

The Toronto "Festival of Festivals": film

From the outside, film festivals often appear to be little more than a chance for well-off snobs to hob-nob with celebrities and ("Only if there's time, daarrling") overdose on celluloid. There's no doubt that the media-prompted by Festival organizers — are the prime purveyors of this incorrect image. After all, naked women promoting an exploitation film by strutting around the beaches of Cannes make better copy than some incomprehensible (to the critic) angst-filled film about love and death. However, don't be fooled; film festivals are organized for very serious and sometimes even noble reasons.

Festivals are, to a large extent, business conventions where distributors, critics and other industry folk from all over the world meet, talk shop, sell ideas, see new movies and, hopefully, buy rights to the films they like. For many independent producers and directors, and makers of "small" (low-budget), foreign, or experimental films, taking part in a festival provides them with their only chance to screen their films for some very powerful people. Consequently, underneath all the talk about money, lies the thrilling and romantic prospect of discovering a new artist. And when you peel away the many layers of hype, this is what a film festival

is all about — seeing new films, discovering new artists and spreading the word.

The Toronto Festival of Festivals is both an example of, and an exception to the festival rule. On the one hand it has its share of hype: gala presentations of uninteresting mainstream Hollywood films complete with stars and directors ("It generates press-coverage, eh"); exclusive late-night parties; and high-profile press-conferences, complete with bar, where very little of anything occurs. On the other hand, the Festival of Festivals is the most audience-accessible film fest of all and is wider in scope (lots more films) than the prestigious New York Film Festival. Because The Toronto festival is virtually non-competitive — there are only two major awards: "most popular film" (audience choice) and "best film" (International critics poll) — there's less of a cut-throat atmosphere than at comparably prestigious festivals. The excitement is generated by what's on the screen as opposed to what's behind the scenes.

This year's festival (which ran from September 6-16) was for the most part, a success. Nearly 400 films played in six theatres from 10:00 am to as late as 2:30 am each day, for 10 days. Despite the fact that the overall quality

of films was down from last year, bigger crowds than ever attended. Even mid-week morning screenings were almost full. A well-received retrospective of closeto 200 Canadian films, the fact that Warren Beatty **did** show up for his tribute, and the largest-ever contingent of directors and stars willing to introduce their films and, sometimes, stay and talk about them had festival organizers gleefully patting each other on the back at week's end.

There are, however, some negative things to be said about this year's festival. First, technical problems — films constantly out-of-focus, missed reel changes, bad sound and the occasional late start — are the kind of correctable annoyances that don't belong at a world-class film festival. Less-easily fixed is a disturbing tendency that revealed itself in some of the programmed choices for the Contemporary World Cinema series. Programmers David Overbey and Kay Armatage allowed personal biases to take precedence over the quality of a film. Overbey scheduled two lousy films — Lothar Lambert's *Fraulein Berlin* and the French *Le Voyage* — and, in my opinion, the only reason for their inclusion was that Overbey worked on both films, one as an actor and the other as sub-title

writer. Kay Armatage seemed to feel that the fact that a movie was directed by a woman was reason enough to schedule it. The result was the inclusion of the most amateurishly bad film I've ever seen exhibited, Jackie Raynal's *Hotel New York*. At one point Armatage even beseeched the crowd to vote for Zelda Barron's *Secret Places* as "most popular film" before the audience had even viewed it!

When it all was over, the critics had chosen Alan Rudolph's *Choose Me* as the best film (followed by Robert Benton's *Places in the Heart* and Leos Carax's *Boy Meets Girl*) and the audience had voted *Places in the Heart* as most popular film (followed by Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* and Norman Jewison's *A Soldier's Story*). When Alan Rudolph accepted his award in the name of independent film-makers, he told Hollywood "You can't keep us down, you know." It's exactly this kind of attitude that organizers of the Toronto festival have had from the beginning. And each year it pays off more and more.

Paris, Texas

Paris, Texas directed by Germany's Wim Wenders (*The American Friend*) and written by Sam Shepard, was one of the most eagerly-awaited films of the festival. Winner of the grand prize at Cannes, *Paris, Texas* focuses on a man's attempt to get to know (and win the love of) his eight-year-old son, whom he hasn't seen for four years.

