

You wanted movies?

By Howard Goldstein and Jane Horsley

While the publicity surrounding this year's Festival of Festivals makes it out to be one of the best ever, advance screenings of some of the films seem to suggest a festival that will be good at best. The films display a trend away from obscure films toward more accessible ones.

The question which seems to arise out of this year's schedule is whether or not Toronto's big yearly event should deal with more independent movies which lack distributors rather than those which are easily seen.

The David Cronenberg Retrospective is a good example. What could the festival planners have hoped to achieve that the repertory theatres (such as the Bloor or the Revue) could not have done? To make matters even worse, Cronenberg was selected to program a science fiction series and what did he pick? Well, with the exception of a couple of interesting obscure films like *I Killed Einstein*, *Gentlemen*, his choices are mostly widely shown films like *Duel*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Freaks*.

The State of Things West Germany 1982

One of the most critically well-received films at this year's festival, Wim Wenders' very personal look at filmmaking is not to everyone's taste.

The movie is basically about a film crew in Portugal who have run out of money in the middle of the making of a science fiction feature entitled "The Survivors." On the plot level, Wenders details all the crew's boredom and the director's attempts to contact the producer. When all his attempts eventually fail, Friedrich, the director, flies to Los Angeles.

There he finally meets up with his boss, Gordon (wonderfully played by Allen Goorwitz). Together they spend the night cruising the streets of Hollywood in a mobile home, talking about film and their lives, and most of the time failing to make any distinctions between them.

Back home, so to speak, in black and white filmmaking, Wenders has managed to create a film reminiscent of his earlier colorless classics, *Alice in the Cities* and *Kings of the Road*. The pace is slow, the images haunting, and the dialogue is subtly loaded with philosophical content.

State of Things is a bit more complex than those earlier films. At first it seems to be the kind of docudrama meant to exorcise the ill spirits Wenders suffered while making *Hammett* with Francis Ford Coppola. (*State of Things*, incidentally, was made during a break in shooting *Hammett*. The break was due to the fact that Coppola, the producer, was using Frederic Forrest in his own film, *One From the Heart*.) On another level, however, it is an attempt to address the difficult issue of whether reality can be separated from illusion. In this respect, it is very much a companion piece to *Hammett* in its struggle to ascertain whether film or art can be separated from life.

In the mobile home scene, the producer Gordon criticizes Friedrich for his lack of a story. Friedrich responds that he wishes to create a film which, rather than dealing with a story, deals with the "space between characters." It is to Wim Wenders' credit that he has managed to capture that space. In story form, *The State of Things* is a welcome departure and a reward to the committed viewer.

Educating Rita U.K. 1983

This film should prove to be one of the most enjoyable films of the Festival; certainly it is one of the best. A variation on the Pygmalion theme directed by Lewis Gilbert, *Educating Rita* teams Michael Caine (the star of *Alfie*, also directed by Lewis Gilbert) and newcomer Julie Walters. It is a superb match. The two have perfect timing, their characters switch form lighthearted bantering to serious discussion with seeming effortlessness.

Rita, actually Susan—she takes her name for Rita Mae Brown, the author—is a hairdresser who feels stifled by her working-class milieu and comes to University at Night to be tutored by Frank (Michael Caine). Frank is an embittered professor who used to write poetry until he became supremely cynical. Now he has turned to drink instead.

Rita's down-to-earth approach to life and literature (an example of her earthiness is her suggestion that the way to overcome staging difficulties of a Shaw play would be to put it on radio) is the first real challenge for Frank in a long time.

Rita gets educated, and in a sense, so does Frank. But in the process she finds herself unable to continue her life in the same manner (her husband leaves her because he won't have children). She is not yet secure in her new environment.

Eventually she learns to write the kind of essays required (stifling her street-wise approach somewhat) and to talk to the kids in university (Dublin's Trinity College). She is transformed and accepted.

Michael Caine feels ambivalent about his part in her growth—he feels she is losing what made her such a refreshing change from the sterility he suffers. Ultimately they both learn that they can have choices, the supreme lesson of freedom. In the meantime they have developed an extremely special bond between them.

Educating Rita is brilliantly acted, alternately hilarious and poignant. The film never compromises—it is consistently great. A wonderful look at the trauma of change and adaptation.

Although the Festival was poorly received last year, it at least had more interesting series. The look at the National cinema of Brazil, for instance, was superb. Films like Arnaldo Jabor's *Everything is OK* and Carlos Diegues' *Summer Rains* were among last year's high points and these are films which haven't yet, and may never be back in Toronto. Last year's John Cassavettes Retrospective also made more sense as most of the films in it were either without Canadian distributors or had not been shown in a theatre in years.

But with the Ontario Film Theatre suffering financially, the Festival organizers ought to seriously consider their mandate as Toronto filmgoers' only alternative to regular commercial cinema.

