

Steve's Film Festival Reviews 1993

[These reviews have been reformatted for Word. Note that there was a hiatus of reviews from 1988 to 1992, and this edition marks a return to publication.]

September 23, 1993 (Rev.) (again)

Yes, it's that time of year again, and I am actually going to publish my reviews this year, something I had fallen out of the habit of doing. Having promised this epic to so many people, now I have to deliver.

The films are reviewed in the order in which I saw them, and so there is no pride of place to a review coming first or last. I have done this to give non-Festival goers something of the feeling of the ups and downs of attending the Festival -- the days you wish you had stayed in bed as well as those where the films just get better and better.

My apologies to those of you who have heard pieces of some of the reviews before. It is an inevitable fact that when people ask you about what you have seen, you develop a canned response after a while, and some of those are here. Have patience and read on.

Friday, September 10th

(1) "A Foreign Field", GB, Charles Sturridge, 1993.

This film looks interesting in the program -- Alec Guinness, Leo Kern, Jeanne Moreau, Lauren Bacall; distributed by The Sales Company, a usually reliable source of English films.

Premise: two old soldiers (English and American) are off to France to look up an old flame from WWII who was a ministering angel of mercy to them in hospital (and probably a bit more as well), and who are both convinced that she loved only them. English soldier (Kern) has a sidekick (Guinness) who is a bit simple as a result of a war wound obtained saving Kern's character's life. American soldier (John Randolph) has a daughter and son-in-law in tow whose principal concern appears to be that daddy not find a new love to whom he might leave all his loot. To this mixture add a mysterious American woman with a European past (Bacall) and the old flame (Moreau) who turns out to have been a well-known tart with much of her old charm intact.

Stir well.

Unfortunately, the situation is just a bit too contrived a bit too often, including a phenomenon I have come to dread -- the artificial crisis in the second last reel which triggers the reconciliation between all characters. In short, interesting to see this collection of actors working together, but something you're likely to see on Masterpiece Theatre where you can ignore its shortcomings.

Sturridge (directing) is probably best known for "Brideshead Revisited", and he uses Geoffrey Burgon again here for his music. I half expected to see a young Jeremy Irons bicycling into frame at any moment.

A waste of a lot of good talent. <sigh>

(2) "The Bed You Sleep In", USA, Jon Jost, 1993.

You know that you're in trouble when the producer thanks you for attending the screening, says that he feels this is the best thing the director has done (he should know, having produced the last four films by Jost), and then says that it is a difficult film. Hmmmmmm. Lights go down. Main title.

Now you really know you're in trouble when the typography in the title sequence is unreadable -- a designer's joy and an audience's nightmare. Do I suspect just a tiny bit of self-indulgence here?

This film spends a lot of time looking at things. Long shots. Really long shots. Trees rustling gently in the wind. Water in a babbling brook (nosubtitles, and so I can't translate). Small town roads on which, rarely, a vehicle crosses the frame. And then there's the sawmill and the logs. We get to know them very, very well.

Seems that this sawmill (in Oregon) has fallen on hard times thanks to the nasty Japanese competition and the "God Squad" who are more interested in protecting the wildlife than the lumbermen's jobs. We spend a lot of the first hour of the film learning this when we are not looking at the logs, etc. (see above). We learn that the sawmill owner (or manager, it's never really clear) is a bit distant, but has a loving wife who takes him in the bush sometime in the first hour (probably to give the brook something to talk about).

At the start of the fourth reel, A LETTER ARRIVES. This is the plot, kiddies, so pay attention! Seems that the daughter of the couple (above) who is off in Seattle or somewhere similar at college has written to her mother to say she can't ever come home again because daddy diddled her as a young girl. Mom wants to know if it's true. Dad won't fess up and resorts to the "do you believe her or me" gambit. It doesn't work. About a reel and a half later, we learn the daughter has killed herself, and the mother has done likewise in reaction, and then the father offs himself too. End of plot.

If you are really brave and sit through the credits (in the same unreadable typography), you will eventually learn that the sawmill where the film was made closed due to competition and a lack of logs all of which were being nested in by some owl or frog or whatever. Of course, you have to sit through at least five minutes of credit sequence to get to this point.

I was not impressed, but sat through the entire two hours (a) to kill time and (b) not quite believing that anyone would actually try to fob this off as a great work. Oh yes, I almost forgot Jon Jost's obvious bid for the record longest steadycam shot in any film where he moves around a diner looking at everything in a kind of slow pan shot that goes on, I am convinced, until he ran out of film or the cameraman tripped.

A gigantic waste of time and a film unlikely ever to appear again unless the Cinematheque does a Jon Jost retrospective someday.

(3) "45th Parallel", Italy, Atillio Concari, 1986.

This film was a substitute for "Ripa Hits the Skids" whose print had not shown up yet. An odd choice, I must say, given that "Ripa" is a Finnish comedy. Anyhow, the title alludes to a place half way between, and the film is about those aspects of small-town Italian life which were vanishing in the mid-1980s as the modern era crept into every corner.

I won't say much more about this, except that it was the only feature Concari (a fashion photographer) made. Interesting in an academic sort of way.

(4) Wittgenstein, GB, Derek Jarman, 1993.

Boiling one of the 20th century's major philosophers down to 75 minutes takes some doing, and Jarman gives us at best a sketch of the man, his circle, and his work. Rather like the cover of Reader's Digest, but with sexy graphics.

