

## Steve's Film Festival Reviews for 2003 (With Comments About 2002)

By Steve Munro

### *Ratings*

!#%?\$ An appalling piece of junk (new rating this year)  
0 I walked out (rating unused in 2003)  
\* 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.

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### *Festival Main Title*

The main title gets more boring every year. All of the Festival posters this year have someone holding a film frame in front of them through which one can see the background. This image is transferred to the screen with a woman on a long wooden bridge whose rails and posts suggest/become frames on a film. By the second day, I was seriously bored with this, and astounded that the Festival has only prints of this with overexposed and out of focus titles. The only time I saw it properly was at digital projections.

Universal Studios' salute to the volunteers, on the other hand, was always warmly received even though it's seen over and over again because the audience really appreciates the work the volunteers (and the Festival staff) do to make this whole thing possible.

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### *People's Choice Trailer*

AGF has three trailers and one poster this year, all based on the concept that a character is trapped in a job other than his/her true desire.

- The Poster: A teacher who would rather be in the movies has Dick, Jane and Spot in screenplay format on her blackboard.
  - A Private Eye really wants to be a director/cinematographer, and critiques his surveillance of a tryst while, presumably, the tearful husband watches on a camcorder's monitor.
  - A Court Reporter reads back a transcript in the best "Dark and Stormy Night" manner. The witness, a cop reading from his own notes, looks on dumbfounded (this reaction made for a good laugh every time of the at least dozen I saw it).
  - Bad Taste Award: An Airline Steward as a ham actor tells his passengers how to work the emergency air mask, and slides into exhortations that everyone should turn to their fellow passengers for support and comfort in such trying times. Yes, the Festival managed to screen this one on September 11. AGF, in response to an email from me, said that they had no control over the rotation of the spots, but ignored the question of why they approved the script in the first place given that the Festival brackets 9/11. No response yet from the Festival itself.
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### *General Observations*

Although I've read lots in the press about how this was a great Festival, I found the level of quality down from 2001 (my last complete Festival). This sentiment was echoed by just about everyone that I talked to in lineups or in theatres. Just a sample of the great films from 01 – *Pauline et Paulette*, *Mulholland Drive*, *A Song for Martin*, *Kissing Jessica Stein*, *Facing the Music*, *C'est la vie*, plus others at least at the three star level. Even with the horror of 9/11, there were exhilarating days in 2001 where I would come home at night thrilled by the day's viewing. That only happened once in 2003.

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I did poorly in the draw – 69<sup>th</sup> of 80 boxes processed, and did not get some of my first choices. This had the unlooked for effect of opening gaps into which some gems fell.

My two favourites of the Festival got very little press coverage: *Les Triplettes de Belleville* and *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself*. The first is a full-length animated story about a boy whose dream of cycling in the Tour de France is thwarted by villains from a large city across the Atlantic. The second is a bittersweet comedy about two Glasgow brothers, one frequently and unsuccessfully suicidal, who inherit a used bookshop and fall in love with the same woman.

2003 brought another farewell to an old theatre – the Uptown – the last really big first run screen in the city. The 900-seat Uptown 1 (the balcony of the original Lowe’s Uptown) was a great space to see movies for the size of the screen, the strength of the sound system, and for the fun of sharing the experience with so many others. Among my great memories in this space are:

- 1997: Sally Potter and Pablo Veron at the Q&A following *The Tango Lesson*. A voice high up in the theatre calls out “Dance for us!” and off they went across the stage, dancing without music while the audience clapped out the rhythm.
- 1987: Tengiz Abuladze’s *Repentance*, a film made in Georgia, USSR, with strong themes of nationalism and religion, shows us the first fruits of *glasnost*. Abuladze was a personal friend of Gorbachev, and the long Q&A, conducted in English, French, Russian and Georgian, dealt as much with current events in the then Soviet Union as with the content of the film.
- 2003: John Irvin’s *The Boys From County Clare* screens at 9:30 am on the closing day to a packed house. The Director is astounded and heart-warmed to see us all there, and we have the joy of laughing with and applauding for Irvin and his cast as they watch the movie with us.

The Uptown will be demolished to make way for a 50-storey condo tower.

Others lost Festival theatres include:

- The University (now a Pottery Barn store): I saw *Ben Hur* at the University in first run and had my first taste of inflated prices at cinema food stands. A roll of peppermints I could buy at a corner store for five cents went for the unheard of price of a quarter! Also at the University, I saw Carlos Saura’s *Carmen* and was introduced to Saura’s love for Flamenco. And finally, one of the masterpieces of the silent era, Mornau’s *Nosferatu* screened at the University in a freshly restored, tinted print with the original intertitles.
- The Towne (now the site of the Xerox tower): Not the most distinguished of cinemas, but I had the thrill there of seeing *Chariots of Fire* before the world discovered both the movie and the music of Vangelis. Back in the days before advance ticketing, the Towne was a house where at least half of us left by the back door to dash across the parking lot to the lineup for ...
- The New Yorker / Festival / Showcase (now dark, most recently host of *Puppetry of the Penis* whose signage, sadly, still “graces” the front of the theatre): In 1981, Jean-Jacques Beineix’ *Diva* played as the closing show at the Festival (as it was then named). The lobby looked bombed-out as the owner of the concession stand (good food before Cineplex discovered the idea that audiences will eat something other than popcorn) had pulled out all of his equipment to avoid losing it in the locked theatre. *Diva* had gone nowhere in France, but it was a huge hit in Toronto, and (unusually for a film screening so late in the Festival) it won the audience favourite award, and went on to conquer North America. Some years later, the theatre re-opened as a cinema for a time as the Showcase, and in that incarnation I saw Itami’s *Tampopo* at a packed house at 9:00 am on a Sunday morning.
- The Hollywood: The Festival ran here for a short time, and one evening I watched Henry Jaglom’s *Eating* (a film that brought it’s share of lively Q&A exchanges) with the director in the audience. This was the time of Operation Desert Storm, and Jaglom (an American) was aware of the tensions in world events. All through his film, ominous rumbles could be heard in the theatre, but the audience ignored them. As the Q&A started, Jaglom congratulated us on being so calm, and with one voice, we replied “It’s the subway!”
- The Hyland: Although not strictly a Festival house, the Hyland hosted a sneak preview to which Festival patrons were sent tickets. We didn’t really know what to expect other than a new fantasy film from Steven Spielberg. It was *E.T.*