Here then is a sampling of some of the films to be shown. Other films to watch for that are not previewed here include:

- Lawrence Kasdan's *Big Chill*
- Nagisha Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*
- Jonathan Kaplan's *Heart Like A Wheel*
- Jean-Jacques Beineix's *The Moon in the Gutter*
- *The Tin Flute*, Claude Fournier's adaptation of the Gabrielle Roy novel

Chicken Ranch Great Britain 1982

Chicken Ranch—the title alone is suggestive—is a funny and moving documentary about a legalized brothel in Nevada. This was also the inspiration for the *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* but the movies differ radically. *Chicken Ranch* is a British production by Nicholas Broomfield and Sandi Sissel which manages to capture the spirit of Midwest American superbly.

Right in the middle of the desert in a prefab home is the fortress, the infamous house of sin (although the owner of the brothel says it is rather a house of love, doing charity work—who else would have sex with legless, paralyzed veterans if not for "the girls?")

The girls line up in the reception area for local rednecks and groups of Japanese tourists. The men choose the girl of their dreams—for the five-, 10-, or 20-minute sessions—from about seven or eight at a time. The price is decided upon in the room once the customer decides what he wants, the specialty suite with the Jacuzzi, for example.

Chicken Ranch is a fascinating look at the day-to-day business of sex—what the market value is for which act (one customer gets sent away being told that he can't get anything for 20 bucks; these girls aren't cheap). There is a lot of money to be made for these girls, but it takes its toll. One girl leaves the ranch because she feels the job is making her too callous, finding her emotions being deadened.

Fran, the woman who looks after the girls (she hands out the baby-stopping pills and the aspirins), seems to care for them but she does the bidding for the owner, Walter, and chews them out. Walter tries to pretend that he is really looking out for the girls' own good, but as the film unravels, he exposes his rather nasty self.

A lot of the women seem better able to relate to each other than the men—a couple of them talk about being beat up by their ex-boyfriends, ex-lovers, or ex-husbands. The conversations amongst the women gives touching insight into the trials of the job, their reactions to and opinions of their customers. The film does not paint a romantic, idealized picture of prostitutes and their clients, but instead is brutally raw and humane.

Au Clair de la Lune Canada 1983

For all those who think Canadian filmmaking means another awful movie which disguises Toronto so that it appears to be New York, Philadelphia, or Houston, here's a surprise. Not only is *Au Clair de la Lune* a good Canadian film, but it might very well be one of the best at this year's festival.

The story is offset to say the least. A vagrant albino named Francoise (call him Frank) meets a former bowling champ named Albert, who wishes to be referred to by the Anglicized short form, Bert.

Bert, his championship long behind him, now gets by working as a sandwich-board advertiser for the Moonshine Bowling Alley, the site of his great bowling past. The two become good friends and Albert agrees to let Frank live in his tire-slashed Chevy in the bowling alley parking lot.

The craziness is compounded by a leather-clad gang who go driving around in cars without tires. Their goal is to find the maniac—the person who's been slashing everybody's tires. The maniac turns out to be a young girl who does it to express dissatisfaction with her father's girlfriend; as well as to aid his tire rebuilding business.

The story of their friendship is told through Frank's narration—an oddly poetic jumble of mixed metaphors. It culminates when Frank fixes Bert's comeback (Bert, of course, doesn't know about it) in the Molson's Tournament at the Moonshine lanes.

If it all sounds rather boring and eventless, think of it as *Waiting for Godot* in a bowling alley parking lot in Montreal. While comparisons are often unfair, *Au Clair de la Lune* deserves to be mentioned alongside such significant work.

A positive film, it reminds us that even in the most absurd situations there is indeed something to be done. Director Andre Forcier has created a film of infinite charm, and aided by the lovely performances of Guy L'Ecuyer and Michel Cote, Forcier has done it very well.



Michael Caine (right) and Julie Walters in a scene from *Educating Rita*.

Vertigo U.S.A. 1958

After years out of distribution, what is arguably Alfred Hitchcock's greatest film is back. The story of an ex-police officer who is hired by a friend to follow his wife contains plenty of plot twists. Without giving anything away, suffice it to say that *Vertigo* is a brilliant documentation of the obsession of a man, Scotty Ferguson (played extraordinarily by James Stewart), for a woman (Kim Novak, also an excellent performance). The film hinges on Ferguson's phobia for heights, his vertigo.

Unlike many Hitchcock films, this one actually does have many moments which are quite poignant and haunting. There's lots of drama and suspense as the intricately woven plot unfolds. Also, there's lots of food for thought, particularly in regard to the role which power plays in sexuality and in life in general. It is a fascinating portrait of the juxtaposition of romance and reality.

The overall production is superb. Bernard Herrmann's soundtrack and Saul Bass' provocative titles all contribute to make this film the real buried treasure of this Festival. *Vertigo* is perfect film for those who think filmmaking began with Francis Ford Coppola or Stephen Spielberg, and an even better one for those who just love great films.

Altman's Streamers a belabored effort

By JOHN NICKLAS

Robert Altman's last film, *Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, was a stage adaptation that worked. His new film, *Streamers*, is one that does not. Both films use only one room for their setting and one gender for their cast (all female in *Jimmy Dean*, all male in *Streamers*); however, while *Jimmy Dean* transcends its stage origins, *Streamers* remains a filmed play.