A very theatrical work (generally black sets with little furniture) with good acting, but not very enlightening in the end. We get the sense of having been exposed to "deep thought", but only enough that we might remember the gist of the argument beyond the inevitable cappuccino after the show.

Tilda Swinton (of "Orlando" fame) has some nice over the top scenes along with Michael Gough (playing Bertrand Russell). Another film more interesting for the acting and production than for the content.

Opens soon at the Bloor and other rep cinemas. Maybe worth seeing once for the acting and design.

Saturday, September 11th

(5) "A Dangerous Woman", USA, Stephen Gyllenhaal, 1993.

Despite it's being an obviously commercial film (Cineplex is the distributor), I went to this screening because I wanted to see Debra Winger in a film where she has a rather simple, plain character whose principal fault lies in her utter (and naive) inability to be dishonest. Moreover, the director is known for his previous features including "Paris Trout" and the less successful "Waterland".

Winger's character (Martha) lives with her aunt (Barbara Hershey, and yes, it strains credibility a little until you realize that "Aunt Frances" married a much older man and is now a widow). Frances has a lover who has political ambitions, but his wife (a boozier) is not enthralled by this situation, and she literally crashes a party being thrown for hubby at Frances' house by driving her car into the verandah. This brings on the need for someone to fix it, and he materializes in the form of Mackie (Gabriel Byrne) who, among other things, manages to get Martha pregnant.

Can you say "soap opera"?

For all its faults, this is not a *bad* film and it's nice to see Debra Winger playing against type. However, the film is marred by an obviously tacked-on ending in which loose ends are cleaned up, Mackie has done right by Martha, and they have an oh-so-cute urchin. Blecchhh!!! If the film had ended about five minutes sooner leaving us to figure out whatever ending we wanted, it would have been much better but probably too artsy.

(6) Short Program

I always try to attend programs of shorts at the Festival because you get to see work that either vanishes completely, or which turns up unannounced at odd times as fillers on TVO, PBS or even the CBC (when they are not preempting everything else for a hockey or baseball game, or a special on the significance Kim Campbell's hair in Canadian constitutional history).

"Sour Death Balls" by Jessica Yu (USA) is in the best tradition of years of "Candid Camera" episodes, except that the people knew they were being filmed. They are all trying to eat *very* sour candies -- some with great dedication and others giving up in horror.

"Smush" by Jeff Vilencia (USA) managed to get the most visceral reaction from any audience I sat in this year. It contains eight minutes of a rather cute damsel who loves to crush earthworms under her feet, squish them in her toes, and when that gets boring, under high heels. She thinks of them as tiny little men, you see, but the audience didn't think much of two dozen worms going to their death (quite messily) for our "entertainment". Kay Armitage (the programmer of the film) batted zero on this one.

"The Attendant" by Isaac Julien (UK) features a museum guard for whom the classical artworks he watches by day take on a new and very kinky style by night. Lots of leather and delicious young men, not unexpected from one of England's new gay directors.

"Schwarzfahrer"/"Black Rider" by Pepe Danquart (Germany) takes place on a streetcar in Berlin where a black man sits in silence beside an elderly white woman who spends much of the film talking openly about the horrors of all the foreigners in her land. Others on the tram are embarrassed but they do nothing. Eventually, the ticket inspector boards, and everyone gets ready to deal with him. Just before he arrives at our friends' seat, however, the man grabs the woman's ticket and eats it in a lightning move seen by the other passengers but not the inspector. The woman, nearly speechless, protests that she has never cheated on her fare, while the man

smiles and calmly produces his pass. As the film ends, the woman has been led off the car muttering about how those blacks will do *anything*, "they even eat your tickets!", while the inspector writes out a summons. Best short on the program.

I am not going to mention any of the others (five of them) except to give an honourable mention to a Czech film "Food" by Jan Svankmajer which uses live action and stop animation to produce three increasingly bizarre versions of breakfast, lunch and dinner meals. Worth seeing, but almost impossible to describe, and a little gross for those of you with weak stomachs.

Sunday, September 12th

(7) "Libera Me", France, Alain Cavalier, 1993.

This was the first film of the festival to truly impress me, to give me the sense of having seen something special and worth repeating. Unfortunately, I suspect that it will not be seen here again.

The film is set more or less in the present, but its use of sets with only the minimal furnishing or composition needed to establish a location gives it a feeling of taking place nowhere at all. This is a fitting feeling for a film about government oppression and resistance in which the power of the state is omnipresent, but not entirely invincible. The great strength of this work is that there is no dialogue, and yet, by the end of its 75 minutes we know all of the characters, who they are, what they do and what their fate has been.

There is little on-camera violence, but the brutality of the state is quite clear and all the more effective for the way it is handled. The sound track, which contains only the sounds caused by people's actions, is as important as the images on the screen. A film well worth seeing if it ever shows up in Toronto again.

(8) "Madadayo", Japan, Akira Kurosawa, 1993.

This is Kurosawa's latest film, and some of the criticism I have read has been rather unkind. Yes, it is too long (134 minutes) and could do with some cutting in spots, but the problems are not fatal.