As most of my readers will know, I spent much of the 2002 festival recovering from breaking my left kneecap at the Uptown cinema on my birthday. The film I was about to see was *Welcome to Collinwood*, a crime caper film with William H. Macy (my reason for selecting this flick) that opened and closed in fairly short order last fall. In an ironic twist, my last film at the Uptown also starred William H. Macy, one of the few redeeming features of *The Cooler* that will open (and likely close soon thereafter) this fall. I like Macy as an actor, but the indifferent films he works in make me wonder about his judgement.

At the end of my 2003 reviews, I will include a few comments on the films that I did see in 2002, just to put that year to bed.

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## Thursday, September 4

Nothing on the Thursday evening schedule (always very small in any event) looked appealing.

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## Friday, September 5

### *Koktebel*

**Russia / Boris Khlebnikov & Alexei Popogrebsky**

**Rating: \*\*1/2**

Awards: Silver St. George Special Jury Prize at the Moscow Festival, 2003

*Koktebel* is a road movie, but like any good road movie, the interesting bits are all the stops along the way and the characters we meet. A father and his son are walking – yes, walking – from Moscow to Koktebel, a popular tourist destination on the Black Sea. As the film opens, it is dawn, very foggy, and the two emerge from their night in a culvert under the highway. Why are they doing this? Papa used to build airplanes, but he drank a lot, lost his job and lost his apartment. His wife is dead, and with his son he is enroute to his sister's place in Koktebel. It will turn out, much later, that she is not there, but is on vacation somewhere else, a bit of black irony to end the story.

Along the way, they meet some odd characters. One night is spent with many sheep. After hitching a ride in an empty boxcar, they are befriended by a track maintainer who shares his supper and lets them stay in a workshed. They come on a *dacha* whose eccentric inhabitant is looking for someone to rebuild the rotting roof, and stay until their host's paranoia drives them off. At this point, the two are separated, and the son hitches a ride with a friendly trucker who takes him almost to Koktebel. On the outskirts, the son drops off to see a monument to flight that his father has often talked of. It is in ruins. Eventually, papa catches up and we leave them sitting on the beach amid warmth and tourism, but as much at loose ends as they were leaving Moscow.

Animals make cameo appearances, on occasion quite by accident. A dog runs into and out of the opening shot at the culvert. A fish leaps out of the water at night in the background of a heart-to-heart conversation between father and son. A worm makes an appearance in half of an apple. At the Q&A, one of the directors explained that they had taken a highly trained, professional Russian stunt worm from Moscow for the shoot, but in the end it was a local Ukrainian worm that did the job.

Although I found the premise of *Koktebel* just a little much to swallow, I was pleased that the story did not drag and the characters held my interest. On the technical side, the sound and photography were both excellent

Gleb Puskepulis, who plays the 11-year old son, is a professional actor, but this is his first film. Others in the cast are accomplished stage actors in Russia. The quality shows in the characters, and this rescues *Koktebel* to a credible first feature.

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### *Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine*

**Canada / Vikram Jayanti**

**Rating: \*\***

*Game Over* is a documentary with an agenda – to advance the thesis that Kasparov's paranoia about IBM and Deep Blue was justified and that IBM, in fact, cheated in the 1997 man-versus-machine meeting. My own verdict is "unproven", at best. Jayanti wastes a lot of time on filler such as footage of a Victorian chess-playing automaton that actually was operated by a man inside the body of the machine.

Jayanti is no Michael Moore [of *Bowling for Columbine* fame], but he has obvious pretensions. As he said at the screening, he decided to leave out all of the "chess geek" stuff to concentrate on Kasparov's story. That would have been nice if we had seen more of the arch-rival IBM gang, although they seemed nice enough folks that too much screen time might have undermined Jayanti's theme. What we get instead is a lot of Kasparov pacing around, Kasparov thinking, and the lurking allegation that IBM was cheating by changing the playing style of Deep Blue partway through the match, indeed, while the

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games were in progress. Their goal? Marketing and hyping the stock market according to the Q&A, although this was not mentioned in the film itself.

The biggest problem with *Game Over* is that it isn't over soon enough. It's 60 minutes' worth of material blown out to a full 90, and that length dilutes the effect. I had lots of time to wonder why we were not seeing IBMers pursued by rolling cameras as they fled from interviews. I had lots of time to wonder about "game 2" where Deep Blue made a move so unsettling to Kasparov, it threw off his game for the rest of the match. He claims that it was a move that could only have been made with the intervention of one or more grandmasters on the spot. The possibility that a combination of skillful programming and dumb luck won the day never occurs to Kasparov or to his mouthpiece, Jayanti. As someone who understands the basics of chess and more than a little about computers, I found *Game Over* very disappointing.

