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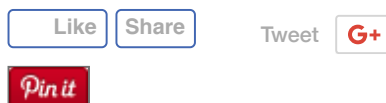


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Toronto Torrent

Gay Gems Stand Out In Annual Film Frenzy

By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Oct 18, 2005



Features



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With 236 features screening at the 2005 Toronto Film Festival, it was difficult to discern any core or unity to this frenzied sprawl of an event. In fact, depending on which films you saw, Toronto 2005 could be a tale of two festivals: the first a cornucopia of cinematic peaks and displays of stellar acting; the second a pileup of misfires, both from filmmakers who've delivered in the past, as well as lower-profile directors.

As it happened, I experienced both fests. Yes, I logged leg-twitching hours with uninspired fare-but so long as I kept to the "Gala" and "Masters" entries, I also caught films as accomplished and resonant as in any fest over the past several years. To co-director Noah Cowan, a man of vision, energy and charm, goes much of the credit. These films for grownups were all the more bracing after the cranked-up noise of the silly season.

Three standouts may end up placing gayness squarely in the mainstream. *Brokeback Mountain*, from acclaimed Taiwanese-born director Ang Lee, arrived in Toronto already tagged "the gay western"-and indeed, sexual orientation is the heart of the story. In contrast, in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto* and Bennett Miller's *Capote*, sexual or gender identity, while front and center, is subordinated to more dominant themes.

Brokeback-which took the top prize in Venice, prompting the director's hasty departure from

Canada to accept the award-was also rapturously received in Toronto. It explores the thwarted love between Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), two cowboys who meet on a summer sheep-herding gig in Wyoming during the 1960s. Though they separate at summer's end and go on to marry and father children, over the years the two men recklessly pursue their secret passion, with escalating consequences.

Based on a story by E. Annie Proulx published in *The New Yorker* in 1997 (just before the Matthew Shepard atrocity, which hovers over the film's plot), the screenplay was inked by Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry. These literary pedigrees are on full display in the film's economy of gesture, pared-down dialogue, and McMurtry's uniquely American brand of poignancy and poetry (which evoke moments from *Lonesome Dove*). Gyllenhaal and Ledger play off each other to perfection-but it's Ledger's word-shy introvert who will surely be singled out at awards time for a performance that's the stuff of Hollywood legend. *Brokeback* is one of the great love stories to reach the screen, and nothing short of heartbreaking.

It's a damn shame, in a way: Toronto buzz had it that Ledger and Philip Seymour Hoffman could expect to duke it out at awards time. But that's like comparing an asteroid with a zebra; they cannot be compared, without rendering the notion of competition nonsensical (as Woody Allen believes it is in all artistic endeavors).

As Truman Capote, Hoffman uncannily resurrects the fey creator of the non-fiction novel and fixture at Babe Paley's soirees, pushing the envelope of the thesp's art. Directed with supreme confidence by Bennett Miller (after only a well-received doc to his credit) and written by actor Dan Futterman, the film zooms in on the six-year period Capote spent interviewing Perry Smith (the startlingly touching Clifton Collins, Jr.), and Richard Hickock (Mark Pellegrino), who famously mowed down the Clutter family in rural Kansas.

This dark, austere fashioning, super-intelligent film explores the underbelly of artistic striving, the notion that a writer may ruthlessly cannibalize his subject. It takes risks in showing Capote's less savory side, all the while building sympathy for his ill-fated subject, Perry Smith-a delicate balancing act that Miller brings off, thanks in large part to his star's charisma. It's sheer delight-and viewers laugh with pleasure-to watch Hoffman as he nails Capote's childish voice, odd giggle, body language (down to the slouch and stubby fingers wielding cigarettes), a virtuosic turn that ranks among the screen's most fascinating portraits.

Completing the "queer trilogy" is Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto*, based on the novel by Patrick McCabe (and after *The Butcher Boy*, marking the second Jordan/McCabe collaboration.) *Breakfast* features a zingy turn from gifted comer Cillian Murphy as the Irish transvestite "Kitten," abandoned at birth, who hits London in search of his Mitzi-Gaynor-lookalike mother. Since this is the '70s, the quest is interrupted by assorted IRA actions, but Kitten-a neo-Candide-breezes innocently through the mayhem, intent on finding happiness in her fashion. Featuring a haunting cameo by Stephen Rea, the film is shaped into 36 picaresque segments, each with a mock 18th-century title, and

rollicks with manic energy.

Energy is surely the currency most required to navigate this feeding frenzy of a fest, along with the radar to pick up some unsung gem. Routinely catching four or five films a day, one night I simply threw in the towel by film #5, its sequence of jumpy non-sequiturs swimming before my eyes, and stumbled hotel-ward, after a day's diet of muffins and caffeine. Which film, competing time-wise, to choose next morning: *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* or *Breakfast on Pluto*? And the next: Mary Harron's *The Notorious Bettie Page*, about the '50s pinup for bondage mags? Or *North Country*, the Norma Rae-redux vehicle for a de-glammed Charlize Theron?