We pick up the story in 1943 in Tokyo when a teacher (played by Tatsuo Matsumura) retires to write, to the great disappointment of his students. These students form an extended family who care for the teacher and his wife in the aftermath of the war and through his retirement as he becomes more easily distracted by small things like the disappearance of a favourite cat. Every year they hold an anniversary party at which the teacher's stock answer to questions about whether he is really at the end of his life and powers is "Madadayo" ("not yet").

The story is loosely based on the life of a writer who died in 1971, and may be Kurosawa's way of saying that he, too, is not yet ready to retire. It is a warm character study in which the reverence for age and wisdom may seem a little odd to a Canadian audience, but worth seeing all the same.

(9) "Household Saints", USA, Nancy Savoca, 1993.

Another commercial film (Alliance Releasing has it), and again one which starts to come apart at the seams in the last half. Catherine (Tracey Ullman) is wife to Joseph, who won her in a pinochle game (I am not making this up) from her rather tipsy father who had nothing left to bet. She is an innocent and somewhat naive, but evolves into a good Italian mother ... a little too good in that her daughter, Therese, grows up immersed in religion and a belief in miracles.

So far, so good, and the film is well on its way to showing that blind faith has its good and bad sides. But Catherine falls ill, has a vision of Jesus (who, in a nice touch, looks just like all of His paintings, and speaks with an English accent), and eventually dies, although of what exactly we are never sure. Many flowers bloom. A divine hand is obviously at work, and maybe she wasn't crazy after all.

I was intrigued by comments around me from some people who felt that the entire premise was deeply insulting to Catholics by presenting their belief as verging on gullible superstition. I do not agree with this view, however, as underneath everything I think that the author was trying to talk about what happens when religion becomes superstition, and how a really true believer may be indistinguishable from the loonies around her. Whether this message comes across clearly in the film is another matter.

A nice story, with a lot of interesting characters, especially in the oldest of the three generations, but just a little too sweet for my taste in the end.

Monday, September 13th

(10) "The Piano", Australia, Jane Campion, 1993

This was probably the most-awaited film at the Festival as it won co-top honours at Cannes. C/FP Distribution has picked it up, and it will open later this year, I think.

The premise takes a bit to swallow, but if you let yourself believe, then the story and its characters hold up. Ada (Holly Hunter), a young widow from Glasgow, has agreed to an arranged marriage to Stewart (Sam Neill) who is a pioneer in New Zealand, all this taking place in the late 19th century. She comes ashore in a large Maori canoe with her daughter, her considerable luggage, and her piano which (to strain credibility) is in perfect tune after a round-the-world voyage. The piano is too large to be carried through the dense and muddy jungle to Stewart's house, and it is abandoned on the beach.

This is catastrophic for Ada who has not spoken, of her own choice, since the age of six, and for whom the piano is her true and passionate voice. Baines (Harvey Keitel), a white man gone native who lives near Stewart and Ada, and without whom (one gets the impression) Stewart would have

vanished into the mud long ago, takes the piano although he cannot play it. He talks Ada into giving him lessons, but what he really wants is her, and there follows a series of visits in which she "buys back" the piano from him key by key in return for increasingly generous and erotic favours. The feminists in the audience may have a little problem with this idea, because a great a passionate love grows out of something that clearly starts off as exploitation.

Anyhow, we have a somewhat unconventional love triangle that ends with a cathartic, if overdramatic, break between Ada and her piano as, the film hints, she finds her true voice. I appreciated this film's use of music as a means of expressing passion, especially for an era when public passion was unknown, and am willing to forgive a few things (like a piano tuner showing up in the New Zealand bush) because the story is so well told. Definitely worth seeing.

(11) "The Baby of Macon", Netherlands/France, Peter Greenaway, 1993

The Greenaway fans will love this one, and actually I found it better than "Prospero's Books", Greenaway's technically brilliant version of "The Tempest" which I detested for the violence done to Shakespeare. "The Baby of Macon" is a play within a play, a device Greenaway uses to involve the audience in complicity for what happens in the film (an old, and rather well-worn approach).

Set in the 17th century, the story opens with a baby boy, all golden curls and ever so beautiful, being born to an absolute hag who is well past her child-bearing years. The baby is hailed as a miracle (both because of the mother's age, and because all women in the town have been barren in punishment for the decline of its cathedral), and soon his sister (a virgin) is claiming the child as her own.

In the short term, an industry springs up where first the sister, and later the Church, exploit the child for the "blessings" it can bestow (in return, of course, for ever more lavish gifts or the outright sale of precious fluids -- tears being the least disgusting -- from the child). The tables turn, eventually, and the child is killed, but local law forbids the prosecution of the sister for her fraud because she is a virgin. That situation is quickly remedied in a long and rather gruesome mass rape which leaves her dead.

The layers of the play get confused, deliberately, because the actress in the play within the play who has the role of the sister is actually raped and killed to the delight of the audience. As the film ends, the "audience" turns to face the camera, giving a strong message that we, the outer audience are just as guilty of the exploitation and violence which has taken place on the screen.

I am not convinced that this subject needs the baroque treatment for which Greenaway is so well known (the message is a lot smaller than the medium in this case), but the film is something of an experience. Worth seeing once if you like Greenaway's style.

(12) "The Boys of St. Vincent - Part I", Canada, John N. Smith, 1992

This film has not been seen in Ontario until now thanks to a gag order from the court which is hearing the child abuse case of the Christian Brothers. The fact that it is a work of fiction which was not viewed by either the original court nor the appeal court upholding the ban raises serious questions about freedom of speech in Canada where the courts are playing fast and loose with the concept of publicity bans. Although it is something of a moot point, the case may still be heard by the Supreme Court as the issue has broad implications.