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**Saturday, September 6**

***The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Episode 3. Antwerp***  
**UK/The Netherlands / Peter Greenaway**  
**Rating: \*\***

*See also Episode 1 reviewed on page 18.*

Peter Greenaway has alternately astounded and frustrated me over the years with his complex layered images and lush style. Talking about the *Tulse Luper* project, one that will grow eventually to several feature-length films, a website, many books and other manifestations, Greenaway said that the DVD was invented just for him. His desire is to present a story from many perspectives, with many options and troves of information for the audience to explore. Greenaway is convinced that this is the future of cinema.

Yes, well, maybe.

Let's get the technical stuff out of the way first. The *Tulse Luper* films were shot and edited digitally giving Greenaway a breathtaking (at first) ability to manipulate images, a technique dear to his painter's heart. *Antwerp* was projected in widescreen digital format at the Varsity, and I must say that the clarity of the image settles for me the question of whether digital projection could ever match the subtlety and detail of film. It does. Indeed, when I saw another installment projected from a digital-to-film transfer, the image was pedestrian by comparison, and this in one of the best Festival houses for projection, the Elgin. Sadly, all of that technology runs aground on the most basic of cinema requirements: the need to have something worth saying.

Greenaway explores Kafka and Beckett (including a scene from *Godot* where the actors want to change the script), and freely gives the same character to multiple actors (through the mechanism of auditions). He gleefully places characters from minimalist theatre inside his baroque construction. "Baroque", a term Greenaway himself used, is almost an understatement: so much detail and information are present in the high definition image that one cannot take it all in on one viewing. Images slide around the frame, they overlap, they are superimposed on surfaces within other images – all a *tour de force* of the editing table.

The *Tulse Luper* project takes as its reference point the element Uranium. The title character is born in the year the element was discovered, 1928, and Greenaway will follow him through the "uranium era" to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Along the way, we will see the contents of 92 boxes (the "suitcases" of the title, corresponding to Uranium's atomic number) containing collections of objects that relate one way or another to the story. Luper himself is a rather confused character who will spend most of his life in one form of prison or another.

The *Antwerp* episode is set in the 30s amidst the rise of Fascism, ironically among sympathizers in Holland and America. For reasons that escape me, Greenaway starts Luper's life among the Mormons of Utah, and has them stand in for the entire range of Christian right-wing loonies now infesting that country. Luper has moved to Europe. He has books (clearly the mark of a dangerous intellectual), as well as an admirer and would-be lover, a stenographer whose task is to transcribe the books. She recognizes that the work is not all his, that his jailers would need to invent writings in order to justify his imprisonment. Here again Greenaway gives us one character with two manifestations, only one of which we can believe.

I'm not going to try to tell "the story" here, in part because conventional narrative is not Greenaway's intent. He prefers interactive projects and feels that the 100-year old cinema technology needs a change. He recognizes that technology

influences the style and manner of presentation, but fails to notice that we still read books and see plays interpreted afresh by our own imaginations and those of new actors and directors. Greenaway's presumption of his own destiny in the new media would be easier to take if he had presented only the *Antwerp* episode in the Festival. Unfortunately, we also saw the *Moab* episode some days later.

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### ***The Fog of War***

**USA / Errol Morris**

**Rating: \*\*\***

Robert McNamara is a key figure in American history during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Today we watch "Dubya" march off to war against anyone who can be counted on not to shoot back too often, but we forget that the USA's militarism is not new. McNamara was there during World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis and Viet Nam. Now he is having second thoughts.

Errol Morris brings us a film that fills in the gaps and leaves us with horrible "what if" questions about different paths history might have taken. The long interview with McNamara, intercut with historical footage, is annoying because of Morris' editing – in order to tighten the argument, Morris has many elisions in McNamara's text and I had to wonder what detail, what alternative view, we were losing. (Or was it just a lot of "ums" and "ahs" as McNamara came to grips with his own past?)

During World War II, McNamara was an analyst who came up with the idea that it was better to fly low, bomb accurately and hard to maximize the yield of sorties. The pilots preferred to stay high and relatively safe, but they missed a lot. McNamara admits that if the west had lost the war, they would have been tried as war criminals for their destruction. The point is not that either side was inherently "good" or "bad", but that the view is coloured by which side you were on and who won the battle.

In Cuba, the Americans were certain that what they saw were missile sites under construction, but that there were no warheads that could threaten an attack. This emboldened them to undertake a blockade, and some generals wanted to simply go in and destroy Cuba. Years later, McNamara visits Cuba and learns from Castro that the warheads were already there, and would have been used even though Cuba would have been annihilated in retaliation. I could not help thinking that 9/11 might never have happened because New York would no longer exist.

In Viet Nam, the premise was all Cold War rhetoric, the expulsion of Communism, for the Americans. For the locals, it was a war of independence, to be fought to the death. Robert McNamara's education came far too late to save both Viet Nam and the United States from the horrors of that war.

The sadness and terror in *The Fog of War* comes in seeing how little the USA has learned. They see what they want to see to justify actions that are dubious or counterproductive. This is a film very much worth seeing, frustrating though it may be.

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### ***Alien***

**USA / Sir Ridley Scott**

**Rating: \*\*\*\***

One of the treats of the Film Festival is that we get to be a launchpad for new films, blatantly commercial though this practice may be. There's the thrill of a premiere, the hype, sometimes an interesting Q&A with folks behind the movie. Yes, it will be out commercially in a few weeks, but who cares? We were there first.

