

Steve's Film Festival Reviews for 2001

By Steve Munro

September 11, 2001

Writing about the Festival without mentioning this day is impossible. Cinema entertains, it teaches, it allows us to share moments of joy and sadness with hundreds of others in a darkened room, and later in the lineups and cafés. This year, the world shared the terrible experience as, one by one, we learned of the disaster-in-progress and, unbelieving, watched it unfold in our homes, on electronic billboards, in shop-fronts. We shared the horror in broad daylight.

I am still digesting what I saw that day, and in newspapers of days that followed. Deep sadness for the City of New York and my friends there whose home is so changed even as their lives continue. Sadness too for our world of cities where so much of our culture lives, the greatness of our humanity.

Film Festivals always contain irony through the chance placement of related films, through references whose context has shifted, through the unexpected discovery of a familiar scene in a far-away place.

On Tuesday, before the Festival closed in sympathy and respect, I sat in the Uptown watching *Focus*. The story is adapted from a play by Arthur Miller, and is set in a fictional New York of the early 40s. A Christian right-wing movement whose aims and slogans are uncomfortably close to those of Nazi Germany is growing, and awaits the end of the war when it can rise to take power.

Wednesday, I watched *Kissing Jessica Stein*, a New York comedy set in lower Manhattan. The first inevitable view across the harbour to the World Trade Center brought gasps and several departures from the house.

Friday, again in the Uptown, was *C'est la vie*, a film whose power, beauty and affirmation of life in the face of death had a resonance unintended by the filmmaker.

I also read and heard much anti-American sentiment in the media and even from friends who should know better. The concept that somehow Americans "deserved" New York and Washington, that "they had it coming to them", is callous and inhuman. Explosions and falling buildings do not give warnings to the select, to the innocent bystanders, to the politically correct who should be spared. So many speak righteously about this, as if somehow they were innocent of centuries of history, exploitation, religious bigotry, and racism. We all have blood on our hands.

There is a special place in my own construction of Hell for the religious bigots, for those who advance hatred in their God's name. High irony that both the Moslem fanatics and the Christian right would solve America's problems by ridding us of those who are impure in their eyes, in their interpretation of scripture. If there were any act that fits the term "blasphemy", this is it: to hate others, but to justify your hatred, violence and murder as "God's will".

Ratings

- 0 I walked out
- * I stayed to the bitter end (but probably shouldn't have)
- ** Maybe worth seeing once
- *** Recommended
- **** First rate
- ***** Best of the festival

The reviews are arranged in the order of viewing.

Festival Main Title

A rather low-key title this year featuring a Magritte-inspired man in a black suit and bowler, walking through a grove of (mainly) digital trees, sitting at a park bench and watching this year's logo – an infinity loop of film in the sky overhead. Dull enough that by the third viewing, one looks for technical nuances between film and digital projection.

Universal Studios Thanks to the Volunteers

Bless their hearts! In this, the *Year of the Volunteers*, Universal ran a 10-second trailer saluting the work of the volunteers who work day and night managing the lines and keeping the operation of the Festival well-oiled. Great music! Big orchestra, a "Fox Fanfare" for the volunteers.

This trailer received applause, often loud and sustained, at every screening I attended.

People's Choice Trailer

This year, the People's Choice Award was sponsored by AGF Funds (the Canadians among my readers will recognize the "what are you doing for the rest of your life" tagline). Bless them too. Very low key, but amusing 10-second shots of, yes, trailers. Very little happens: someone drops a beer can out the window into a growing pile; someone scrapes leftovers out for a hungry dog; someone ambles out for an early morning fart; someone turns on one too many appliances and blows their fuse; and in one, nothing happens at all (except very subtle snoring). All are shot at dawn or dusk in sepia.

Bravo! Someone finally figured out that Festival audiences will remember and love simplicity and understatement.

[The award itself went to *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, a film I tried to see, but could not get into. Alliance-Atlantis is the Canadian distributor, and, therefore, we can expect to see it sometime in the coming year.]

General Observations

Even without the horror of September 11th, this Festival didn't have the punch of last year's. There were several very good and one superb film in my screenings (you will see the ratings later), but the joy of seeing one gem after another was missing.

Last year, by the third day, I had seen Paul Cox' *Innocence* (my own favourite, and the People's Choice of the 2000 Festival), David Mamet's *State and Main*, Christopher Guest's *Best in Show*, a program of short plays by Samuel Beckett in excellent screen adaptations, and Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire*. Still to come were much more Beckett, *Billy Elliott*, *Pollack*, and two as-yet unreleased wonders *Sous le sable* (with its wonderful role for Charlotte Rampling) and *Pandaemonium*. 2000 was one of those astounding years.

But the Festival goes on, and that great experience of sharing the magic in theatres makes it a wonderful annual vacation.

Thursday, September 6

The 7th was my birthday, but it's a portable feast. As in past years, I dined at the Café Brussel with family, letting the festival get underway without me.

Friday, September 7

Je rentre à la maison

France/Portugal / Manoel de Oliveira

Rating: **

I must confess that this film had a few things going against it before the screening started. The director, Manoel de Oliveira, was chosen by the Festival for "Spotlight" treatment a few years ago, but frankly I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Moreover, *Je rentre à la maison* was programmed by Dmitri Eipides, someone whose choices are, at best, dubious. But Michel Piccoli is an actor whose work I have enjoyed before, and there's even Catherine Deneuve in a supporting role. Let's give it a chance.

Je rentre opens with a tediously long performance of the final scene from Ionesco's *Le roi se meurt* with Piccoli, as Gilbert Valence (a theatre actor) playing the king, and Deneuve playing the queen. This is the last we will see of her. During the performance, there's frantic activity backstage as word comes that Valence's wife, daughter and son-in-law have been killed in a car crash. Curtain. Valence is told the news and rushes from the theatre.

Time passes. Valence's life is empty except for the presence of his grandson, but his daily routine and continued stage work fill in the space. His agent offers him work, but in the best tradition of agents, it's a bad fit with his likings and experience – the opening episode of a TV series in which an old, rich duffer is robbed (and possibly murdered) leaving his son (the real star) to avenge him in succeeding weeks. The only real temptation is the possibility of a bedroom scene with a young actress.

Later comes an offer as a replacement in the role of Buck Mulligan in a film production of Joyce's *Ulysses*. This is a hopeless task given that Valence is 50 years older than the role (even makeup cannot save him from this) and he speaks with a pronounced French accent in a very Irish role. For added comic relief, we have John Malkovich as the hopeless director (is he typecast now after *Shadow of the Vampire*?). This production does not make it through the first scene, and Valence leaves the set a broken man. He goes home (the title reference) presumably to die.

