

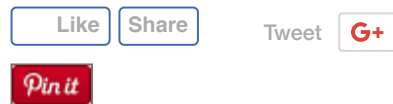
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Super Movie Mart

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Nov 17, 2004



Features

The Toronto International Film Festival, that giant supermarket of cinema, showed 328 films this year--making it, as always, near-impossible for one individual to assimilate. Even catching five, sometimes six, films a day (more induces hallucinations), I managed to see only some 40 in all.

Complicating matters, the schedule felt front-loaded--in the first days, several entries clamored for attention at the same or overlapping hours. (Then, having chosen a film, you're nagged by the question: What am I missing?) So, an up-front disclaimer: Far from an objective appraisal, this is, necessarily, my Toronto 2004.

With co-director Noah Cowan now fully in charge of programming (and Piers Handling as director and CEO), the 29th year kicked off a new direction for TIFF. Perhaps, though, it's too early to detect Cowan's mark. In this eclectic and impressive edition, big-studio product was amply represented (Ray, Beyond the Sea, Shark Tale), but it was more than balanced by edgy, envelope-pushing art films, with documentaries claiming greater prominence than in the past. And the fest has been restructured to put a focus on emerging Canadian filmmakers, with a section named 'Canada First' for Canadian first features, or first time fest entries, and another dubbed 'Shortcuts Canada.'

This year was distinctive, too, for what was not in the lineup: Vera Drake from Mike Leigh, Finding Neverland from Marc Forster, and 2046 from Wong Kar-wai Wong. As well, it would be hard this year to cite a cluster of films as eagerly anticipated as Far From Heaven, City of God, 21 Grams and The Quiet American of past seasons.

But it's fair to say that if Toronto 2004 lacked individual firepower, it excelled through its ensemble

of works, a dizzying spectrum of styles and visions, especially under the 'World Cinema' rubric (in this respect mirroring the tenor of Cannes this year). And one aspect of the fest only gets better: its accommodating stance toward press. (If a screening fills up, another gets skedded.) And if you overlook the annoying phrase 'no problem,' which seems epidemic in the city, Canadian courtesy acts as balm to fried nerves.

Though it wasn't a banner year for celeb-spotting, on hand were Annette Bening and Warren Beatty, Hilary Swank, Jeremy Irons, Will Smith, and Kevin Spacey (surrounded by dark-suited younger clones of himself). Glam events included a hotel bash with belly-dancers, sand and live camels for the Dubai Film Festival; the Vanity Fair party, which had the lamentable taste to exclude me, and snarled traffic on Bloor Street; a red-carpet bacchanal to salute Kinsey (though star Liam Neeson--and perhaps Kinsey cohort Peter Sarsgaard, fresh from his full-frontal debut--were roped off in a zone forbidden to the sweaty hoi polloi). Flashing my Film Journal creds, I sailed past the velvet rope into exclusive dinners at Avenue eateries, where, in the spirit of his new Pinot-soaked film, I hoisted glasses with preppy-handsome Sideways director Alexander Payne (his wife, delicious Sandra Oh, at the next table).

Payne had plenty to toast. With only a few female dissenters grouching about a 'guy' film, Sideways shaped up as a festival favorite. The odd-couple road movie about two guys in full mid-life crisis brims with the pathos-inflected humor and humanity Payne displayed in About Schmidt and Election. The other film winning unanimous raves was My Summer of Love from Warsaw-born Brit Pawel Pawlikowski. How did I miss this Sapphic teen love story that turned my colleagues delirious with praise? Well, at least it will hit theatres thanks to Focus Features, which snapped it up.

My personal faves included three French entries: a crowd-pleaser, an art-house orchid, and a provocation by inimitable bad boy Fran^{çois} Ozon. His 5 x 2 looks at marital disintegration by tracking backwards through five defining events in a couple's life. It's anchored by Valeria Bruni Tedeschi (of the sexy cracked laugh) as the wife, and icily handsome Stephane Friess as a husband who may not be cut out for matrimony. The film's telling use of a lyric from 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes'--"something here inside cannot be denied"--along with other clues, suggests that Ozon is depicting a closeted gay man straitjacketed by married life. But all is inferred, nothing spelled out.

Les Choristes, Christophe Barratier's feature directing debut, has done boffo box office in France, and may boost foreign film, Amlie-style, when Miramax brings it here. Framed as a flashback, it concerns a failed composer who comes to work in a school for bully boys and transforms them by organizing a chorus. Yes, it's sentimental, but the French are right to love this--it's also charming, funny, haunting, with soaring music. It speaks to viewers because it illumines the small, hidden lives that transform those they touch.

Finally, La Femme de Gilles from Frdric Fonteyne, stakes out territory quite different from his marvelous Une Affaire Pornographique. Set between the wars, and exquisitely lit with natural light like a Vermeer sprung to life, the film uses minimal dialogue to explore a provincial woman's

unexpected compassion toward her husband's adulterous passion.

My two other personal picks concerned, curiously, child abuse, but we won't read anything into that. *Mysterious Skin* from American auteur Gregg Araki, with a riveting turn from hot Joseph Gordon-Levitt, tracked a suburban boy's abuse at the hands of a pedophile baseball coach, which tipped him into a career as a male hustler. The film is notable for its unblinking realism, the *cri de coeur* at its core, and its unsettling message that evil resides in the most banal heartland locales.