The first half of the story takes place in an orphanage in St. John's where the head brother, Peter Lavin (Henry Czerny), is clearly abusing boys, and he is not alone in this practice. What takes place is well known among the children, but not generally believed outside of the orphanage.

One night, a young boy, Kevin, runs away from the orphanage, is eventually picked up by the police and returned despite his strong objections. He is the personal "boy" of Lavin's and has no desire to go back to the orphanage. A police detective takes up the case and begins collecting evidence about what is going on, but is blocked at every step by the Church and its friends in the Police force and the Newfoundland government.

By the end of the first episode, most of the offenders have been conveniently packed off to other duties in the Church, and a new regime is installed at the orphanage. There is a subtle hint at the end of the episode that it may be "business as usual" with the new brothers, but this thread is not pursued in the second half.

This is a film about the abuse of power and the corruption of a society where some people are, de facto, above the law, and it deals with the subject of child abuse in a strong, but not exploitative way. After seeing the first episode, some people may think that it blackens the Church's reputation, and yet it goes out of its way to ensure that there are sympathetic, well-intentioned, but frustrated characters in the Church, police and government who are unable to expose the evil among them. And, frankly, both Church and state have a lot to be ashamed of. While this film is a work of fiction, the type of events it describes are all too true as the revelations from the Mt. Cashel orphanage has shown.

The second episode (which I saw on Friday, but include here for simplicity), is set 15 years later when the wheels of justice finally begin to turn. The boys, who are now young men each damaged by their experiences in one way or another, have gone their separate ways and are dealing with their past in many ways -- drugs, nightmares, sexual confusion. Peter Lavin has left his order, and is married with two children in Montreal. As he is about to begin a family dinner, the RCMP arrives with a warrant for his arrest, and his life and family begin to unravel.

The second episode deals mainly with the trial and each character's reaction to it, and contains scenes between Lavin and a psychiatrist who is evaluating him as part of his potential defence. These scenes were shot with Czerny and with the psychiatrist who acted as counsellor to the cast and crew during the shooting, and were scripted between the two of them. Through them we come to see the inner man, the background in Peter Lavin's life which brought him to the brotherhood for

its control and safety. That control, however, was overtaken by the repressed passion which with deep irony could flourish only because of the closed society in which Lavin lived and rose to a position of authority.

There was a long question and answer period after the second episode which brought out the great deal of work that went into the preparation of the script, the characters and the story. All of the events and characters are drawn from life, although they are, necessarily, composites. Czerny's role was particularly difficult (it was odd to see him almost changing back into "Peter Lavin" as he talked about how he worked on finding a way to portray the barely repressed terror that lurks just below the character's surface), and he has been widely praised for his work.

This film has been well-received at showings in Europe, and it will probably appear on CBC in December (it was screened in French on Radio Canada a few weeks ago). American networks are interested, but terrified of advertisers' reactions; whether PBS, now that it does not have to toady to the knuckle-dragging Republicans, may be a little braver, but that remains to be seen.

Very highly recommended.

(13) "The Pigs", Poland, Wladyslaw Pasikowski, 1993

A straight-ahead police thriller set in the very changed world of post-communist Poland where organized crime and former security police are hard to distinguish from each other. Two friends who were both in the political police go their separate ways, one into the less glamorous world of criminal policing, and the other, after a short spell, in the drug trade. The inevitable tension follows from their conflicting duties, and the ruthlessness of the former security police quickly pushes the merely ordinary criminals aside as they become an established power in the drug world.

Meanwhile, the criminal police are hopelessly understaffed, underarmed, and not particularly motivated to do a good job; they are easy pickings for the pros. There is a clear undercurrent through this film both of criticism of the existing political order which seems unable to operate the country credibly, and of the old security forces which built up substantial expertise and power that is now turned against their own country for private gain.

This film has no North American distributor, and I don't know if it will show up locally. However, in style, it made an interesting contrast to the next film on my list.

(14) "Romeo is Bleeding", USA, Peter Medak, 1993

Another police thriller, but with a very different slant (not to mention budget and directorial outlook) from "The Pigs" (see above). Peter Medak is already known to Toronto audiences as the director of "The Krays" and "Let Him Have It", both set in England. "Romeo is Bleeding" is very much an American film, and is done in the manner of a "film noir", complete with a soundtrack that is so essential to the style. Medak, however, "winks" at the audience a few times early on to let us know that we are all in on the joke, and that this is a 90s film, not one from the 50s.

Gary Oldman, in a fine role, plays a cop (Jack) who is working both sides of the street -- his job is to protect gangsters in the witness protection program, but he happily sells them out to the mob. The payoffs go mainly into a stash in his back yard, but also to support his mistress.

Life gets messy when not only a witness, but the cops protecting him are assassinated by Mona DeMarco (Lena Olin), one of the nastiest and sexiest femmes fatales on the screen. This is a woman you would not want to have anywhere in a thousand-mile radius were she even vaguely displeased with you, let alone angry. Resourceful, deadly and utterly unscrupulous. Guess who poor Jack is assigned to guard when she is finally caught.