This could have been a great film. Many small moments (a recurring sequence in a corner café is particularly good) warm the heart, but there's not enough detail to overcome the tedium of the longer scenes. A passage from *The Tempest*, with one of the ditziest Ariels ever, brings the speech "Our revels now are ended". It is heavy-handed symbolism rather than an actor truly saying goodbye.

Not a great start for the week.

Íslenski draumurinn / The Icelandic Dream

Iceland / Róbert I. Douglas

Rating: **

The 2001 Festival included a series, *Nordic Visions*, as a showcase for films from northern Europe. Some were low-budget experimental works, others were first-rate commercial productions. We see very little of this work in Canada, and I took the opportunity to fit in as many films from this series as I could. *The Icelandic Dream* definitely belongs in the low-budget category.

Toti (Tórhallur Sverisson) is the kind of guy who is always trying to work some scheme that sounds good, but usually involves other people's money. Somehow, he has become the Icelandic agent for a Bulgarian cigarette company, and a container-load of product is waiting at the dock. It appears to have arrived "cash on delivery", and Toti has to find someone to finance the purchase. Meanwhile, he visits small stores throughout Reykjavík trying to find a market for his product, but with little success.

The money comes through from a friend of his father, and, one day, someone notices that the cigarettes contain an herb that is wildly popular in Iceland as an “energiser”. Sales skyrocket. Success appears to be certain, but then the government intervenes, seizes the whole shipment as a danger to public health, and sends poor Toti off to jail (albeit a very benign one by our standards).

The Icelandic Dream depends for its effect on the innocent stupidity of Toti and on his conflict with others as his scheme goes wrong. Once we get to the one-hour mark, with all of the plot lines in motion, the director chooses to resolve everything by having it come out well. Toti gets out, gets a job, pays off his dad, and gets his wife back. We finish with his daughter’s birthday party in a garden. Yes, I could read this as irony, in that things don’t usually work out this way, but that last half-hour has little of the spark that drove the first part of the movie.

Good marks to the actors and director for a lot of improvisation. This includes a wry send-up of oh-so-serious films in which actors talk to the camera about their roles, but here the actors talk in character as if this were a documentary about Toti.

Three stars for a good low-budget effort, but one star off for a weak ending.

Pauline et Paulette

Belgium/France/The Netherlands / Lieven Debrauwer

Rating: ****

Pauline et Paulette continues a thread running through my Festival of films with older actors. Here, we have Dora van der Groen and Ann Petersen, both stars of Flemish theatre, both 74, in roles written for them by Lieven Debrauwer and Jacques Boon.

Pauline was a “simple” child among her sisters Paulette (whom she adores), Martha and Cécile. Pauline lives with Martha who does rather more for her than is really necessary. Paulette is both an operetta singer and the proprietress of a fashion boutique. Cécile lives an hour away in Brussels with her unilingual French partner. Paulette’s biggest problem is that Pauline keeps showing up in her store at odd and inappropriate times. She loves her sister, but there are limits.

Early in the story, Martha dies, and the terms of her will state that Paulette and Cécile must undertake the care of Pauline in order to share in the estate. If not, the whole thing goes to a trust for Pauline.

Paulette tries first, but finds it impossible to keep Pauline out of her shop. A trip to the opera goes awry since Pauline doesn’t understand that she must remain quiet and stay off the stage. A trip to Brussels with Cécile is even more trying. Cécile’s apartment is small, and her partner winds up on the sofa while the sisters sleep together. His inability to talk to Pauline compounds his distaste for having her in the apartment. I will leave the rest of the plot for you to see how this comes out.

Dora van der Groen’s acting as Pauline is astounding. She is very much a little girl in an old woman’s body, mischievous, prone to temper tantrums, but with the wily experience of having lived this way for a very long time.

Pauline et Paulette is a wonderful, warm film about love and sacrifice among sisters. Floral imagery abounds: Pauline obsessively tends her garden, and Paulette lives in a colour scheme of shades of red and pink. Near the end, we are at a wintry seaside, all blues and grays, but even there the flowers bloom.

Saturday, September 8

Much Ado About Something

Australia / Michael Rubbo

Rating: **½

Who wrote Shakespeare? There’s nothing like a thriving academic debate on an unprovable thesis to make for an amusing look at competing views in the literary world. Those who hold against Shakespeare claim that he could not possibly have the background in society, in knowledge of foreign lands, in subtlety of thought, to write the greatest works of English. Those who

hold for him cite a long oral tradition in theatre, the power of imagination and the fact that the milieu of Elizabethan England was a lot closer to Shakespeare than it is to his detractors.

Michael Rubbo is an iconoclast, and delights in undermining the cherished position of the Bard of Avon. While *Much Ado* stays a documentary, complete with earnest, slightly batty scholars on both sides, it's on firm ground. We get an entertaining and educating view of a very real debate. Rubbo, however, is not content, and throws in his lot with those who believe that Christopher Marlowe is the true author, and lived in Italy for years after his supposed death in England. By this scheme, Marlowe could pen works filled with Mediterranean settings and send them back to England for publication under Will Shakespeare's name. The many "Italian" works, beginning with *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, start to appear in 1593, the year of Marlowe's death.

Here the film goes off the rails. We spend a fruitless 20 minutes trying to trace Marlowe to Italy without success. If there had been the hint of a trail, a whiff of Marlowe's presence in all those musty records, this could have been worthwhile, but alas, that search remains for someone else to complete, if they can.

A good documentary turns into propaganda and leaves not only an unanswered question, but a sense that I have wasted my time listening to the debate.

The Navigators

UK / Ken Loach

Rating: ***

Ken Loach has a long history of films with a social, political viewpoint decidedly left-of-centre. Thatcher's England and its legacy under the new Labour Party are grist for Loach's mill, and *The Navigators* is no exception. The subject is the privatisation and breakup of British Rail, and its descent into chaos as the economic schemes intended to strengthen the system lead instead to its destruction.

We follow the lives of a track gang working out of South Yorkshire depot. One day, a new sign goes up and they find they are now "East Midland Infrastructure" a private company competing with others for maintenance work on the same tracks. In a system where the work goes to the lowest bidder, cutbacks in staffing, changes in work rules, and a "safety last" attitude are inevitable. Some men simply take their buyout package and leave either to retire, or to work part-time at rates that are higher only when they're actually on the job. Some stick it out trying to work in an environment that offends everything they know about rail safety, with tragic consequences.

This is not a movie for those whose belief in "trickle-down economics" or "common-sense revolutions" is still intact. Such people would likely take this as propaganda for the unionist lefties at the root of society's ills. Those of us who see public institutions under siege will recognize, with regret, all of the symptoms of government with simple, pea-brained answers. [I hope that I have made my leanings sufficiently clear lest you think this might be a biased review.]