*Alien*, as we all know, has been out for years, since 1979 to be exact and, despite Sigourney Weaver's best attempts to kill off the species, it has spawned offspring. This one is the original, updated by Sir Ridley Scott for re-release on October 31, 2003. It is dark, brooding, and totally unlike the bright and rather tidy worlds of so many space epics. Scott has added about five minutes' worth of footage and taken out almost the same amount to tighten up the pace, and the film itself has been digitally restored as closely as possible to the original.

Something I had forgotten, not having seen *Alien* for at least a decade, was how long it takes us to even see an alien creature. Almost the first hour is taken up with the routine business of a rather grungy space freighter until they come upon a wrecked spaceship on an horrific, storm-wracked planet. Even after John Hurt's character is attacked by an alien hatchling, Scott plays with us by letting things settle back to normal, for the moment. Then, finally, we get down to the serious business for the second half of the film at an intensity that could not have been sustained had it begun earlier.

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Scott gave a short introduction, and a generous Q&A. He was particularly proud of the fact that in *Alien* everything on the screen had to be done, somehow, for the camera, not in a computer. Producing the alien form itself, the work of Swiss artist H.R. Geiger, was quite a challenge. One well-known form, the youngster that bursts out of John Hurt's belly, just didn't work in Geiger's version. As Scott put it, it looked "like Geiger had put his hand up a turkey's ass". I will never see that scene (or a flock of turkeys) in quite the same way ever again. The creature was kept under wraps until the scene was filmed, and the cast (except for John Hurt, of course) did not know what was about to happen.

Another classic Festival moment – the meeting between the devout film student and the seasoned director – added a great laugh to the Q&A. I will leave the description to Peter Howell of the Star who has captured this in his review:

"The serious woman in the Uptown Theatre audience raised her hand to question Sir Ridley Scott ... What, she wanted to know, had Scott intended by the film's butt-kicking feminist subtext? And also by its maternal imagery, with its many womb symbols and its computer named 'Mother'?"

"Sir Ridley thought for a second, his hand stroking his scruffy gray beard. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he delivered his answer: 'I just wanted to do a hard-nosed film and scare the shit out of you'."

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!

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***Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran [Mr. Ibrahim and the flowers of the Koran]***

**France / François Dupeyron**

**Rating: \***

Well, it was a nice idea in our troubled times. Omar Sharif, of all people, plays M. Ibrahim, an old man who runs a small grocery store in Paris. His presence is clearly intended to lure audiences, and at the screening he received a long, warm welcome. But this is marketing, and marketing alone will not save a film.

Ibrahim is "an Arab" where the word means anyone who tends a shop for long hours and knows everyone in the neighbourhood. He befriends a teenager, Moïse, a Jew who regularly steals small things from the shop. This could be the start of a gentle meeting-of-cultures story, but it loses its way.

Moïse is always trying to act older than his age, especially with girls, but he winds up spending his time with the local hookers. Meanwhile, the friendship with Ibrahim deepens. The shopkeeper decides to make a voyage back to his home in Turkey, and takes Moïse with him. We would hope for some meaningful surrogate father-son dialogue at this point, but, no, the film turns into a travelogue. You can almost see the subliminal headlines "Vacation in Turkey!" In effect, the very point where we might establish something new between the characters is wasted on a lot of landscape.

When we do arrive at Ibrahim's hometown, he leaves Moïse to go off on a personal errand, and we later learn that he was going to visit his wife whom he had left decades before to move to Europe. It turns out that she has died, and it's not long after that [cue the kleenex here] Ibrahim dies too.

Fast forward a decade and we have the same shop. Moïse is the proprietor, the "Arab" as he calls himself now. Very symbolic. Very trite. Very not worth the 94 minutes.

**Sunday, September 7**

***A Program of Shorts***

I try to fit in a few of the short programs at the Festival, but oh they can try my patience! This grouping looked as if it might have a vaguely urban theme linking them, and as someone who cares about cities, I added it to my list.

My overall impression was of a bunch of student works, even though it turns out that the really bad ones were by people who *teach* film. This may be a case of the line from *Annie Hall* that “People who can’t do, teach”. A common thread seems to be the urge to use every single frame you shot including the ones that were lightstruck at the end of the roll (a phenomenon that digital photography will make obsolete leading to the need to digitally imitate a former medium). Poor pacing is the norm because, of course, there is no discipline of editing nor of the need in a low-budget silents to actually sync the image to the pace of the soundtrack. The audience supplied its own soundtrack along with noise from the adjacent lobby.

*Meditations on Revolution, Part V: Foreign City* (Robert Fenz) looks at an urban landscape by night. It’s actually NYC, but not the touristy part anyone would recognize from a postcard. Very moody. The film evolves into a portrait of jazz artist Marion Brown, but the lead up is so long, the ostensible subject is lost in the clutter.

*Im Garten* (Ute Aurand and Bärbel Freund) brings us the time honoured fast forward through the seasons of fall, winter, etc (yawn if you’re getting tired already). We are in a formal garden in Potsdam that, I’m sure, rates a decent, sensitive documentary. Don’t look here. *Im Garten* plays repetitively and uselessly with under and overexposures, including lightstruck frames, without any sense of pacing (time passes regularly the last time I looked out the window), and with no sensitivity for the subject.

*Quadro* (Lotte Schreiber) shows us fragments of high rise blocks overlooking a square in Trieste. It is supposed to be a study of and response to 60’s architecture (think of a badly-done version of the Mies’ TD Centre) and we artfully have buildings almost playing hide-and-seek with the viewer thanks to the camera movement. Interesting for about 20 seconds.

*Bouquet 25* (Rose Lowder) is 25 seconds of superimposed images that last at most a few frames each. It is entirely unwatchable.