The rest of the story unravels with Jack caught between forces both in the police and in the mob who want Mona, each for their own reasons. I don't want to give anything else away because there are some rather nice plot twists you should discover for yourself. Some nice supporting work by Roy Scheider, Peter Boyle and Juliette Lewis, among others. (Ours was the first public screening -- Medak likes Toronto audiences.)

The film opens later this fall in Toronto, and is worth seeing. (A caveat: there are some rather violent scenes which fit the style, but which those of tender hearts may wish to avoid.)

Tuesday, September 14th

(15) "Darkness in Tallinn", Estonia/Finland, Ilkka Jarvilaturi, 1993

Well, here I am, stuck in a Film Festival rut at yet another cops and mafia film. This time, the premise is that a stash of gold which will ensure Estonia's fiscal stability, hidden during the war in Paris, is being repatriated. A group of men (some with obvious connections to the old power structure and others just greedy) plot to hijack the bullion delivery, but for this they require a city-wide power blackout (hence the title's most obvious meaning).

One of the conspirators runs a cigarette factory (his trademark is a two-foot long cigarette always worn over the ear from which he breaks off smokes as needed), and plans to smuggle the gold out of Estonia recast and packaged as cigarettes. Another is an engineer in the power system whose vital role involves triggering the blackout, and he is encouraged in his task by his wife who is very pregnant when we first meet her.

The actual heist is something of a shambles, although successful, and the child's birth (co-incidently happening during the blackout) is compromised by the power cut. (The wages of sin, etc.)

The basic problem with this film is that it tries to do too many things, and gets tangled up in working out plot lines. There is the conspiracy itself, a less than flattering picture of the state of affairs in Estonian hospitals and other public areas, and a celebration of the new-found independence of the state. Not bad, but not the film of the decade either.

(16) "L'Ombre du Doute", France, Aline Issermann, 1993

Another superb film on the subject of child abuse in which, unlike "The Boys of St. Vincent", even we, the audience, are unsure of what is fact and what is fantasy until nearly the end of the story. An apparently normal family (couple, daughter, son) is not all it seems, and the daughter's reaction to a simple touch by her father suggests something dark in their relationship. This boils to the surface not long after with the daughter accusing her father of abusing both her and her younger brother.

The father is astounded, and the mother horrified that her daughter would say such things. They both encourage the view that the daughter, who has a strong fantasy life, has fabricated the charges. Only much later when the father is undergoing psychological counselling does the truth come out.

This film was three years in the making through research and careful scripting, and like "The Boys ..." is scrupulous in basing its characters and their motivations on the real world. The difficult and poignant scene near the end of the film where the father breaks down and admits to himself what he has done was based on a real interview between Isserman and an abuser during her research. The film has not opened in France yet, and Isserman expects that it will encounter some resistance because of the mother's complicity in disbelieving her daughter's accusations.

Definitely worth seeing if, and when, it plays here.

(17) "Tango", France, Patrice Leconte, 1993

This film, from the director of "Monsieur Hire" and "Le Mari de la Coiffeuse", was a great disappointment. It is supposed to be a comedy, but winds up only being a thinly disguised plug for misogyny where the resolution and reconciliation do not outweigh what has gone before.

The first reel or so spends its time establishing the character of a man who quite cheerfully and ruthlessly disposes of both his wife and her lover, is subsequently tried for murder, but is acquitted by the jury. However, the judge (Phillipe Noiret, who is wasted here) knows where there is additional evidence which would convict our murderer, and keeps this knowledge for future use. (It should be noted that the judge is a bachelor and has a rather low, but not infrequently expressed, opinion of women.)

It seems that the judge's nephew has a problem -- he likes to sleep around alot, but cannot handle his wife's taking a lover. The solution? Get a hit man to dispose of her. (I am not making this up.) Who better for the job than our murderer who can be coerced into assisting. The film really comes apart at the seams when the chase takes us (and the murderer, judge and nephew) into Africa. The murderer can't bring himself to do it, and it all works out in the end.

This film is a big hit in France, and has a Canadian distributor. Avoid it.

(18) "Naked", GB, Michael Leigh, 1993

David Thewlis plays Johnny, an incredibly literate and witty drifter who drops in unannounced at his former girlfriend's flat in London. There follows a surreal collection of encounters among Johnny, the girlfriend's roommate, the girlfriend and other assorted characters (including a security guard with a strong philosophical bent) who are all in one way or another hurt by the way that Johnny crashes through other people's lives.

I cannot begin to thread together the plot, and this is really more a film about characters than about what happens to them anyway. The writing is brilliant and quite conscious about putting complex discussions in the mouths of people from whom you would never expect them. Thewlis performance earned the best actor award at Cannes, and he deserved it -- he is on screen, it seems, for at least three quarters of the movie's two-hour running time.

Alliance Releasing has already picked this up, and so it will open here sometime in the next year (no date or venue announced yet). Very fine work.

Wednesday, September 15th

(19) "Speak Up! It's So Dark", Sweden, Suzanne Osten, 1993

A two-hander with actors Etienne Glaser and Simon Norrthon playing, respectively, a psychiatrist and a neo-Nazi skinhead. As the film opens, we are in a railway station where a black man is being beaten by a gang of skinheads while the doctor looks on in horror from a compartment on a train. In the melee, one of them is injured and flees to the train to the same compartment, and this sets in motion the rest of the story.