The cast of *The Navigators* undertook the standard training needed to obtain a certificate to work on rail lines, and the script was developed with the assistance of a former trackworker. This was needed both because the cast worked on active rail lines during the shoot, and because it gave their work credibility and realism to anyone who is familiar with railway operations. The roles have a good mix: dedicated workers whose future jobs are in doubt, old hands who take their pension with a shrug, the inevitable foot-draggers who can always find a way to spin a short task into a day's work, and the young, untrained recruits who will do anything for a day's pay whether they are qualified or not. The labourers are not all exploited saints.

During the Q&A, we learned that the railways probably didn't know what the film was about, and Loach kept the script under wraps so that even the cast were unsure as they went along. The cast who were present at the screening said that they hope that *The Navigators* will be a wake-up call to Britons for whom rail travel is no longer a fast, reliable, safe means of travel. The film will screen in late November on Channel 4 in the UK.

A cautionary tale for our times, while we still have a public sector left worth saving.

Postscript: As I finish these reviews on Thanksgiving Day, Railtrack, the private company created to maintain the track and signals of former British Rail, has gone bankrupt. It will be replaced by a not-for-profit public company.

Sunday, September 9

Bunuel y la mesa del rey Salomón / Bunuel and King Solomon's Table

Spain / Carlos Saura

Rating: *1/2

Oh dear, oh dear. Those of you who know the dance films of Carlos Saura (*Blood Wedding, Carmen, Flamenco*) and his dark tales where reality and illusion seamlessly merge will be disappointed by *King Solomon's Table* in the extreme. That half star is there only because the film starts with some promise even though it loses its way.

An elderly film director modeled on Luis Bunuel (best known in North America for *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*) is writing a script for a film that will feature himself and two well-known friends, García Lorca and Salvador Dalí, as they were in their youth. They will search for a magical table once owned by King Solomon in whose mirror surface one could see the past, present and future.

The lead actors of the story-within-the-story circulate through a restaurant very much in modern time, but are recognized and addressed as their characters by a young girl. Later, on a walk through the city, "Bunuel" comes upon an antique shop where he learns that the lost table may exist and can be found. The shop has vanished when the trio returns.

So far, so good. The makings of a surrealistic story, very much an homage to Bunuel, with an amusing overlay of the modern quest movie. *Indiana Jones* meets *Illusion Travels by Streetcar*. But here, it goes off the rails.

Our trio finds its way (assisted by a menacing trio of Catholic, Jewish and Islamic churchmen, none of whom can be trusted) into a passage leading deep into the bowels of the city. Many obstacles are encountered, some psychological (walls dripping with blood), some real (a huge robotic character lifted straight from *Metropolis*). Nothing much in character development happens at all, and the special effects take control. Alas, we tire quickly and finding the table is anti-climactic.

And what do we see in this all-revealing mirror? Dalí sees his father (the past) as himself. Lorca sees his own imminent death (the present). Bunuel sees the rise of a Spanish fascism (the future relative to the young Bunuel's time period). Saura's thesis is clearly that organized religion would prefer to suppress such knowledge and with it the greatness that Spain might have had without Franco and his Catholic supporters. A message worth saying, maybe, but not in this story.

Saura has used the device of a film-within-a-film and an author who writes as the action unfolds before, and much better. *Bunuel and King Solomon's Table* cannot make up its mind what to be, and the final message is a simplistic ending that feels patched on to mask a threadbare plot with political commentary.

Så vit som en snö / As White as in Snow

Denmark/Sweden / Jan Troell

Rating: ***

Amanda Ooms stars as Elsa Andersson, Sweden's first aviatrix in a movie that is less a biography than a sketch of a woman very much out of her time. This is a woman who wants to fly, and flight can be read as a synonym for freedom from the confines of womanhood in the early 1900s. Elsa's mother dies giving birth to Elsa's sister, Flora, whom Elsa sees as the murderer of her dear mother. What might have been sibling rivalry is filtered through a streak of self-centredness that both drives Elsa and will be her undoing.

As White as in Snow is a visually beautiful film (Troell is also the cinematographer and editor) filled both with bird imagery for Elsa, and a visual feel for colours and seasons that elegantly mark the passage of time. Dramatically, we switch between the end of Andersson's life as she makes a night journey by train and incidents sketching the story of her life. The device works well until she actually arrives, and only then are we aware of things dragging, a rare feat for a movie that runs 164 minutes.

Young Elsa wants to be a pilot, and with some persuasive effort and stubbornness she becomes the first female student in a flying school. Her skill is soon evident, and she is much-respected by fellow airmen. A meeting with a visiting German flyer leads to a sojourn in the Weimar-era Berlin. This is neatly suggested by snippets of historical footage woven into the film, and the director has the sense to realize that his audience is not expecting the cinematic marvel of a recreated streetscape.

Elsa, however, has one problem – she cannot seem to find a lover. Either the men she wants are unavailable and honourable, gay or simply distracted. When finally she succeeds, it's less than successful and her focus is shattered. Whether her death on a daredevil parachute dive the following day is an accident or suicide we must guess for ourselves. This aspect was my one real complaint about an otherwise fine film – the idea that the innocent, virgin Elsa could achieve anything, but that sex, when it came, led to her death. This is very much the philosophy of the era from which Elsa Andersson escaped, an unsettling presence in an otherwise fine story.

In the end, we have watched a lovely story well told, beautifully photographed. We have been seduced by a woman whose success and happiness we yearn for. But there's a sense that it is more technique than substance.

Rain

New Zealand/USA / Christine Jeffs

Rating: **

Rain, a first feature from Christine Jeffs, is a bitter coming-of-age story set in suburban Auckland. Janey (Alicia Fulford-Wierzbicki) is a 13-year old girl staying with her parents and much younger brother, Jim (an amazing non-actor, Aaron Murphy) at a cottage. Mom drinks constantly while Dad is resigned and ineffectual. Enter Cady, a photographer who lives on a boat down the shore. He's an instant target for not only Mom's desires, but also for Janey who wants him as her first lover.

Cut to the chase: Janey and Cady are off in the woods while Jim has been left to his own devices on the beach. That Jim is going to get into some trouble is telegraphed by the script, and Janey would have to be as dumb as a post to miss the clue. Janey seduces Cady. The earth moves. Artful shot from very high in the trees of Janey (actually a body double for the actress) lying on the forest floor. We return to the seashore to find Jim's lifeless body. Family disintegrates. Janey winds up with her mother, older, wiser, but unhappy.

Once again we have this premise that nobody can have sex without retribution [see previous review for those of you who are skipping around here]. This *deus-ex-machina* device insults the audience and avoids thoughtful writing. Having said this, I am willing to give *Rain* two stars as a good first feature, especially for the solid direction in the first hour or so. Great work from the two young actors in very difficult roles.