*Megalopolis* (Jim Jennings) gives us more of Manhattan, but at least knows that it’s an architecture film and nothing else.

*Outline* (Sandra Gibson) is a bit of paint-on-film animation. It’s been done before, and this example is nowhere near as good as some 50 years older.

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***Les Triplettes de Belleville [The Triplets of Belleville or “Belleville Rendezvous” as it has been released in England]***

**France/Canada/Belgium / Sylvain Chomet**

**Rating: \*\*\*\*\***

*Les Triplettes de Belleville* is an absolute gem. 80 minutes of animation lovingly rendered in three countries, but designed and directed seamlessly by Sylvain Chomet.

First off, the plot: The main title runs under an animated, grainy black-and-white film of three singers (the “Triplets” of the title) who one might take for a French version of the Andrews sisters. We pull back to reveal that this is a television program watched by Madame Souza, an aging, short and cantankerous woman, and her grandson, Champion. At this point, he is just a lad, and he dreams of racing in the *Tour de France*. A gift of a tricycle from Madame Souza launches him on his career. We fast-forward to Champion’s late teens where the ageless Madame Souza has become his trainer.

They are accompanied by Bruno, a dog who starts out small and grows both up and out. Bruno’s obesity and difficulty with the athletic things dogs normally do neatly mirror Champion’s perfection. There is a running joke about trains passing the house that I will not spoil.

Now it’s the day of the race, but mysterious figures (“men in black”) are kidnapping the best riders. A chase ensues that takes us across the Atlantic to “Belleville”, a city that happens to have a rather buxom lady statue in its harbour and a very large

number of overweight inhabitants. Madame Souza is taken in by the now elderly Triplets (who still have a stage act), and together with Bruno, they track down the Champion, the cyclists, and the evil mastermind. It's a French film, and so the bad guys are also wine snobs. Champion is set free, but the men in black give chase through the streets of Belleville. The good guys win out, of course. In a touching dénouement, we are back at the opening scene, almost, in front of the television.

I have left out huge amounts here including wonderful scenes that could work on their own as shorts, but serve the larger purpose of the feature. Only when you read the credits do you realize that a separate team of animators did each scene. There is little computer work here – a few bits of texture and three-dimensionality, but the scenes are almost all hand-drawn with wonderful detailing. The bric-a-brac in Madame Souza's house, alone, is a treat.

Introducing his film (gloriously screened at the Elgin), Sylvain Chomet said that his producers have him total artistic freedom. These are characters that were not designed to ever become a Saturday morning kids' show, nor to ever appear on mugs at a fast food restaurant. *Les Triplettes* is a labour of love that deserves every award going not just for animation technique but for the brilliance of its story and the warmth of (most of) its characters.

Warning! Animated frogs meet a violent end in this film and many are eaten. If you are a defender of the rights of animated animals, don't go. Otherwise, don't miss it!

Sony Classics will release this as *The Triplets of Belleville* on November 21, 2003.

Visit the website at [www.lestriplettesdebelleville.com](http://www.lestriplettesdebelleville.com) for a taste.

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### ***Depuis qu'Otar est parti [Since Otar Left]***

**France / Julie Bertuccelli**

**Rating: \*\*\*\***

Awards: Critics' Week Prize at Cannes

*Depuis qu'Otar est parti* is set mainly in Tblisi, Georgia and is acted mainly in Georgian, although it is a French film. Julie Bertuccelli presents a family of three women whose lives are all touched by the absent Otar of the title. The eldest, Eka (played wonderfully by Esther Gorintin), deeply misses her son, Otar, who is working illegally in Paris to make money that he sends home to the family. Otar's Letters are a treasure to Eka who, through them, can both stay in touch with her son and with her memories of France where she lived as a young woman.

Her daughter, Marina (Nino Khomassouridze), Otar's sister, is widowed, but has a sometimes lover. The granddaughter, Ada (Dinara Droukarova), is caught in the bickering between Marina, who always felt the less-favoured child, and Eka. Otar's rooms, both in the Tblisi house and in the family's house in the country, have been preserved as he left them.

Eka suffers a minor heart problem and spends a short stay in hospital. Meanwhile, news comes from Paris that Otar has been killed in a construction accident. Neither Marina nor Ada can bring themselves to tell Eka about this, and they begin a ruse to write letters on Otar's behalf keeping up the fiction that he is still alive. Eka is suspicious because some things don't ring true, and Otar no longer phones, but she stays happy.

This continues for seven months, but one day Marina and Ada come home to find the bookshelves bare – Eka, who had a huge library, has sold her collection to pay for a trip for all three to Paris.

Once in Paris, Marina and Ada go off to the cemetery to see Otar's grave, while Eka sets out to visit her son. Finally, she learns the truth from a former neighbour.

The three women meet up again, and Eka keeps up the fiction that Otar is alive, although both she and Ada seem to have an understanding that this is not true. As their visit ends, Ada changes her mind at the last moment and stays in Paris, yet another generation that Eka has lost to the promise of Western Europe.

Throughout *Depuis qu'Otar est parti* I was struck by the fine acting (all principal roles are played by well-known eastern European actresses) and by the combination of an utterly credible plot and characters. There is no need to make believe for the sake of the story. This is a touching, bittersweet film, and I hope that it shows up in release if only at the art houses.

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***The Saddest Music in the World***

**Canada / Guy Maddin**

**Rating: \*\*\*1/2**

Award: Best Canadian Feature at the Toronto Festival

Guy Maddin is quickly becoming an icon of Canadian film, and it's not hard to understand why. His bizarre film style leaves one gasping for breath that someone would first have the ideas (Maddin must be seriously warped just to think up some of his scenes) and that someone else would pay to make a film from them. The Film Festival had an unexpected hit when Maddin produced *The Heart of the World*, a five-minute long homage to silent, black & white Russian cinema that outclassed the other 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Preludes by a mile.