The doctor is a Jew, and yet he befriends the skinhead and attempts to break through the anger and hatred to reach the confused and insecure man underneath. In a series of consultations, their relationship ebbs and flows, almost disintegrating at times as the skinhead clings to his belief that the Holocaust is a myth, and the doctor searches for the person underneath the neo-Nazi cloak. By the end of the film, they are still grudging friends, but nothing has really been solved beyond their better trust and understanding.

A film worth seeing both for the acting, and for the sad insights it gives into the fertile ground in which fascism can grow. It has a New York distributor, and may therefore show up in Toronto.

(20) "Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould", Canada, Francois Girard, 1993

Unquestionably my favourite film from the festival because of my love of Gould's music, the acting of Colm Feore (who plays Gould), and the excellent script by Girard and by Don McKellar. Rhombus Media, who have produced many films about the performing arts, have outdone themselves with this one.

Bach's thirty-two "Goldberg Variations", a landmark in the Gould recordings, provide the scheme for the film which, although chronologically organized, is less a biography than a sketch of the many sides of Gould. The filmmakers wisely chose never to attempt to duplicate Gould's playing leaving Feore to merely inhabit scenes, to bring Gould's mischief, delight, insistence on detail, and sardonic humour to the screen. The sound track is entirely taken from Gould's recordings, and my only kvetch about this film is that it should have had a good quality, stereo track rather than the mono sound one associates with 16mm documentaries.

Each segment, with its own title, is a vignette, some less than a minute long, which brings us another piece of Gould to savour. Some are documentary-style interviews with close friends, some are elegantly staged snippets from Gould's life including a particularly fine demonstration in a busy cafe of the creative spark behind the radio drama "The Idea of North".

I know that as someone with a love for music and theatre, I may be somewhat prejudiced in my assessment of this film, but I recommend it very highly. It is a warm portrait of an artist whose music left us far too soon.

Opening later this fall.

(21) "Friends", South Africa, Elaine Proctor, 1993

This is a film with a message about the possible future of South Africa and it succeeds to a point, albeit one which takes a bit of a leap of faith. Three women, one a Boer, one English and one black, are friends from university in Johannesburg. The film is as much about the interaction of the three women and their cultures as it is about the SA political situation, and on that level it works well.

The English woman is also a terrorist working with the ANC, and although her character is based on a composite of real whites in SA who used their position and access to carry out terrorist acts, I have a hard time believing that someone as ditzy would gain anyone's confidence. This led me to feel that she was being used as a "mule" (to borrow a term from the drug trade), and I'm not sure that was a reaction the director wanted in her audience.

As a political film, it occupies an unusual position of being made when the government was sufficiently disorganized that the script was not censored (including a clear reference to the collusion between the SA Security Service and the Nkata forces to harass ANC supporters).

This is Elaine Proctor's first feature and worth seeing even with its faults.

Thursday, September 16th

(22) "Der Kinoerzaehler", Germany, Bernhard Sinkel, 1993

"The Movie Teller" (to use this film's English title) is about the passing away of a gentle, simple life of Germany in the 20s with the transition from silent to sound films as the link. Armin Mueller-Stahl (who starred in the delightful "Utz" at last year's Fest) plays the title role -- a man who narrates the silent films in his local theatre and accompanies them on the violin. His is a man of renown, well-liked by his audiences, and with a romantic theatrical tradition to uphold. With the coming of the talkies, his world falls apart.

The theatre itself suffers a change soon after with the rise of fascism, and the owner, a Jew, is stripped of his citizenship. The cinema becomes a meeting hall for the Nazis and a venue for nationalist films. A sad moment arrives when Mueller-Stahl's character makes a stirring speech at a meeting that draws on his background in silent film stories, and it gives every indication of turning into a call for the greatness of Germany and its culture, but then he asks that the showing of silent films be enshrined in law, and his shallow vision is revealed.

This is a film about film, much in the line of "Cinema Paradiso" which the director made a point of not seeing until after he had completed his own work. It has its moments, but is held together by Mueller-Stahl's performance just as Phillipe Noiret is the hub around which "Cinema Paradiso" turns. The inevitable fire which destroys the theatre is foreshadowed rather more than is necessary, although it can be taken as a metaphor for the disaster which will follow in the war.

A good, but not great film.

(23) Short Program

A program of Canadian shorts, with the usual ups and downs in quality.

"A View of Bosnia" is Arthur Kent's personal reportage of the situation (almost a one-man film crew) which has received a lot of press because it supposedly goes outside the bounds of "standard" television. I beg to differ, and saw in it only another variant of the many "Journal-esque" documentaries which looked at the war, but saw mainly the images and not much underneath. Kent's great stroke, we are told in the media, is that he did not portray the Serbs, a priori, as the bad guys, but once you get past that, there is nothing particularly unusual about the film except its political incorrectness.

"The People in Black", by Robin Schlaht, is a film about the Hutterite community in Saskatchewan, and frankly, it looks like Schlaht has a lot of film, artfully shot in underexposed, slow motion black-and-white, and just spliced it together.

"Crad Kilodney", by Peter F. Glen, is a witty 5-minute portrait of Toronto's sidewalk poet, a man you can often see peddling his small books of verse on Yonge Street. A more succinct putdown of Toronto's pretensions is hard to find.

"Telewhore", by Spencer Rice, is about a woman whose business is phone sex, and about the disparity between the fantasies she describes and the events around her as she speaks. She enjoys her work and brings a certain professionalism to it (not to mention some sympathy for her callers), even if she is playing cards while she talks on the phone.