Either way, queue up, suck down a latte grande, and queue up for next film, while worrying about the unsung gem someone else is discovering. Brace yourself for the pre-screening trailer, a grating "turn off your cell phone" spot, directed by student filmmaker Stephen J. Mavilla (which reportedly triggered death threats). Try to catch the party for *Bee Season*. Or the do for *Brooklyn Lobster* to scarf some seafood protein. Or maybe the press conference with Hollywood royalty Johnny Depp. Or Liam or Charlize. Or Orlando Bloom, who phoned in his role in Cameron Crowe's *Elizabethtown*.

Which brings me to the duds. From the writer-director who gave us *Jerry Maguire* and *Almost Famous*, alas, comes an endless, misshapen ramble about a hotshot running-shoe inventor (Bloom) with major tsuris: Not only does he fail miserably on the job, but his father dies. To the rescue comes a zany ingénue played by Kirsten Dunst, spouting treacly New Age nostrums. Nomination for the fest's worst movie climax: Susan Sarandon as the widow, tap-dancing a eulogy to her late husband. It was not a good sign when the publicist for Paramount emerged before the screening to explain this *Elizabethtown* was not the finished version.

Guy Ritchie (the Brit Quentin Tarantino) weighed in with *Revolver*, a crime thriller set in a high-stakes world, where it's impossible to discern who's conning whom. It's equally hard to discern why nominally sane adults should be asked to endure this pretentious gallimaufry, peppered with pseudo-profound quotes from Machiavelli and *Julius Caesar* yet. *Bee Season* directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel, and adapted from Myla Goldberg's novel, asks us to buy Richard Gere as a Jewish professor of religion and an adept of the Kabbalah. I don't think so.

Lorene Machado's *Bambam and Celeste*, an intended showcase for brilliant comic Margaret Cho, debuts with a promising take on the road movie. Celeste-an overweight, Korean, Goth punk-lights out for New York from the dreary Midwest with a hyper-queeny African-American stylist. But over-the-top gags like retreads from a bad "Saturday Night Live" land this one in a ditch. The earnest but forgettable *River Queen* from Vincent Ward squanders Samantha Morton and lush New Zealand scenery in the story of an Irish surgeon's daughter torn between the Maori culture and her own. Closer to home, Kevin Jordan's *Brooklyn Lobster* spotlights a family fighting a bank foreclosure on their lobster farm. Despite the Willy Loman-like turn from Danny Aiello, this static effort feels like a rerun from "Philco Television Playhouse."

A candidate for a subset called the "Why Oh Why?" category is Larry Clark's *Wassup Rockers*, his ode to a gang of Latino skateboarders from South Central L.A. The only conceivable answer: to indulge Clark's voyeuristic fascination with Latino adolescent bodies, especially that of cute Jonathan Velasquez. At least the hoppin' soundtrack pulls you through the film's inane plot.

Many films fit in the flawed but honorable category. *John and Jane*, an Indian documentary by Ashim Ahluwalia about "call centers" in Bombay, critiqued globalization, but seemed to suffer from night-shift exhaustion. *Vers le Sud*, featuring Charlotte Rampling, is a shocker from Laurent Cantet (*Time Out*) about mid-life, man-deprived American women who find love in Haiti with a local Adonis. Though it gives new meaning to sex tourism, it fails to make the chilly Rampling character convincing.

Late in the day, I discovered my unsung gem: the feature *October 17th, 1961* by Frenchman Alain Tasma. It's part of the historical-exposé genre, blossoming after such works as *Hotel Rwanda*, and increasingly seen as financially viable. *October* re-enacts a shameful event at the close of the Algerian war: the slaughter of Algerians by the police during a peaceful demonstration in Paris, a crime that the French government has never acknowledged. Fair-minded, heart-stopping, never didactic, here's a worthy successor to *The Battle of Algiers*. May a distributor step up to the plate. Audiences were also hotsy for another dark horse, *Tsotsi*, Gavin Hood's U.K./South African film about six days in the violent life of a young gang leader. The film snagged the People's Choice Award and was just picked up by Miramax.

Finally, it's sometimes fun to be proven wrong. I had dim hopes for the much-ballyhooed *Pride and Prejudice*, a first feature from Joe Wright. I shuddered at the thought of Keira Knightley tarting up Jane Austen's brainy, beloved Elizabeth Bennet, and expected "Masterpiece Theatre" jacked up for the big screen. But surprise: This classic about ruinous social niceties lifts off from "Go" with a long, gorgeous tracking shot that follows Lizzie about her chores and into the dithering hive of the Bennet household. The spot-on period detail, from stately mansions to formal dances, to bourgeois clutter, perfectly offsets Lizzie's sharp exchanges and romance with the taciturn, glowering Darcy. And Knightley not only convinces as a woman of substance-she carries the film on her slender shoulders.

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