Monday, September 10

Absolument fabuleux

France / Gabriel Aghion

Rating: *

Such hopes. Two great actresses: Josiane Balasko and Nathalie Baye. The possibility of seeing French subtlety applied to broad English humour. A translation in space and culture, not just in language.

By the half-hour mark, I was getting very tired of the overdone self-indulgence of our "heroines", not to mention our director who obviously had enough money to change their clothes every other frame. I reminded myself that this is the land that reveres Jerry Lewis as a great *artiste*. I closed my eyes and tried to doze. It did not work.

The plot, such as it is, begins with a 50th birthday. This woman has done everything, been everywhere (thanks to the cinematic magic of placing our actresses in major events of the past 35 years), but can only get through life with one more glass of champagne and a lot more shopping. It goes downhill from there, although it's not a long fall.

Ab Fab is an idea that can work, can be tolerated, in small doses, but it does not scale up to 105 minutes. Absolutely appalling.

Mulholland Drive

France/USA / David Lynch

Rating: *1/2**

Los Angeles. Night. A limousine carrying a single woman, brunette, very sexy, winds its way through the darkness up the hills of Mulholland Drive. The car stops. The driver turns and, at gunpoint, says "This is as far as you go". But just as he is ready to shoot, joyriders careening down the hill crash into the limo killing the gunman and an accomplice. Terrified, the woman scrambles out of the car and down the slope to the light of nearby houses.

Thus begins David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, a film very much in the dark, nothing-is-what-it-seems world of *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*. (There are even a few *Twin Peaks* references thrown in for the aficionados.)

Another woman, blonde, fresh off the plane from Cold River, leaves Los Angeles airport in the company of two overly friendly, grinning seniors. She hopes to break into the movies, and is on her way to the vacant flat of her Aunt Betty, an actress off making a movie in Canada [I am not making this up]. The flat happens to be the very place where "Rita", suffering from amnesia, is hiding after the opening crash.

A man sitting in a café, anxious and frightened, tells his friend of a nightmare about this very place, and a horrible figure living in the alley behind who "runs everything". They walk around the building, and sure enough, there it is.

I don't want to give away more vignettes partly because I'm still piecing the story together, and another viewing will be needed to settle some doubts about just what Lynch is up to here. What I can tell you is that about half-way through, we find ourselves in another version of Los Angeles. All the characters are the same, but they're all different, darker, meaner. Have we awoken from a dream? Are we really back at the beginning of a cyclical story? Is everyone trying to be someone they are not, and whose dream is this anyway?

Mulholland Drive is a refreshing change from the final days of *Twin Peaks* when Lynch constructed *Fire Walk With Me* out of the cutting-room leftovers of his TV series. In some ways, this is a darker, menacing version of *Blue Velvet* where the real world is filled with decay and ugliness, and only the imaginary Hollywood world is bright and innocent.

For all Lynch's technique, for his ability to surprise, to leave us wondering what is real, I cannot help feeling that in some ways I've seen much of this before. The idea of a corrupt, rotting world just under the surface of polite society is one of Lynch's favourites, and it's hard to see where else, if anywhere, he can go with this theme. Half a star off for mining old material.

Postscript: Unable to fly back to the USA in the wake of September 11, several Festival guests chartered a bus to drive back to Los Angeles. Lynch was one of them, and was shooting a documentary about the journey. I am intrigued to see what comes from this, and maybe next year's Festival will see Lynch in a very different mood.

Nazareth 2000

Palestine / The Netherlands / Hani Abu-Assad

Rating: ***

It's About Time

Israel / Ayelet Menahemi & Elona Ariel

Rating: ***

Nazareth 2000 and *It's About Time* were screened as a double-bill on the evening of September 10th. Hani Abu-Assad could not attend the screening, but both films were introduced by Ayelet Menahemi and Elona Ariel. They pointed out that these documentaries were filmed over a year ago, before the start of the *Intifada*, when life in the Middle East was settling down and hopes for peace were high. People had the time to worry about the day-to-day problems of life in any big city.

Nazareth 2000 takes us to a small neighbourhood, only a block from the director's childhood home. Abu Arab and Abu Maria have run the gas station on the corner for 25 years, and they share a mundane life tending to their regular customers and chatting with passersby. The owner of the station wants to modernize, and we are treated to a scene familiar to those of us who

toil under hopeless managers the world over: a room full of gas jockeys and mechanics, men with simple lives, who are exhorted to be more in touch with the customer, to build their market and be more competitive.

Down the road from the station is the Church of the Annunciation, the site where Gabriel is said to have told Mary that she would bear a son, Jesus. Right next door is an Islamic holy site, the shrine of a martyr. The city of Nazareth, overwhelmingly Arab and Moslem, wants to build a new town square as a Millennium project, and the space they want sits right on the shrine. The Moslems want to build a mosque since the Christians have their church nearby. A political powerkeg, but one that pits Arab against Arab while the Israeli military look on. There is much resentment among the Arabs that the Jews seem content to let them kill each other.

Nazareth 2000 is a refreshing reminder that life is made up of many threads, easily recognized. The local characters' lives touch each other, but they are unknown to the wider world. Well-spoken politicians and managers are out of touch with day-to-day life, and their grand schemes bring more harm than good. The film is bracketed by a young girl reading a poem whose metaphor is a longing for Palestine. She does not understand the poem, but we know too well that she will soon.

A sad postscript: A mosque will be built in the new square, and the Arabs are now united against the Jews.

It's About Time takes its inspiration from the concept that time to Israelis is different from time everywhere else. The state is so young and so threatened that every aspect of daily life is compressed, there is never enough time to do everything, and people are habitually late because they always try to fit in too much. We meet a grab-bag of characters, some long-time Israelis, some recent immigrants, who talk about their lives both on a personal level and in the political context of the Middle East. A jazz quartet and a stand-up comic provide the linking passages and darkly humorous interludes.

Much of *It's About Time* covers the same ground of ordinary lives that we saw in *Nazareth 2000*, but I could not help noticing the difference in class, style and living conditions of the Jewish Israelis. This may be a side-effect of putting two documentaries together on one bill, as well as the choice of subjects by each director. All the same, the difference between the two populations was hard to ignore.

Ein sång för Martin / A Song for Martin

Denmark/Sweden / Billie August

Rating: **½**

A Song for Martin continues my theme of films for older actors with stories of old age, love and the inevitability of loss.

Martin (Reine Brynolfsson) is a conductor-composer in his mid-sixties. He is rehearsing a new work, and the concertmaster, Barbara (played by Linda Källgren, who is Brynolfsson's wife), notices some errors in the score. Although Martin is not one to admit mistakes easily, he warms to Barbara, and their friendship blossoms quickly. In time, they divorce their respective spouses to marry, and live as a blissful musical couple, for a time. Love at any age should be so sweet for us all, and here it has the depth of experience.