Directed by hell-raiser Asia Argento, *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* sent 'em streaming from the theatre. (The critic from the paper of record wrote that he couldn't watch it.) In this Southern gothic based on stories by J.T. Leroy, Argento, looking like Courtney Love, plays a junkie truckstop-hooker and uber-slut mother, who tours an American wasteland with young son Jeremiah (played by twins). This is dark stuff indeed, but the film's bizarre mix of black humor and mother-son love make it one of a kind. More mainstream, and lovely and affecting as well, was *The House Keys* from Gianni Amelio of Lamerica fame, about a father who rejoins his physically and mentally challenged son after abandoning him 15 years back. Kim Rossi Stuart makes one sexy dad--why don't we see him more often?

Speaking of sex, to judge by this year's lineup, you'd think filmmakers had just discovered it. 'Flesh is in the air this year,' said festival co-director Cowan. 'This is an invasion of film sex into North America.' Of course, many of the raunchiest films were made by youthful directors, so no need to look further for an explanation. The sorriest entry in the sexcapades was Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs*, for which the line snaked around the block, making me wonder if we weren't all voyeurs. The bait: the director's theory that onscreen actors eat food for real, so why shouldn't onscreen shagging be real, too? In between all the in/out, as if to clear the palate, viewers were treated to long, boring takes of a rock concert rave and footage of the Arctic waste. Bottom line, this film is a tribute to the art of acting: The couple here sounded a whole lot like Meg Ryan faking it in the deli.

Unsurprisingly, Catherine Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell*, with its gynecological realism, inspired many walkouts. Said Breillat, 'I find my own film hard to watch.' The Midnight Madness section offered the agit-porn of *The Raspberry Reich* by Bruce LaBruce, with generous dollops of gay and straight sex. Notably un-erotic was an omnibus film titled *Eros*, offering three takes on the topic. The Wong Kar-wai contribution about the relationship between a beautiful courtesan and her tailor featured his signature luminosity and mesmerizing color--but this viewer jumped ship during the one-joke story by Steven Soderbergh, and the enigmatic piece by film great Michelangelo Antonioni.

The other dominant themes of Toronto 2004 were politics and history, often conveyed through documentaries. Sean Penn was on hand to tub-thump his starring role in *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, the politically themed drama directed by Niels Mueller about a failed salesman and would-be assassin--and also to slam President Bush at a press conference. Saluted in Cannes, and en route to the New York Film Festival, Ousmane Sembene's feature *Moolaade* powerfully argues that the liberty of women forms the basis of a progressive society. The doc *Gunner Palace*, the first

movie about the invasion of Iraq, gives voice to the men and women serving in the war (and was picked up by Palm Pictures).

Hotel Rwanda, which snagged the People's Choice Award, relates how one courageous man saved the lives of more than 1,000 helpless Rwandans during the 1994 genocide. The Discovery Award went to Irish docudrama Omagh, about the 1988 bombing in Northern Ireland that killed 31 people. The CITY-TV Award for Best Canadian First Feature Film went to Daniel Roby's La Peau Blanche for its 'audacious genre-bending as well as its mix of race politics, romance and horror.' And euthanasia drama The Sea Inside, featuring a towering turn from Javier Bardem, argues that life is a right, not an obligation. Closer to home, John Sayles' Silver City laces into the current administration, with Chris Cooper hilariously channeling the President.

Offering Oscar-worthy vehicles, biopics were also big in 2004 (and like most of the films in the festival ran too long by some 10 or 15 minutes). Not for nothing is Toronto now considered the Northern gateway to Hollywood. As the titular character, Liam Neeson shone in Bill Condon's deeply intelligent Kinsey (seconded by the fascinating Peter Sarsgaard). Taylor Hackford's Ray makes Jamie Foxx a serious contender--maybe an Oscar shoo-in--for his immaculate portrayal of the blind musician who combined R&B and gospel. Along with its terrific jazzy, retro look--spinning records, neon signs, black keyhole fades--the film reveals how Ray Charles found his distinctive voice. Despite its anemic plot, Annette Bening is thoroughly enchanting as a spurned older woman bent on revenge in fest opener Being Julia.

Revenge also figured mightily in Old Boy from Korean director Park Chan-wook. In fact, his film, also in Cannes and reportedly admired by Quentin Tarantino, could nab the award for Ingenious Sadism. A guy is taken prisoner for 15 years without ever knowing why, and emerges to wreak a vengeance that includes a severed tongue and amateur dentistry. Not merely gratuitous gore, this hyper-violent manga is framed with the structure of a Greek tragedy, spoofs its own conventions, and uncoils an intriguing backstory involving incest.

To end on an upbeat note, the first film I saw when I arrived off a storm-tossed flight was an item with the unpromising title The Alzheimer Case. Well, it turned out to be a visually innovative Belgian noir thriller by Erik Van Looy, drenched in ambiance and filmed in cool neon green and blue lighting. It's about an aging hit man who decides to take justice into his own hands--but it's a race against time, because he's running low on memory. Meanwhile, he's playing cat-and-mouse with two wiseass detectives, who add levity and humor to this visceral thriller. One of the festival categories is called "Discovery"--and finding a film such as this is part of the joy of Toronto.

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