

Arts

Festival's Canadian film is *The Last Straw*

By WYNDHAM PAUL WISE

Giles Walker's *The Last Straw* is the product of the National Film Board's innovative Alternative drama program. This unit of the federal agency is responsible for Walker's earlier film, *90 Days*, and John M. Smith's *Sitting In Limbo*. Both of these films were previewed at Toronto's Festival of Festivals which opens tonight for its 12th year.

The Last Straw shares with Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing* the honour of being the two Canadian films that will open the first night of this 10-day event. Because of the unexpected success of *90 Days*, this sequel will, in all probability, be given a Toronto theatrical run in the near future.

90 Days was the story of Alex Rossi (played by Sam Grana) who contracted his sperm to a lawyer with a mysterious client. *The Last Straw* continues the story of Alex, a very average man from Montreal who, as it turns out, has the world's highest sperm count—a staggering 99.5 percent "motility rate." He is under exclusive contract to a designer spermbank, complete with showrooms and deferential salespeople with slick brochures. On the advice of his manager Alex tries to capitalize on his superhuman abilities and goes public on a local radio station.

He is immediately beset by hundreds of women and a series of offers that range from a \$20 million US "deal" to a bizarre promotional scam involving gigantic pink elephants and shopping plaza parking lots. Alex, however, resists them all, determined to remain a truly Canadian resource.

90 Days was a surprise hit because of its refreshing look at the perceived loss of masculinity in contemporary males. Its engaging performances evolved from tight ensemble acting. In *The Last Straw*, the decline of the sperm count has become a world-wide phenomena, perpetuated by a communist-feminist plot. The gentle, focused satire of the earlier film has been replaced with the broader strokes of farce.

The Last Straw contains many funny sequences, including one in which a straight-faced Gwynne Dyer—playing a National Security Advisor—explains to the Canadian Minister of Defence how feminism was spread by the Russians.

However, what begins as a funny story about designer babies deteriorates into a prolonged chase as an Australian rugby football team



I'M WORKING AS FAST AS I CAN: Sam Grana reprises his role as Alex Rossi, generated semen samples with the help of Nurse Laura (Fernanda Tavares) in Giles Walker's *The Last Straw*.

tries to kidnap Alex. Apart from some *Crocodile Dundee* bashing, the last 20 minutes of the film are filler. In striving for the bigger laugh, Walker's material becomes very thin.

Sam Grana, Stefan Wodoslowsky as Alex's friend Blue, and Christine Pak as Hyang-Sook, Blue's Korean Mail Order bride, reprise their *90 Days* roles with the same low-key "non professional" charm. They are once again joined by the pretty Fernanda Tavares as Laura, the lawyer who now operates the spermbank. Wally Martin, a Quebec children's performer who has appeared on Sesame Street, gives an inspired performance as Alex's creepy manager who concocts the most outrageous schemes for making money. Beverley Murray gives the film's quirkiest performance as the nurse who is more than willing to assist Alex's ejacula-

tions twice a day, six days a week for the "future of Canada."

Giles Walker has been working for the National Film Board since 1974. *The Last Straw* is the third foray into social satire for this filmmaker whose 1980 half-hour drama, *Bravery In The Field*, was nominated for an academy award.

The Alternative Drama Program was born in the doom and gloom days of the early '80s when the Applebaum-Hébert Cultural Policy Report recommended reducing the NFB to a research and training centre. Walker, John Smith, and editor David Wilson felt that features could be made for a price that the NFB could afford and they set out to show that it could be done.

The result of this strategy was the first in Walker's trilogy, *The Masculine Mystique* (1984), about middle-class North American men struggling to cope with feminism. Walker, Smith, and Wilson collaborated and developed a style of feature documentary filmmaking using real people instead of trained actors with improvised dialogue and plot lines. Their style draws heavily from the cinema verité approach pioneered in Canada in the early '60s.

With the success of *90 Days*, *Sitting In Limbo* (directed by Smith, written by Smith and Wilson), *The Last Straw* (co-written and produced by Wilson and Walker), and Smith's latest, *Train Of Dreams* (also at this year's festival), the NFB has once again assumed the important role of providing an alternative Canadian vision.

12th annual Festival features punk westerns and the Far East

By ANDREW SUN

Going to a film festival is like walking into Baskin Robbins on a hot summer day. There are so many choices it's hard to decide. This year's Festival of Festivals once again features a wide range of films from the world of contemporary cinema. It's pretty hard to catch over 200 films in 10 days and this short guide might help you pick and choose.

First, some helpful hints: wear comfortable shoes, line up early, carry munchies around to eat during films and wear sunglasses going from one theatre to the next or you'll be squinting your way around Yonge and Bloor.

Galas this year include Canadian Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, which apparently wowed, the Cannes crowd—unless that's another exaggeration by the Canadian Press. Also, Stephen Frears' sequel to *My Beautiful Laundrette* called *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* will have a Gala on the 13th. *The Glass Menagerie*, directed by Paul Newman, will close the Festival on the 19th at Roy Thompson Hall.

Other Galas include Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride*, Eric Rohmer's *L'Ami de Mon Ami* and Alan Pakula's *Orphans*, but the most interesting Gala should be *Aria*, a series of opera music videos by 10 directors including J.L. Godard, Robert Altman, Ken Russell and Julien Temple.

The *Contemporary World Cinema* program has scooped Luis Mandolki's *Gaby* starring Norma Aleandro (*The Official Story*) for a world premiere. Norman Mailer makes his

directorial debut with *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Don't miss Wayne Wang's suspense thriller *Slam Dance* (the best Hollywood film I've seen this year!).

The Taviani brothers are back with *Good Morning, Babylon*, a story about early Hollywood. Juzo Itami's (director of *Tampopo*) funny new satire, *A Taxing Woman*, spoofs police vs. gangster dramas by replacing them with public auditors and corporate tax evaders. Other notable films include James Ivory's *Maurice*, Monty Python alumnus Terry Jones' *Personal Services*, Penelope Spheeris' weird

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punk western *Dudes* and John Sayles' union film *Matewan*.

Canadians are well represented this year with some terrific efforts. Besides the much publicized *Mermaids*, there is Giles Walker's sequel to *90 Days* called *The Last Straw* (see review in this section), Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un Zoo la Nuit*, and Bill MacGillivray's *Life Classes*. One Canadian director who hasn't received much publicity is Yves Simoneau, who in my opinion is this country's most talented director. His films are superbly executed from the cinematography to the editing, and explores an important theme in Quebec art, freedom versus entrapment. Simoneau's new film, *Les Fous de Bassan* (*In the Shadows of the*



I'VE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING: Actress Sheila McCarthy in a scene from Patricia Rozema's highly-touted film, expected to be one of the highlights of this year's Festival of Festivals.

Wind)—the story of a son who returns to his native fishing village after many years—will be shown during the Festival.

Virtually any film in "Eastern Horizons" is worth catching if only to compare cultural differences. "Buried Treasures" are rarely seen films by famous directors including Ichikawa, Antonioni, Michael Powell and Elaine May.

The Festival spotlight on the films of young controversial Spanish director Pedro Almodovar should also be interesting.

Watch for more Festival coverage in next week's *Excalibur*.