Five years pass, and Martin begins to have small problems. He forgets simple things, and his formerly strong character slips into self-doubt, and a concert ends in disarray as Martin forgets what he is doing. Martin is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and now both he and Barbara must make of their remaining lives what they can.

Barbara's reaction is half protectiveness and half denial. On one hand, she does not want the world to see what Martin is becoming, but cannot herself accept that the man she loves is slipping away. Reine Brynolfsson's acting coupled with Billie August's direction are breathtaking when one can pull back enough from the story to see the technique behind what unfolds on the screen. Martin's gradual loss of speech, his awareness of the loss of his body and character, his retreat into himself, are entirely believable. They are executed without the maudlin play on an audience's heart one might find in a lesser work.

In the end, Barbara must let go, she must say goodbye to the man who may still be physically alive, but whose character and love are lost to her. A tragic, but beautiful film.

Tuesday, September 11

I arrived at this screening after the surreal experience of walking through the Bloor-Yonge intersection where crowds watched the news from New York and Washington on a CTV video billboard that only a day before was filled with trailers for the upcoming TV season. This is something one sees only in movies or newsreels, not on the streets of Toronto. The full impact of what was happening had not yet set in.

Focus

USA / Neil Slavin

Rating: ***

Lawrence Newman (William H. Macy) is a bookish bachelor living with his cranky, ill mother in 1940's New York City. His office job is routine, rather dull, but one day he meets Gertrude Hart (Laura Dern) who is applying for a job. Her dazzling good looks bowl him over, but she's not "the sort of woman his office is looking for".

Lawrence is short-sighted, and at his boss' urging, he gets a set of eyeglasses. These transform his life in many ways. Suddenly, because he looks Jewish, he's to be shunted off to a side office. He notices that his neighbour Fred (Meat Loaf Andy) has evening meetings with a lot of unsavoury characters, and turns out to be involved in a Christian right-wing group who plan to take over after the war and really clean up the country. Attacks start against the corner variety store owned by a Jew (David Paymer), and Fred himself becomes a target of attack as a sympathiser. Fred changes jobs, and by chance winds up working in the same office as Gertrude. They care for each other, but are threatened by events around them.

Miller's play attacks both blind patriotism and its manipulation by those who would justify racism and violence in the name of religion. Some characters are simply drawn, but the message is clear. Macy and Dern are both committed to their roles, and Slavin, in his first feature, avoids histrionics letting us, the audience, find the parallels between the story and the real world.

Placing this squarely in an American context rather than a European one gives a "yes, it could happen here" subtext that is truly eerie in the wake of reactions to today's events. This is an earnest play with a sombre warning, one that may not see the light of general release for some time despite name actors and a major studio (Paramount) behind it.

All remaining screenings for the day were cancelled.

Wednesday, September 12

Kissing Jessica Stein

USA / Charles Herman-Wurmfeld

Rating: ***

Kissing Jessica Stein began life as a play, *Lipschtick*. It was adapted for the screen by its authors Heather Juergensen and Jennifer Westfeld who starred in the lead roles of Helen Cooper and Jessica Stein on stage and in the film. They are very familiar with their material, and pull off two wonderful characters.

Jessica works for a publisher in an office both with her very pregnant girlfriend and an ex-boyfriend, Josh. She's looking for a new man, but a series of dates (a beautifully played and edited series of restaurant dinners that tell us everything we don't want to know about these men) goes laughably wrong. An ad in the personals intrigues her, but it's from a woman looking for another woman. These are uncharted waters, but Jessica dives in, and so meets Helen.

The relationship takes a while to gel, but in time Helen and Jessica are living together. Jessica, however, cannot come out to people beyond her immediate circle, and especially not to her family. The problem is more Jessica's than anyone else's, but it definitely gets in the way of the friendship. One refreshing touch has both women being bi, and the idea that they're not gay enough gets a well-deserved skewering. Everything comes to a boil at Jessica's brother's wedding, but I will leave the outcome for you to see yourself.

Kissing Jessica Stein doesn't have a huge plot, but it works through the wonderful comic vignettes between its characters. It is very much a New York movie without being by Woody Allen. Some minor editing will be required to replace short passages with the former WTC towers, but fortunately, the film should survive with only minor revisions.

Facing the Music

Australia / Bob Connolly & Robin Anderson

Rating: ****

Facing the Music covers some of the same territory as *The Navigators* (reviewed earlier here). However, this is a documentary and its characters are real people in a heartbreaking situation for anyone who cares about public funding of education.

Anne Boyd is a composer and Chair of Music at the University of Sydney. Ten years of budget cuts have eviscerated her department and the university as a whole. The staff plan a work stoppage on the school's opening day, but Boyd is loyal to her calling, and crosses the line. This is the last time she will be so meek in the face of University cutbacks.

Her department is reduced to rationing its supplies, deciding what it cannot afford, and throwing costs formerly borne by the University onto the students. Boyd's colleagues try to make do, although one, a more radical advocate of labour action drives herself into a heart attack while others just give up.

In the midst of this we have the students, talented musicians trying to learn in a program that is disintegrating around them. One who is composing a choral work is reduced to tears by Boyd's critique of her work. Here we see a teacher who once might have a reserve of care for her student's sensitivity bring her own ruthless standards to bear on someone who is not yet ready to handle them, possibly someone whose style is just different, not wrong.

By the end of *Facing the Music*, the department's budget has been cut a further fifty percent, and huge swaths of curriculum must vanish because Boyd can no longer afford to operate a full course calendar. The University of Sydney clearly cares nothing for the arts in the rough world of public funding cutbacks.

Facing the Music is both a warning and a lecture to those for whom the arts are a frill, something that cannot turn a profit and, therefore, have no place in our world of common-sense economics. The music will stop, but will anyone notice or care before it is too late?

Magonia

The Netherlands / Ineke Smits

Rating: ***

Magonia is a first feature by Ineke Smits, and I have given it three stars despite its flaws. Smits takes a complex setting – a man telling stories that form the bulk of the film to his son – and manages to keep the lines intact. My only complaint is that the three inner stories, all sharing a thread of longing and isolation, leave little room for the outer plot of the father passing on his knowledge of and love for life.

In the first tale, a beautiful woman cares for an aging *muezzin* whose calls to prayer fail to rouse the faithful from their daily routine. The old man's apprentice loves the woman, and sends an endless stream of carefully folded paper birds from the mosque tower to the front door of her house. The *muezzin's* voice and health are fading, and the apprentice cobbles together bits and pieces of old equipment to make a recording of his call. The broadcast of this at an unexpected volume has the unwanted effect of causing everyone to close themselves in their houses with windows shuttered against the din. Only when the old man is near death does the apprentice find his own beautiful voice and sing the call to prayer himself.