The film takes place in an army barracks where five young recruits and two sergeants interact and attempt to reach some form of camaraderie despite different social backgrounds. "Racial problems, homosexuality, drunkenness, and the fear of fighting are some of the problems the men have to overcome. It is only during the opening moments, when the problems are still undeveloped, that the film is imbued with Altman's cinematic touches—mirror shots, slow zooms, and shots through windows—emphasizing character interaction on different levels. Unfortunately once the characters' identities become established, the speeches lengthen, and the film turns into a play.

This is easy to understand since screenwriter David Rabe is, in fact, also the author of the stage version. What may be strong characterization when presented live on stage is somewhat flat on film. Altman doesn't help matters by shooting most of the conversations in a conventional two-shot set-up. The middle of the film suffers from lengthy banter with certain themes too belabored.

By the end of the film (play) the viewer realizes that the personality clashes are only the surface themes. This is a film that is ultimately about the brutality lurking just beneath the surface of the characters. It doesn't take a war to bring out the killer instinct: some are able to suppress it, others are not.

However, the intensity of the final cathartic moments comes about not because of Altman's directing, but because of Rabe's script.

Streamers lacks the feeling of openness and emptiness that characterize Altman's finest work. He is at his best when characters maintain an improvisational mood, stumbling and moving through a world that Altman can satirize (*Nashville*, *The Long Goodbye*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Jimmy Dean*). But in *Streamers* the edges are just too smooth and the elements to neatly ordered for the film's own good. The result is disappointing.



Carmen Spain 1983

Every year there is a film which somehow becomes a major success, for no apparent reason. At last year's Festival it was Paul Mazursky's *Tempest*. It was voted most popular film at the festival, but it's only redeeming quality was its beautiful Greek islands location, putting it in the same class as such classics as *Summer Lovers*. This year it appears that such undeserved attention will go to Carlos Saura's *Carmen*.

A supposed hit at this year's Cannes and Montreal Film Festivals, *Carmen* is the story of a choreographer who is staging a dance version of the famous opera and is in need of a leading lady. After a short search he finds her. Guess what? Her name is Carmen. The rest of the film depicts how the choreographer's obsession with his dancer parallels the performances which they rehearse.

Much of the film is concerned with the rehearsal pieces. They are elaborate Spanish-style dance pieces, complete with endless foot-stomping and finger-snapping. It is here, according to one major Toronto newspaper critic, where the film's great eroticism lies. Unfortunately, the shallow script makes the characters seem artificial, and the whole thing seems too contrived. The result is that *Carmen* is about as erotic as the underwear section in a Sears catalog.

About the only thing of interest in *Carmen* is the appearance of guitarist Paco DeLucia (best known for his work with John McLaughlin and Al DiMeola) as the choreographer's friend. This level-headed, underacted performance makes him one of the only believable characters in the film. Unless you're interested in seeing Spanish dancing documented, avoid this one.



Frank the Albino sends his love in this scene from *Au Clair de la Lune*, possibly the Festival's best film.

Alsino and the Condor Cuba/Nicaragua 1982

This movie could appropriately be subtitled "Nicaragua Meets Hollywood." The irony of the film, the first fiction feature to come out of Nicaragua, is that while portraying a rejection of American military aid—interference in the civil war—the film relies upon typical Hollywood techniques of telling a story (syrupy music, a cute kid actor, and manipulated perspective).

Alsino is a peasant boy who lives with his grandmother. Influenced by a helicopter ride he took with an American pilot, he attempts to fly out of a tree and cripples himself. After the accident, he wanders around the country observing the fighting between the American-directed government army and the revolutionary guerrillas. The "condor" in the title refers to the symbol of American military interference (presumably requested by the government forces): a helicopter with an eagle painted on the front.

Parts of the film seem to be references to *Apocalypse Now*, particularly a scene in which the American advising officer, Dean Stockwell, orders an attack on the whole area in retaliation to an ambush by guerrillas. Ultimately, the bombs also land on the government forces base, which is forced to evacuate, with the Nicaraguan army leader wondering who is in charge. The suggestion seems to be that U.S. involvement in Latin America will cause it to experience another Vietnam.

Alsino is morose throughout the film. He does not smile at all until the very last shot which depicts him holding a gun to salute the revolutionary soldiers who have triumphed over the American-assisted military. It is a disturbing shot, but one which fits the slant of the film—it occurs just after Alsino has burned a trunk of mementos from his grandfather, a Dutch seaman. Perhaps the removal of Western influence is meant to be a propheety.

The director, Miguel Littin, was head of the Chilean film industry and sought asylum in Mexico after Allende was overthrown. Now working in Nicaragua, Alsino is reputed to be the first feature film to come out of Nicaragua since its change of government. It was made with Cuban assistance though. Two countries combined to produce it and it was still made on a small budget of \$60,000. The resulting film is surprisingly well-crafted, and while the message contained in *Alsino and the Condor* might be met with great indifference, to ignore the film, as a film, would be to miss a solid work.