Maddin sets *The Saddest Music in the World* in depression-era Winnipeg (well, a set that was probably located in Winnipeg, anyhow). Lady Port-Huntley (Isabella Rossellini(!)) is a baroness whose fortune springs from (wait for it) beer – this is Canada after all. In a tribute to the Dance Marathon, Maddin invents a contest to find the saddest music in the world with the judging and the prize coming from the beer company. All sorts of would-be winners come from the corners of the earth. They sing, they play, we rarely cry.

Among the contestants is an American (you are supposed to boo and hiss here) named Chester (Mark McKinney) whose nefarious plot is to win the prize by any means he can. His estranged brother Roderick (Ross McMillan), now a cellist with an assumed eastern European name and pedigree, and his muse, Narcissa (Maria de Medeiros), are in town for the competition. Their father, Fyodor (David Fox), a retired (thank goodness!) doctor, agonizes over the terrible accident years ago when he accidentally amputated Lady Port-Huntley's legs. She was the love of his life, and now he has built beer-filled glass legs.

Yes, this plot is *Cinderella* on serious drugs.

I wanted to love this film, but refrained from a five-star rating. Maddin has crafted some sidesplitting set pieces here, but they are firmly based in that most Canadian of comic forms, the sketch. The wacky setting, the premise, and the slightly foggy cinematography don't quite hold together, and the dialogue between the good bits is, in spots, so dull that I hope Maddin intended campiness rather than boredom.

Congratulations to Rhombus Media for producing this wonder, flawed though it is.

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**Monday, September 8**

***Errance***

**France / Damien Odoul**

**Rating: \*1/2**

Jacques and Lou are one of those odd couples who show up in "relationship" films. One wonders how they ever got together and why the girl didn't leave the guy part way through the second reel of the film.

Jacques (Benoît Magimel) is wild and erratic. He drinks. He is unfaithful. At one time, he may have been attractive, but not now. He shows no sign of consistent employment.

Lou (Laetitia Casta) is pregnant, and she has a difficult birth that must eventually be done by Caesarian. She adores her son, and he is astoundingly cute considering the cold and difficult relationship of his parents.

*Errance* has three sections set in 1968, 1972 and 1973. We begin in the city, a place where Lou is not very happy, with the birth of her son. Along the way, she mentions that she would be happier living by the sea, and thanks to the time travel of cinema, we find ourselves on the Cote d'Azur four years later. Things seem happy, but Jacques is still drinking, unfaithful to his wife and skimming funds at his job. How he has lasted for the four years is a bit of a mystery. A violent confrontation ends his job, and proves to be the end of his marriage.

In 1973, we find ourselves back in the city for reasons that are unclear – if Lou doesn't like city life, why is she there? Jacques has cleaned himself and wants to get his marriage back on track, but he hasn't got a chance.

It seems that Jacques and his even wilder brother were in army intelligence together in Algeria, and Jacques is recruited for a job that will pay well. He gets a down payment, but doesn't even bother to try to carry out his task, and is murdered. Oh sigh. My problem here is that it's hard to believe that such a pair of men would make it into intelligence work, let alone both have such attractive wives.

As a film about breakups, it works for about an hour and a quarter – the point where Jacques should have been gone for good – but after that the whole business about Jacques as a potential hit man is quite forced. His relationship with Lou is never really tested because the plot veers off on another course.

Great acting, but not a great plot or premise. Don't waste your time if it shows up in Toronto.

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### *Émile*

**Canada / Carl Bessai**

**Rating: \*\*1/2**

*Émile* is Sir Ian McKellan's film, a character study of an old man who has returned to his place of birth and what's left of his family. We studiously avoid the premise that this most English actor might have been born on the Canadian prairie, moved across the pond in his late teens, and now has no trace of his Canadian background. It's just one of those things that happen in films.

*Émile* is back in Canada to accept an honorary degree from the University of Victoria. He visits his niece, Maria (Deborah Kara Unger), and his grandniece. The youngster shies away initially but grows to love the old man.

The family has a history, and we slowly learn that *Émile*'s brothers died one from suicide and one from a road accident. *Émile* himself left Canada, and Maria, to study in England. Maria still resents his leaving.

In time, the grandniece will knit *Émile* back into the family, and he will decide to move back to the farm where he was born.

You can see that this is a rather threadbare plot, and I have left out a lot of flashbacks through which the family history is revealed – there are almost too many flashbacks for any self-respecting film, and the technique gets a bit boring after a while. Only McKellan's presence saves the film and guarantees it some exposure.

A good effort by Carl Bessai, but no masterpiece.

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### *Another Program of Shorts*

Finally! Shorts that are made by people who can tell a story and who understand how wonderful it is to have the audience with you rather than demanding that they accept your view of the world!

*Not a Fish Story* (Anita Doron) is a short take on a love that is transformed by a change where only one partner can go. After thirty years of marriage, a husband confides to his wife that he wants to become a fish, and that he has built a large aquarium in the basement as his new home. Gills, scales and fins start to appear, and eventually his days on dry land are over.

*Why the Anderson Children Don't Come to Dinner* (Jamie Travis) is an off-the-wall portrait of a family where home-cooked meals take on a new meaning. Mrs. Anderson does cooking on a grand scale, and each meal to greet the kiddies is bigger than the last in a form of culinary child abuse.