"In The Gutter and Other Good Places", by Cristine Richey, is an hour-long documentary about bottle pickers in Calgary. Richey has worked in TV news in Windsor and Edmonton, but this is her first film. Its length allows us to learn about each of her subjects, and she intercuts their adventures and philosophy both to contrast them, and make what could have been a dull, talking heads picture into an engaging story about people we care about.

Worth watching for on CBC or TVO.

(24) "The Hawk", GB, David Hayman, 1993

This film, co-produced by the BBC, stars Helen Mirren as a wife and mother who gradually comes to believe that someone in her immediate family may be the perpetrator of a string of brutal rape/murders. Initially, however, she focuses on the wrong person, a relative who better fits the stereotype. The plot is well put together and the audience is seduced into the same mistakes as Mirren's character.

All the same, this was clearly a television movie which, but for some of the subject matter, might turn up on "Mystery". I had a hard time divorcing Mirren's performances in the two "Prime Suspect" series which screened on PBS from her character here even though, as DCI Tennyson, she was superficially more in control. This conflict got in the way for me, and makes me worry that Mirren is better at playing Mirren than at developing a distinct character.

A reasonably good flick, although not on a subject to everyone's taste.

Friday, September 17th

(25) "The Boys of St. Vincent - Part II", Canada, John N. Smith, 1992

See review of Part I above.

(26) "L'Accompagnatrice", France, Claude Miller, 1993

Another good film with a musical subtext, and an excellent, intelligent soundtrack. Sophie (Romane Bohringer) is a 20-year old girl living in occupied Paris in 1942/43 who has the great fortune to be selected as the piano accompanist to Irene (Elena Safonova), an opera and lieder singer. The film operates on many levels at once, and it is their interplay which gives the plot its strength.

Sophie is resourceful, as one must be in wartime, but somewhat unsure of herself. She gains confidence through her success as a pianist, but is always in Irene's shadow. Irene for her part lives in a world almost untouched by war where thanks both to her husband's booming import/export trade, and her own patronage by the Vichy regime for whom she performs, life goes on almost as luxuriously as before. In this sense, the title has a double meaning with Irene benefitting from her legitimization of the regime and of German art.

Midway through the story, things start to become unstuck as the good life fades away, and an escape to England appears necessary. This is the weak point in the plot -- Irene conveniently has a lover in London who is part of De Gaulle's government-in-exile, and he makes the transition from collaborator to welcomed guest almost painless. In one way, this ease of movement from one venue to another could be seen as a comment on the amorality of Irene's class, but this is not made particularly clear. The film ends after the war with the various characters going their own way and in their own styles.

Although I quibble about the plot, I feel that this is a film worth seeing both because you have to look beneath the surface of the characters to truly understand what is happening, and because the music is so intelligently chosen. Opening sometime this winter.

(27) "Trois Couleurs - Bleu", France/Poland/Switzerland, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993

This is the first of three films by Kieslowski which use the motto "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" and the colours of the French flag as their subtext. Kieslowski is best-known in Toronto for his stunning "Dekalog" which screened in 1989, but which has vanished in Canada thanks to a screwup in the ownership of the exhibition rights.

I am not sure that "Trois Couleurs ..." is going to be on a par with the "Dekalog" based on the first instalment, and this may reflect a move from the deep and moving treatment of the Ten Commandments to a more vague approach to the watchwords of the French Revolution. The main character Julie (Juliette Binoche) has lost her husband, a famous composer, at the beginning of the film and so is "at liberty", but it is an empty freedom. Gradually, Julie re-establishes her ties with other people and with her husband's music.

The concept is good, but there are parts (particularly the ending) which are too pretentious for the depth of surrounding material. I will give Kieslowski the benefit of the doubt until the "Blanc" and "Rouge" instalments come out next year, but suspect that the real problem is that we have about an

hour's worth of idea in a 100-minute film. The real power in "Dekalog" came from its succinct presentation which never allowed your concentration to drift, and the complex web of characters, events and ideas throughout the ten films. There is little evidence of that complexity and depth in "... Bleu".

Saturday, September 18th

(28) Short Program

Three films, all from a series about the disintegration of the modern family, were screened as a group and suffered, unfortunately, from a steady decline in quality from first to last. The first and best, "Family Remains" by Tamara Jenkins, is a dark, black-and-white comedy about a woman and her daughter living in a suburban house with no visible means of support after the departure of the husband/father (who turns up in a casket partway through the film, hence the title). This is a film which turns suburban television culture on its head and works well for it.

"Dottie Gets Spanked" by Todd Haynes deals with a young boy's fantasies about a TV star loosely modelled on Lucille Ball, and we see in it the sort of obsession which may take on different forms in the boy's later life. Dottie (the TV star) has a rather childish character who gets spanked for her naughtiness, but in the manner of an errant child rather than with any sense of eroticism. Exactly what influence this might have on the lad's future sex life we can only imagine. A so-so film that fails to make its point because it avoids the darker side of the premise on which it is based.

"Terminal USA" by Jon Moritsugu contains a bizarre Japanese-American family which is about as dysfunctional as one can get. Grandfather is dying, but is kept alive so that his daughter can scoff the narcotics prescribed as painkillers. One son is a spaced-out punk drug dealer while the other is a straight-arrow computer nerd with a secret liking for gay leather porn (both are played by the director). This is a film which has one big problem – it had enough money to be an hour long. The premise wears thin after about 20 minutes and you keep screaming to yourself -- enough already! Many walkouts in the theatre, although I stayed to the bitter end.

