tony Leung and James McAvoy.) Come Oscar time, Affleck should snag a supporting nom as a

troubling figure whom some critics saw as a prototype of a fanboy. And Dominik ladles out atmosphere by framing the tale with a distancing narrator and basting images in the sepia tones of an imagined past, his camera frequently blurring objects around the edges. That said, way too little happens in this film to justify its running time, and too much of it dwells on Affleck's demented gaze.

Into the Wild is mostly powerful and gripping, if overlong. Drawn from the nonfiction book by Jon Krakauer, the fourth film helmed by Penn stars Emile Hirsch as Chris McCandless, a rich kid who sheds his worldly goods when he graduates from college in 1990, rechristens himself Alexander Supertramp, and lights out for the Alaskan wilderness that ultimately kills him. Penn carves Chris' quest for an authentic self into "chapters," keeping things humming by shuffling the temporal sequence, and revealing in flashback Chris' passion to escape his parents from hell (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden). In fact, at moments you have to ask: Is the guy powered by the mother of all temper tantrums?

Cinematographer Eric Gautier transforms landscape into visual poetry, especially in an indelible scene of Chris mingling with wild horses. And while not directly political, *Into the Wild* implicitly asks the question: What does it mean to be an American when civilization itself becomes a source of alienation and mistrust?

(At the press conference, Penn displayed his own aversion to civilization when he snapped at photographers, "I can't think when you're doing that, the sound of cameras clicking is the ugliest music in the world.")

While the American presence felt especially dominant this year, the British *Atonement*, grandly romantic and poignant—and a showcase for chintz, into the bargain—wins my vote as the fest's most fully realized film. Directed by wunderkind Joe Wright, and adapted from Ian McEwan's revered novel by Christopher Hampton, *Atonement* revolves around a lie told by an upper-class girl with a heated imagination named Briony Tallis, and the way that lie shatters the lives of older sister Cecilia and her lover Robbie Turner, the housekeeper's son. Refracting the narrative in a game of mirrors, Briony is writing about as well as living these events, throwing into question which parts of the story are "real" and which her fictional invention. Tough stuff to capture in a film.

As it did in the opening of *Pride & Prejudice*, Wright's camera speedily tours the Tallis manor house and its environs. In an inspired touch, the staccato beat of a typewriter on the soundtrack suggests Briony's meta-narrative that will shadow the story proper. As Robbie, James McAvoy makes one sexy leading man (eclipsing the rather fey Cecilia of Keira Knightley). If McAvoy doesn't attain stardom after this film, there's no justice. By his springy gait alone, he projects a golden future—which is snatched away, of course, first by Briony's hysterical falsehood, and then World War II. Spot-on casting ensures that the three Brionys—Saorise Ronan at 11, Romola Garai in her 20s, and Vanessa Redgrave in old age—all appear to be the same person. True, you could fault Wright's failure, probably for budgetary reasons, to capture the retreat from Dunkirk in the

virtuosic fashion of McEwan. Still, the film succeeds on its own terms, and looks to become the prestige pic of the season.

My other fave from the United Kingdom was *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, directed by Shekhar Kapur, who gave us the first Elizabeth in 1998. It's kind of fun that quality fare also gets a franchise. As the Virgin Queen, Cate Blanchett struts and rules in 100 different carrot-colored wigs—and indeed, Blanchett could also be crowned queen of the festival, turning in the best Bob Dylan of the lot in Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* (which all but Bob Dylan freaks will find incomprehensible). In this sequel, Elizabeth must counter the attempted overthrow of Protestant England in 1585 by the zealot King Philip II of Spain, the figurehead of European Catholicism. Enter Sir Walter Raleigh in the guise of Clive Owen, who sets the queen a-sizzle and helps beat back the Armada. This one really divided the critics, detractors citing the bombast, cartoonish simplicity and portentously corny score. Me, I enjoyed this epic-for-dummies and Blanchett's campy royal, and thrilled to the CGI rendering of the Spanish Armada, complete with some nifty underwater moves by Owen and flaming horses. Think the old-fashioned spectacle that movies used to be.