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*The Garden* (James Buxton) shows us a couple who have walled themselves off from the outside world and who intend to be completely self-sufficient with their in-house garden. There is nothing to do but tend to the plants, and the outside world beckons through a barely functional TV set.

*A Little Life* (Elizabeth Murray) is a very short film about the birth, life and death of a green bottlefly. Not much here, and half of the footage is credited to someone else.

*The Dog Walker* (James Genn) is a tragic love story. A man, a dogwalker, loves a woman who played a minor role in one episode of an obscure TV series. The actress moves into his neighbourhood, and she has a dog! Bliss! Off he goes with the dog in tow, and a reason to visit his idol regularly. Disaster! The dog meets an untimely end forever dooming a would-be love. [Sigh]

I left without seeing the final film in this set, *Déformation personnelle*, as I had a scheduling conflict with dinner.

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### ***Twenty-nine Palms***

**France / Bruno Dumont**

**Rating: !#%?\$**

Warning: This is an X-rated review. Reader discretion is advised. Please skip ahead to the next page if you are offended by coarse language and descriptions of gratuitous violence and sex.

Bruno Dumont, the director, told us that we, the audience, were like the three-legged dog in this film. The dog gets run over by a Jeep, and that pretty much sums up what *Twenty-nine Palms* did to us.

David and Katia are an American and a Frenchwoman. She speaks little English. There are communication problems. This is very symbolic of something, likely the lack of a script. They are, according to a premise I must have blinked for, off in the California desert scouting locations for a film. Here is what happens:

They drive. She pees on camera. (No, not on the camera, although that might have been useful.) They stop to look at a windmill farm and a passing train that, not terribly artfully, wanders into the shot and comes between them and the windmills. Back at the motel, they swim. They fuck. They order Chinese takeout.

They drive more. They scratch the Jeep. They fuck on some artfully arranged rocks. Back at the motel again, they swim more. An attempted underwater blowjob does not work.

They go to a store where classical music plays. They eat ice cream, but to my amazement, omit any of the erotic possibilities. They fuck again, but in a different position than before, and David comes with a sound that can only be described as the call of Tarzan. The audience snickers and applauds. Obviously the position change was essential.

They repair the Jeep. They drive again. She pees again. They sit on more rocks. The meaning of life is not revealed to them or to us. They meet the three-legged dog. They run over it. Back at the motel, they fuck more – a successful blowjob this time. They eat pizza. Katia is tired of all this and she splits. David pursues her. They fight. They get back together again.

So far, I have been describing the non-violent part of the film.

Now they go off into the desert again where they are set upon by a vanload of rednecks. Katia is stripped naked and made to watch as they rape David. Cut back to the motel where they are a total mess. David loses it and kills Katia. Finally he drives off into the desert and is found, dead, by a policeman who is as lost about what is going on as we are.

The end.

Well-deserved boos and catcalls greeted the final credits, but I did not stay for the Q&A to hear the director roasted. I understand from others that he presented this as a “man against nature” film in which nature turns on man (we will ignore the

question of why man turns on woman). Ya, sure. Very bad pseudo-porn with violent deaths to show the world that fucking has nasty rewards. We can do without that sort of crap.

I wrote to the festival asking why they programmed this piece of shit, and why especially it came so highly recommended by Piers Handling, the festival's director. I have not received a reply. Meanwhile, the festival owes the folks who were conned into seeing *Twenty-nine Palms* a huge apology.

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### *Underworld*

**USA/UK/Germany/Hungary / Len Wiseman**

**Rating: \*\*1/2**

*Underworld* hopes to be one of those films like *The Matrix* that enters the cultural milieu through sheer style. Put enough glossy black on the screen, build a sound-track full of hard edged music, and spend lots on special effects, and you can take over the world. Maybe I'm being too harsh.

Kate Beckinsale is Selene, a Vampire whose mission is to kill Werewolves. Oh, you didn't know there was a war between the Vampires and the Werewolves? Well, you are just out of touch, my friend. Selene, her cohorts and the Werewolves (or Lycans as they have styled themselves here), do a lot of killing with some seriously heavy armaments. This could be a war film if the characters were not so well dressed.

Selene meets Michael (Scott Speedman) who saves her life, but in the process is bitten by a Lycan. Inevitably he will become a Werewolf himself. (We will ignore here the metaphysical concept of a human mortal saving an immortal creature from death.)

Meanwhile, the head Lycan is plotting with a turncoat Vampire to create an ideal cross-strain of the two races. For that, they need Michael's gene-line. This is the item Hitchcock refers to as "The McGuffin", the thing that everyone is after, but the audience doesn't really care about. They just want to see some action and a flash of sex now and then.

Odd though it may seem, we get almost no overt sexuality here. The Vampires all dress quite elegantly and Selene would make anyone want to bare their throat for a taste of bliss, but other than the odd heaving bosom, sexy footwear and lots of leather, there's not much here. As for the Lycans, don't even think of them – a brutish bunch of underground thugs.

Violence, on the other hand, yup we've got lots of that. Late in the story, after Selene awakens the old Vampire Victor to assist in clearing up the mess, we find that there are still a few who do things the traditional way. Victor cares nothing for all those guns and bullets – he simply grabs his victim by the throat and squeezes.

The Lycans are defeated, but another battle and a sequel are brewing. Our screening, the world premiere, had started around 1:00 am thanks to scheduling foul-ups, and by 3:00 am I just wanted to go to bed.

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### **Tuesday, September 9**

#### ***The Company***

**USA/Germany / Robert Altman**

**Rating: \*\***

What more could I ask for? Robert Altman. Malcolm Macdowell. The Joffrey Ballet of Chicago. Even Neve Campbell. Should be a sure-fire winner.