In the second, a European couple is driving across the desert, and they come upon an old man and his son living in an isolated hut. Until this meeting, they have been at odds, putting up with each other's peculiarities. The old man's strength in his loneliness inspire them to greater friendship, and to escape from their own isolation of a trek through the desert.

Finally, a woman waits by the seaside for her lover to return. Even though the weather and sea rage around her, she waits to be reunited.

In each segment, wind plays a role, sometimes gentle, sometimes a mere presence, sometimes violent. This echoes the outer story where the father teaches his son to fly kites high into the sky. *Magonia* is an imperfect film, but an ambitious and impressive feature debut.

Thursday, September 13

The Diaries of Vaslav Najinski

Australia / Paul Cox

Rating: *

Paul Cox is a maker of beautiful films, among them *A Woman's Tale* and *Innocence* (the 2000 People's Choice winner). Sensitivity. Delicacy. That's what I'm looking for and expect. When the subject is dance and the art of creation, I expect a masterpiece, but *The Diaries of Vaslav Najinski* was beyond disappointing.

The screening began poorly with a rambling introduction by Cox in which he complained that the planned premiere on Tuesday evening had been cancelled due to the disaster in New York, and that the premiere had taken place in a small theatre Wednesday evening with a handful of viewers. My suspicion is that this was an already-scheduled press screening. Cox went on to talk about how his art was unappreciated in modern Australia just as Najinski's was in his own time. Well, after that bit of egotism, we got underway.

The film opens with a funeral procession through a forest. All of Najinski's characters are there like a mythical collection come to pay tribute to the mortal who brought them to life. This is the first and last elegant moment in the work. Since the diaries were written while Najinski was mad, and after his dance career had ended, Cox takes this as a cue for a disjointed visual style. Scenes flash back and forth at random. Fragments of dances, that might have looked good when they were a single sequence, come and go with no chance for us to appreciate their art, and especially the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* left me completely cold.

Najinski's words are read by Sir Derek Jacobi. This portentous, weighty delivery combines with the text's unending focus on self to make us wish we had never heard of Najinski, no matter how great his work might have been. In the midst of this comes an entirely gratuitous slaughter of a sheep meant both to symbolize the ferocity of the eagle and Najinski's aversion to meat.

I actually stayed for the Q&A because I could not quite believe what I had just seen came from a director whose work I admire. Cox was even more incoherent, and was clearly upset about the screening in the Cumberland 3 where the 8-channel sound of the print was unavailable, the sound balance was off, and a variety of noises from a restless audience provided added distraction.

Cox is lucky that *Innocence* has just opened. It may provide enough of a distraction that *The Diaries* can sink out of sight without most people ever knowing it was made, and Cox can, I hope, go back to making great films with this one out of his system.

How Harry Became a Tree

UK/Ireland/France/Italy / Goran Paskaljevic

Rating: **1/2

A Chinese fable translated to Ireland and directed by a Serb – such are the peculiarities of *How Harry Became a Tree*. Colm Meany plays Harry Maloney, an outsider who sees his own worth in those who oppose him. The conflicts come not because Harry is inherently a bad person, but because he picks fights with important people. So set is he in this behaviour that he cannot join in the life of his town and ends up, metaphorically, rooted as a solitary tree in a field, a tree that, in his nightmares, will be cut down and made into coffins.

The action is set in the town of Skillet in 1924, and Ireland has never looked more bleak. This is not the rolling, green countryside of the Irish Tourism Board and *Ballykissangel*, but a dark land begrudging its inhabitants. The scenery echoes Harry's own character.

George O'Flaherty owns Skillet's and many other local businesses as well. He is the obvious target for Harry's attacks. A pretty, young girl, Eileen, comes to town to work at the pub. At this point, I must confess that there is an undercurrent about George's intentions for Eileen and the girls who came before her that is a bit unsettling. One of them, a plainer woman, is jealous of Eileen, but this plot line seems to be missing a few pieces as if it were the victim of editing. (The film runs 100 minutes as it is.)

Harry's son Gus, a decent lad, has to put up with his father's taunts whenever there is nobody else around as a target. Gus falls in love with Eileen, and Harry sees this as a chance to undermine George rather than a chance for his son's own happiness. These machinations lead to a tragic end with Harry alone, rooted forever in his obstinacy.

Full marks to Meany for his role as Harry, a foolish, shortsighted, unlikeable man whose inability to love and care for others is his undoing. I can't help wondering whether Meany sought this role as a change from his O'Brien of *Star Trek* days, or whether the producers sought him as a draw to an otherwise minor work.

Friday, September 14

C'est la vie

France / Jean-Pierre Améris

Rating: *****

In *C'est la vie*, Jean-Pierre Améris gives us a story of great warmth and sadness, a story in which death is inevitable, but with the joy of life, of lives shared, as an unending link between us all. *C'est la vie* is not an easy film to watch in places, and there are scenes where I'm sure there wasn't a dry eye in the house, but maudlin, exploitative it is not. The emotions and events here are true and real, and we care deeply for the characters even as we lose them.

Jean-Pierre Améris and Caroline Bottaro based their screenplay on the novel *La mort intime* by Marie de Hennezel. Améris was deeply moved by the book, and by research into the psychology of the terminally ill. He spent months visiting and living at a hospice in southern France to learn about the society, the interplay between residents, staff and volunteers in a setting where our mortality cannot be ignored. Out of this came a radiant script.

Jacques Dutronc and Sandrine Bonnaire star as Dimitri, a Russian-born Frenchman living in Provence, and Suzanne, a volunteer at a hospice, *La Maison*. As the story begins, Dimitri, apparently in good health but suffering from cancer, is off to a clinic for treatment, or so it seems. He is taken aback to learn that his life expectancy, the average at *La Maison*, is 31 days. After a short stay, he cannot to deal with this news and with the loss of independence in the hospice. He escapes onto the road back to town, suitcase in hand, walking through the rain. There he meets Suzanne, and she coaxes him back.

Dimitri begins to accept his surroundings and befriends those around him. He is not as close to death, and he realizes that helping others to enjoy, to celebrate their lives is an important gift he can make just as others will, in turn, help him. A friendship grows between Dimitri and Suzanne, a love that she will treasure even though it must be brief. Through Dimitri, Suzanne learns that her own life outside *La Maison* is worth living to the full.

In the end, this is a story about our shared humanity, about our living on in each other's memories, about the care and dignity we owe each other in life and in death. This is not a film to bring loud cheers, but I walked out of the cinema more deeply moved than in many years of Festivals. The subject is not "big box office", but *C'est la vie* deserves an audience. A true gem.

The Man From Elysian Fields

USA / George Hickenlooper

Rating: ***

We meet Byron Tiller (Andy Garcia) at the remainder bins of his local bookstore where stacks of his last book stay resolutely unsold. His latest manuscript, a novel about migrant workers, can't even get past his editor. Byron needs inspiration, and more importantly, an income.