If *Elizabeth* sneaked into the mix a discreet brief against religious fanaticism, a wide assortment of this season's films presented, cudgels swinging, manifestos on Iraq. I missed the well-received *Redacted* by Brian De Palma (also at the New York Film Festival), as well as Nick Broomfield's doc *Battle for Haditha*, about the massacre of 24 Iraqi men, women and children by U.S. Marines. Regretfully, I did catch *Rendition*, directed by Gavin Hood (*Tsotsi*). It stars Reese Witherspoon doing a warmed-over Mariane Pearl as a pregnant wife whose husband goes missing—in this case, he's an Egyptian-American chemist who gets snatched from the airport and dispatched to the Middle East to be tortured. Of course, he's innocent. On hand to watch the fun is Jake Gyllenhaal as a green CIA operative, who delivers the fest's most memorable line: "This is my first torture." (I also like Michael Pitt's line, perfect for a t-shirt, "Death is a funny thing, Ludovic" from arty weepie *Silk*.) It's the film's earnest, righteous tone that makes it unwatchable. Not even Meryl Streep, Alan Arkin and Peter Saarsgard, who all seem to be winking at the viewer, can save this one. And please, fest programmers—no torture before noon.

Other heavy-handed misfires include *Reservation Road* by *Hotel Rwanda* director Terry George. This drama is about a dad (Mark Ruffalo) who runs over Joaquin Phoenix's kid, but then won't fess up. Mom (Jennifer Connelly) is bereft; Phoenix seeks vigilante justice; Ruffalo is wrung out with remorse, etc. Though George is a native of Belfast, *Reservation Road* is the sort of megaplex fare that peddles manipulation, bad faith, high-concept conflicts—in short, American "quality" filmmaking at its worst.

The beauty of TIFF is that after a dud, you can always cleanse the palate by selecting from a host of aesthetically worthy films. High on the art-film list was *Persepolis*, from Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, an animated adaptation of Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novels. Satrapi's darkly funny account of her experiences as a spirited young Muslim woman coming of age in

Tehran makes for a bracingly original story.

And the Nouvelle Vague lives, I'm pleased to say, with Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette continuing to turn out masterful provocations. Chabrol's *A Girl Cut in Two*, a caustic tale of a girl strung out between two suitors, takes us deep into the heart of the director's favored terrain: bourgeois depravity. Rivette's *The Duchess of Langeais* is an expertly paced fable about love as a lethal game. When its two prideful lovers face off, it's "steel against steel," as Guillaume Depardieu aptly mutters. Beamed in from a different time and culture, Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*, an erotic thriller, also portrays love as mortal combat, to devastating effect. And yes, the by-now notorious sex scenes live up to their advance hype.

Finally, no TIFF is complete without discovering that little gem. This year it was Ivan Reitman's sophomore effort *Juno*, the story of Juno MacGuff (Ellen Page), a wise-ass 16-year-old girl who becomes pregnant by the boy next door, and then finds a couple in the local Penny Saver as the adoptive parents. It was not until 15 minutes or so in that I realized I was hearing what amounted to a new language. Screenwriter Diablo Cody (a woman) riffs on the teen patois (as in "FDR was that hot president who had polio"), ratcheting it up to improbably sophisticated heights. The result is witty, rapid-fire patter unlike anything you've heard before.

Films I'm sorry I missed: *Jar City*, a murder mystery by Icelandic wild man Baltasar Kormakur, and *Lars and the Real Girl* from Aussie Craig Gillespie, starring the dazzling Ryan Gosling as a weirdo in a relationship with Bianca—an anatomically correct doll. What I certainly won't miss: those new "Priority Press" passes (as opposed to garden-variety ones) bestowed on boldface journos—what, in egalitarian, democratic Canada? Zounds, who do they think they are, Cannes?

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