Harry Dean Stanton plays Travis, a man missing for four years and presumed dead. One day, Travis just appears — wandering in the desert, mute. He is picked-up and turned over to his brother (Dean Stockwell) — the man who's been fathering Travis' son in Travis' absence. What follows is sometimes painful, sometimes funny and sometimes deeply moving as Travis tries to breakdown the psychological and situational barriers between himself and his son. Then Travis comes up with the notion to find his ex-wife and re-introduce her to her son...

The two most striking things about *Paris, Texas* are the superior quality of the screenplay and the characteristically Wenders-ian visual style. Sam Shepard, so adept at chronicling the disintegration of the American Family, takes this disintegration as a given here and explores the possibilities for reconciliation. None too surprisingly, Shepard decides that reconciliation is an impossibility.

Although there are one of or two moments of near soap-opera, Shepard's dialogue rings

true throughout the film aided no doubt, by fine performances from Stanton, Stockwell and Hunter Carson as the kid. Especially haunting is the confrontation between Stanton and his ex-wife (Nastassja Kinski) who now works in a sex-booth shop — the kind where the men can see and talk to the women but the women can't see the men. The extended monologues from Kinski and Stanton are pure Shepard — painful, tinged with references to violence and very moving.

Wenders, who's repeatedly shown that he's one of the most talented directors for expressing ideas visually, finds new ways to visualize the time-worn theme of "the difficulty of communication." Conversations shown in two-shot to emphasize the separation between characters, repeated use of technical gadgets (phones, walkie-talkies) to "facilitate" communication and the brilliant sex-booth scene (where the characters are separated by one-way glass and forced to talk on a phone while disclosing the most painfully personal bits of information) show Wenders to be in top form as a visually innovative director. (Robby Muller's distinctive and immediately recognizable cinematography certainly helps the cause too.)

Wenders has said that *Paris, Texas* is his "farewell to America" picture. It is fitting that his final "American" picture (ironically co-financed by France and Germany) is one of the best movies of the year.



Werner Herzog directs *Where the Green Ants Dream*



Dean Stockwell and Mary Dean Stanton in *Paris, Texas*

Full Moon in Paris

Beginning in the early-sixties, French critic-author-theoretician-film director Eric Rohmer started making uniquely personal films that went against the accepted notion of what a film should be. Focussing on characters that were more intellectual than the average movie's characters, Rohmer naturally concentrated on dialogue (after all, intellectuals do talk a lot) at the expense of overt action. What intrigued — and still intrigues — Rohmer is the gap between his characters' actions and words or, if you like, feelings and thoughts. Rohmer's characters, after seemingly-intense self-analysis, provide detailed explanations of their motives and intentions and then almost invariably act in a contradictory way. The results are usually extremely witty movies of self-deception that leave discerning audiences shaking their heads with amusement.

Rohmer's latest, *Full Moon in Paris*, the fourth installment in a series he's entitled "Comedies and Proverbs", is a remarkably clever, funny, and perfectly self-contained exploration of an intelligent but confused young woman's contradictory desires for love and independence.

Louise (Pascale Ogier) is an energetic part-time student and office employee who is beginning to feel somewhat hemmed-in by her relationship with her live-in boyfriend. **Feeling the need to be a little more independent, she takes an apartment in the heart**

of Paris and alternates between it and her boyfriend's place. Her new-found freedom and the new men she meets cause her to descend into the characteristic Rohmer cauldron of rationalization, self-analysis, and contradictory action that is both hilarious to watch and oh so representative of contemporary relationships among us young folk.

Rohmer's fondness for witty dialogue and subtle situational humor can't obscure the fact that he really knows how people will act. His uncanny understanding of contemporary morals results in repeated feelings of *deja-vu* among people I know. What's going on up on the screen frequently mirrors actual situations I and many of my friends have experienced. Rohmer's genius lies in his ability to show what in real-life we all take so seriously as the absurdly-funny things they really are. And what's more he convinces us — the screwed-up youths he's poking fun at — of this fact.

Although Rohmer makes fun of his characters, it's obvious he really loves them. Despite the inevitable come-uppance Rohmer's protagonists receive (usually a moment of *real* self-understanding which is always painful), he always ends his films with a bit of hope. When Louise, abandoned by the boyfriend she was thinking of abandoning, gets over her initial sorrow, she picks up the phone hoping to find a date. And, as the credits roll, the audience is hoping to see the next Eric Rohmer-film very soon.