His working office, a small space in an old Los Angeles building, is across the hall from "Elysian Fields" through whose doors well-dressed gentlemen come and go. Inspiration does not arrive, but one day, sitting in a bar, Byron is befriended by Luther Fox (Mick Jagger). Luther owns of Elysian Fields and he has a proposition for Byron. Luther's business is an escort agency for extremely wealthy women, and he needs men who are attractive and intelligent. Byron resists, but he needs the money.

Enter a new client (Olivia Williams) whose husband is beyond being able to take care of needs in society or the bedroom, but who is content that she has such a good escort, a writer no less. Hubby (James Coburn) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author at the end of his days who struggles to finish one last book as a legacy to his wife, but the manuscript needs a little work. Byron is amazed at the chance to work with such a writer, and the offer of co-credit on the book cover lures him into the arrangement. (Ironically, it will become a story about migrant workers.)

Byron's wife (Julianna Margulies) is getting suspicious of Byron's new work schedule that keeps him out into late evenings with "his editor", and more than suspicious when scraps of Byron's other life show up in his pockets. Byron's life is falling apart. Meanwhile, Luther is hoping that his long time personal client (Angelica Huston) will leave her husband, and the two of them will retire together.

Alas, neither Byron's credit nor Luther's dream are destined to come true, and they are left to reflect on the difference between a professional and a personal relationship.

James Coburn has a juicy turn as the crusty old author, but Jagger's role as Luther Fox is the best in the film.

Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens / Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror

Germany / F.W. Murnau

Music: Hans Erdmann, as reconstructed and conducted by Berndt Heller, with the Toronto Symphony

Rating: ****

Nosferatu is the first in a long series of vampire films, and a monument of the silent cinema. In 1922, Murnau used dramatic lighting, unusual camera positions and scenic compositions that were years ahead of his time. I first saw a restored print at the University Cinema (now a development site for condos) in a version with the original German intertitles. Each character spoke in their own typeface, with the heavily gothic *Fraktur* reserved for *Nosferatu* himself. The musical accompaniment was a piano, and the titles were read in translation by a speaker.

Many years later, I find myself in the Elgin Theatre, a building saved from demolition, and one whose ornate décor seems well-suited to this subject. The intertitles are in English, although some of the original style is preserved. However, the occasion on this viewing is the music.

Hans Erdmann's score, written for performances where at least a small band would be available to accompany the picture, was long thought to be lost. However, portions remained in a notebook along with a treatise by Erdmann on how to score for silent movies. Berndt Heller reconstructed the score adding fragments of well-known classical music to fill out the spaces. With the Toronto Symphony as the orchestra, *Nosferatu* came to life again as Murnau and Erdmann intended. (The lush scores of films that followed the introduction of sound come directly from this background and the musical theatre of the early 1900s.)

Somehow, I don't think I need to recount the plot here. Max Schreck is Count Orlock, the vampire (Murnau could not use the name "Dracula" because of copyright problems with Bram Stoker's novel), and one can only imagine the effect this otherworldly creature had on audiences in the 1920s.

I strongly recommend a triple bill of Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Werner Herzog's version with Klaus Kinski, and last year's *Shadow of the Vampire* with Willem Dafoe.

Zus & Zo

The Netherlands / Paula van der Oest

Rating: ***

More sisters and another inheritance, but this time an out-and-out comedy.

Wanda, Sonja and Michelle are three sisters whose kid brother, Nino, is gay. So incensed was their father with this that he bequeathed their summer home in Portugal, Paraíso, to Nino alone should he marry. This grand house has been the family's home away from home for as long as the girls can remember. Footage from "home movies" establishes the character and relationships between the family in childhood. Even then, Nino was dressing up in his sisters' clothes.

The three sisters all want to move to Portugal, and Nino's engagement to a girlfriend, Bo, threatens to ruin their plans. Wanda, a minor artist, wants to open a gallery, while Sonja, a writer, would prefer to work from a balmy setting. Michelle, wife, mother, keeper of war orphans in her crowded house, would just like to break from her past, although it's hard to believe she would change much. The threatened loss of Paraíso is enough to make all rush off to Portugal, there to undermine Bo and Nino's engagement.

This is not a film with deep, hidden meanings, and there is much amusement along the way as the sisters learn they must work together to save their home by the sea and its memories. I don't want to give away the ending, but rest assured that Nino's true character shines through.

Saturday, September 15

Ball in the House

USA / Tanya Wexler

Rating: **

Ball in the House is one of those films that sound good on paper, but in translation to the screen, lose credibility and relevance. JJ (Jonathan Tucker) has just come home from a juvenile centre where he has dried out from alcohol and drug abuse. His stepfather is openly hostile because JJ wrecked his vintage car. His girlfriend has dumped him and now hangs out with his former drug dealer. His mother is well-meaning, but overwhelmed by his stepfather. Add to this mix his aunt (Jennifer Tilly), a boozy broad who seems to want JJ's body, but whose real purpose is much darker.

Aunt Dot is scheming to get JJ back on booze so that the next time he goes for a drive, the result will be fatal. She has played on the stepfather's hatred and gullibility to get a large insurance policy on JJ's life, and she means to collect. Later in the film, we learn that even Dr. Charlie (David Strathairn), JJ's counsellor, is embroiled in this plot.

The one pure character in all of this is JJ's younger brother, and it's a miracle that he has not turned into some sort of monster in such a screwed-up family. His character is a dramatic necessity both to show what JJ might have been, and as someone who sees what's really going on.

Even allowing for the fact that it was Saturday morning, and I was not entirely awake yet, I had problems with the premise here. Yes, the family is hopelessly dysfunctional, but to stir in "Aunt Dot" with her wicked sexuality and predatory intentions just took things over the top. There's some good acting here, but it's the only reason I bumped this up to two stars.

Tosca

France / Benoît Jacquot

Rating: ***

Puccini's *Tosca* performed by great singers in a film version that's not just camera sitting in front of a stage. What more could I want? Well, I hate to say this, but what might have been a four-star film gets only three from me, and it's the director's fault. I won't bother you with the plot. If you're an opera fan, you know it already.

Jacquot made some poor choices in design that got in the way of my enjoying this performance to the full. He placed the actors on a huge stage with sets that would overwhelm the action if they were fully dressed. [That's the sets that are undressed, not the actors. This is *Tosca* after all.] The space is too large for the actors, and I had trouble placing myself in the action and caring about the characters.

The music was, of course, recorded in a studio with the orchestra conducted by Antonio Pappano. Sections from this recording, in black-and-white, serve as introductory and concluding passages to the acts. Less successful are grainy, hand-held video sequences shot in Italy to give a sense of the surroundings in which the story occurs.

Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna star as Tosca, the jealous diva, and Cavaradossi, the painter. These are the big names, the dazzling duo of the opera world, but it is Ruggero Raimondi as Scarpia who dominates this film. His performance alone makes this a *Tosca* to be seen and heard. Gheorghiu has a great voice, but I was not moved by it as one should be by Tosca. As she jumped to her death from the castle, I could not help waiting for her to re-appear from a trampoline bounce, one of the famous practical jokes visited on one unpopular singer of this role. One is not supposed to have quite this feeling about the tragic heroine.

To conclude: This is a *Tosca* for Scarpia fans. We're not supposed to root for the bad guy, but he's the best thing on the screen.

Strumpet

United Kingdom / Danny Boyle

Rating: ***1/2

Vacuuming Completely Nude in Paradise

United Kingdom / Danny Boyle

Rating: ***1/2

Where to begin? Danny Boyle, best known for *Trainspotting*, brings us two amazing pieces of acting and direction, both shot on a digital betacam that at times moves as wildly as the actors and is almost a character in its own right.

Strumpet features a band of misfits. Stray Man, played brilliantly by Christopher Eccleston, is a street poet, followed everywhere by a pack of dogs. He adds his own bizarre spin to the karaoke at his local pub and covers walls with his poetry. He befriends a young girl, Strumpet (Jenna G), and magic occurs: she plays guitar to Stray Man's recitation of his poetry. Next door, a punker, Knockoff (Stephen Walters) is transfixed at the performance coming through his walls. He wants to be their manager, and they're off to London to break into the music business.

This unlikely trio sits through a meeting with recording execs for whom this performance style is too, literally, off-the-wall, but they take a chance. A day's work in a studio yields nothing, but the company plans to repackage *Strumpet* and leave Stray Man behind.

These are strange characters, wildly comic at times, each sympathetic in their way, even Stray Man in his manic, inspired moments.

Vacuuming Completely Nude in Paradise stars Timothy Spall (the eccentric photo curator from *Shooting the Past*) as Tommy, a completely over-the-top vacuum cleaner salesman. He's very much of the old school – sell, sell, sell to anyone whose signature you can get on a contract, whether they need or can afford the product or not – and behind a smiling, ingratiating face lies an unscrupulous snake. His fellow salesmen hate his crudeness, but it works.

Tommy is one of the top salesmen for JAC Vacuum Cleaners, and there's a competition on. The prize? A holiday vacation in a tropical paradise. Tommy's goal? Win that vacation. Alas, poor Tommy is saddled with a trainee, a man who actually has principles about selling to people who can't afford it, to people who only want a bit of company in their boring lives. What is Tommy to do but to try to remake the newcomer into his own image.

JAC has big plans, and this will be the last big campaign with door-to-door sales. The Internet is coming, and Tommy's crew will soon be yesterday's men.

Strumpet and *Vacuuming Completely Nude in Paradise* feature supercharged characters on the edge of their respective worlds. Both take a bleak view of the world, but the poet uses this to inspire furious rants while the salesman, like a shark, sees everyone as a victim waiting for his call. Two sides of the same coin.

The acting in both films, especially in the lead roles, is breathtaking, and Boyle's camera almost dances with the actors. Unfortunately, there was no Q&A and I was unable to learn how much of this was scripted, how much improvised.

With luck, these will turn up on TVO or Showcase. Films out on the edge, but definitely worth seeing.

Sunday, September 16

My Kingdom

United Kingdom / United States / Don Boyd

Rating: ***

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a powerful story that has seen many adaptations in place and time. Among the best known is Kurosawa's *Ran*. Don Boyd's *My Kingdom* may not be quite so exalted, but this is a worthy addition. A warning: *Lear* is a violent play, and Boyd retains this, with some additions of his own, on camera. This is not a film for the faint hearted who just want to see a new take on an old tale.

Richard Harris plays Sandyman, a crime baron in Liverpool, a city that looks appropriately seedy, a kingdom coming apart at the seams. One night, Sandyman's wife (Lynn Redgrave) is gunned down in a robbery that has all the marks of a junkie just looking to finance his next fix. Sandyman is distraught, and means to pass on his empire.

Such daughters: Kath owns a brothel, Tracy owns a football club (bought by Daddy), and Jo is a former drug addict who cannot stomach her father's world. Sandyman loves Jo and means to leave her in charge, but she rejects him and the business goes instead to Kath and Tracy. With no power, Sandyman's influence quickly wanes. He is left wandering the city with his grandson, a half-Sikh, half-English outsider, looking for the plot he sees behind the killing of his wife.

In the midst of this we have a Customs agent who has followed Sandyman for most of his career. Their lives are intimately linked even though they are enemies – without Sandyman, there would be no crime lord and no career. This "Gloucester" is a true friend to Sandyman, even in adversity, and suffers the same fate as his prototype.

But this is a Lear who, like Hamlet, is only half-mad, and he plots his revenge even while we, anticipating a parallel with the play, expect the worst. A tip of my hat to Boyd for changing the story enough to throw us off the scent and keep things interesting. A big drug shipment is on its way in, and Sandyman has laid enough false clues, both for the law and for his former associates, to thwart them all.

We are left wondering whether a "Lear" who wins is the kind of man we want to cheer for.

Elling

Norway / Petter Næss

Rating: ****

Elling, a very successful novel in Norway, was directed on stage in Oslo by Petter Næss, and here on film in his second feature.

The title character, Elling (Per Christian Ellefsen), is a recluse who lived most of his life in his mother's home. She dies, and he is forced out by health authorities because it is so run down. Although Elling is well-read, he cannot handle the outside world, and he is taken to a state home. There he shares a room with Kjell-Bjarne (Sven Nordin), a huge man who has a great love for food and sex, although his experience with the latter is nil.

In time, they are moved into an apartment together to make a life on the outside while their social worker tries to keep tabs. This is difficult – Elling won't answer the telephone, and wants Kjell-Bjarne to stay in with him as much as possible. Gradually, though, they adapt, although this yields some hilarious moments as they learn to trust outsiders and to behave in settings we take for granted.

Elling discovers that he has a calling as a poet, and takes up the character of an underground writer, complete with trenchcoat and dark glasses, even at night. Kjell-Bjarne, for his part, has a knack as a mechanic from his childhood, and takes on the repair of a vintage car owned by a respected author who befriended Elling at a poetry reading. Their lives are further complicated by the woman who lives upstairs, a very large, very pregnant and, when we meet her, very drunk lady who is unexpectedly a perfect match for Kjell-Bjarne.

This is an "odd couple" story to warm the heart, something very much needed at the end of this Festival. Yes, the characters are peculiar, and yet we love them even as they wrestle, sometimes violently, with the real world. There are scenes of wild humour and great gentleness, and I hope that this film makes its way to North America so others can share in its joy.