Somehow, I don't expect to see this on PBS.

(29) "The Cement Garden", Germany/GB/France, Andrew Birkin, 1993

Well, gang, you're not going to believe this, but here we have a group of children living in a house surrounded by utter desolation in a part of London where someone might have started an urban renewal project a few decades ago, but just forgot about it along the way. Daddy bites it thanks to a heart attack while rebuilding his garden (literally transforming it into a concrete parody of the wasteland around him) in the first reel, and Mommy (Sinead Cusack, who is wasted here) dies not long after for reasons which are never entirely clear ... she is just ill and then dead.

The kids are rather upset about the possibility they may be parceled off to orphanages or foster homes, and so they bury mommy in a box full of concrete in the basement. Life goes on in a rather anarchic state (despite which, certain parts of the house stay almost magically well organized -- a small continuity problem here) until, eventually, a visitor who may, or may not be a lover of the teen-aged daughter figures out what's up. End of plot.

"Cement Garden" will open sometime this season at Cineplex, but it ain't the greatest movie ever made. Too many rough edges in the premise.

Sunday, September 19th

(30) "Why Wasn't He There?", Hungary, Andras Jeles, 1993

I dragged myself over to the Varsity cinema for a 9:30 am screening, and was not disappointed. This is a film about the Holocaust seen from the point of view of Eva, a Jewish girl living in Budapest who turns 13 as the film opens. We, of course, know that she will never see adulthood, and the film's Hungarian title ("Senkifoldje") refers, according to the program notes, to a period between childhood and adult life when one is neither one nor the other. The "He" of the English title is italicised in the film, and the meaning made clear by the French title "Dieu N'existe Pas".

As the film opens, the war is far away, but the tide of anti-semitism growing. Gradually Eva's family life, their middle-class comforts and her friends are stripped away from them as their position becomes more perilous. They, of course, cannot know what will come, and we watch sadly mourning what will soon be no more.

The story weaves together the fantasy world of a child and the almost surreal nonchalance of a people who only barely accept and understand what is happening around them. Jeles uses actual newsreel footage from the war to great effect rather than attempting to stage its horror.

Very moving and well worth seeing if this gets Canadian distribution. A dark beginning to my last day at the Festival, but one which I would not have missed.

(31) "Everything I Like", Czechoslovakia, Martin Sulik, 1992

It happens, at the Festival, that you will see a movie and ask "was the person who chose this ever in the same theatre as a print of the film?" The program notes describe this as a Czech film made in Prague when it is in fact a Slovak film made in Bratislava.

The principal character is a man whose life is somewhat disordered, and this is mirrored by the film's structure, a series of vignettes each with its own title. (Structurally the same idea as the Gould film, but far inferior in execution.) I really never could come to the point of caring about the collection of characters in this man's life, a feeling shared by about half of the audience who left during the screening.

No Canadian distributor listed in the program, and, I suspect, a film not likely to return to Toronto. Don't feel bad. There will be other indifferent films in future Festivals to make up for it.

(32) "The Making of ... And God Spoke", USA, Arthur Borman, 1993

It's now Sunday evening, and I am surviving only by virtue of regular infusions of 99 cent cappuccino from the 7 West Cafe on Charles Street. Something light and frothy is in order for the end of the Festival, and what better than a repeat from the Midnight Madness program.

"The Making of ..." is a film about film about film which simultaneously parodies the "documentaries" which seem to accompany every box office smash and the epics about which they are made. "And God Spoke" is to be the biblical epic of all time, big budget, cast of thousands, every piece of the story used, with mind-boggling potential for marketing tie-ins. A director who sees this film as his great mission, a statement to the world. A producer whose crass disregard for the underlying story and theme are, we suspect, second only to the real thing in Hollywood. An art director whose entire design will be built around fragments of wood from Israel, the same type of wood Noah used for the Ark. Soupy Sales wafting down from the mountaintop bearing the Ten Commandments and a six-pack of Coke, a vital product tie in. Eve, an actress who originally read for the part of the Virgin Mary, who can't do a nude scene in the Garden of Eden thanks to a rather large tattooed snake. God, too, has many tattoos including one of Bettie Page (a 50s-era bondage porn goddess) on his left arm.

I don't need to recount the plot which is an unending string of inside jokes about the problems of movie making. A fabulous end to the 1993 Festival.

Postscript

Special mention to the sponsors, Carlsberg, whose headers appeared on every film. We finally got new ones this year, but they wore out their welcome in a few days.

House lights down, curtain up. Black screen. Quotes from reviews appear in white type to the sound of a typewriter (do movie reviewers still use manual machines?). Name of reviewer appears. Occupation of reviewer appears.

Example: "One and a half thumbs up" ... "former chainsaw juggler".

That's one of the better ones. By the third or fourth day of the festival, the audience at the late screenings was routinely calling out the punch lines because there were only four different headers and we had memorized them all. Boos to Carlsberg who could have made a *real* hit by having more headers, and by holding back the really good stuff until late in the week so that people would actually look forward to them. Marketing people are not among the most intelligent life-forms on this planet. Oh well, maybe next year.