Neve Campbell used to dance (she trained at the National Ballet School), and she wanted to make a film about life in a dance company. She liked Bob Altman who has never made a dance film in his life, but whose name sells tickets, and she asked if he would direct. She even got a real company, the Joffrey, so that someone could actually dance on camera.

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*The Company* cannot make up its mind whether to be a dance performance film or a story. "There was a plot?" was a line I heard on a few lips as we left the theatre. Here it is, more or less:

Dancers dance, rehearse, fall in and out of love. A poor junior dancer has a "mentor" (a big donor, a "friend" of the company, a sugar daddy of the dancer, who knows) and this lad just doesn't fit in. His back-story would have been interesting, but it's not here.

Lar Lubovitch sets a nice little *pas de deux* on *My Funny Valentine*, and this dance is premiered on a rainy, windswept outdoor stage during a storm in which that no self-respecting company would attempt to work. Simply not credible, but it gives Neve's character a chance to make an unexpected success under trying circumstances.

Robert Desrosiers, a choreographer who passed his best-before date a long time ago, sets *Blue Snake* on the company. We will ignore the little detail that this ballet is over a decade old and was done with middling success by the National. Here we see it as if it were a new creation.

Malcolm Macdowell is a self-absorbed twit of an artistic director who should be put out to pasture, but who is responsible for, among other things, the performance in the storm. If this is what arts management is all about, God help the arts!

Neve gets to dance and act a bit. That, after all, is the purpose of the film. Her character gets a break when the original lead for *My Funny Valentine* has to pull out, and later Neve's own character is injured during *Blue Snake*. Oh, I get it. It's a cycle!

This could have been a pure dance film. Robert Altman clearly has learned how to shoot and edit dance sequences. Instead *The Company* turns out to be the cinematic equivalent of the vanity press.

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### ***Veronica Guerin***

**USA / Joel Schumacher**

**Rating: \*\***

As I write this, *Veronica Guerin* has just opened across North America accompanied by much hype for Cate Blanchett as a potential Oscar® winner. Pickings must be slim this year.

The story is astoundingly simple. *Veronica Guerin* is a newspaper writer who decides to take on and clean up the Dublin Mafia whose drug trading is a scourge of the streets, especially in poor neighbourhoods. She does not make lot of friends among the police, the community or, of course, the dealers. For her troubles, she is beaten up and eventually murdered.

Blanchett is excellent as Guerin, but one can't help wondering why we need an Australian actress when there are so many fine Irish ones, except for box office. Her character is single-mindedly focussed on getting the bad guys, suicidal though such a pursuit might be. What drives her? We never find out.

More to the point, why did it take Guerin's death to spur the Irish government to tackle the crooks through legislation and police action? The entire question of collusion by the powers-that-be in the existence of criminal activity is ignored and that's odd given the very political nature of films coming out of Ireland, Scotland and England. The political side is always where the real story lies.

Perhaps the answer is here: This is a Touchstone/Buena Vista film from our friends at Disney who see and who present the world through that peculiarly American point of view. Drugs are bad. Indeed they are so bad that the marijuana dealers of the real story had to be replaced with heroin dealers just to up the ante (and in the process fundamentally change the type and degree of addiction assumed among the Dublin poor). Questioning why politicians and police let the drug trade flourish, or why there might be such a huge market for drugs, is embarrassing. We don't ask those sorts of questions in good Disney films.

*Veronica Guerin* was ecstatically received in Ireland, so say the press releases, and we always believe the press releases. This may be as an homage to a respected journalist, but there's little more here to justify the hype.

For the balance of Tuesday evening, I celebrated my 55<sup>th</sup> birthday with many friends and lots of wonderful food at the Café Brussel.

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**Wednesday, September 10**

***Tom Dowd & the Language of Music***

**USA / Mark Moormann**

**Rating: \*\*\*\***

Tom Dowd was a wonderful character, a man who was part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's music business from the 40s almost up to his death late in 2002. Dowd worked as a physicist in the Manhattan project, but turned to acoustics after the war. This led him into the problems of how to record and mix sound. Dowd could have been a techie, a nerd who ran cables and twiddled dials, but he was more than this. He had a feel for music, for how to make artists sound good, and for getting the best out of the artists in a studio.

The collection of artists in this film – Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers, Les Paul, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Mingus, John Coltrane, and on and on – makes it worth seeing just for the music. What links them all is Tom Dowd and their respect for what he did as a recording engineer. At the Q&A, Mark Moormann was proud that performance clearances were easy to get because “it was for Tom”. A sound-track CD is in the works.

Today, with digital multi-channel editing, we tend to forget the primitive technology when today's “golden oldies” were recorded. Three-track tape was a luxury, and eight-track was nirvana. Dowd was responsible for capturing a lot of music. In a beautiful sequence shot not long before his death, we see Dowd at a mixing console working with the original master tape of *Layla*. One by one, he pulls out the various tracks to highlight riffs we might otherwise miss. It's almost as if he's mixing the original all over again.

*Tom Dowd & the Language of Music* is a warm-hearted documentary about a man who was behind the scenes of many great music stars. A limited theatrical release is planned by Palm Pictures. Watch for it!

Visit [www.thelanguaugeofmusic.com](http://www.thelanguaugeofmusic.com) for further information.

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***The Yes Men***

**USA / Dan Ollman, Sarah Price and Chris Smith**

**Rating: \*\*\*\***

*The Yes Men* is an hilarious documentary you will likely never see at your local cinema or on PBS for reasons that will soon be obvious. It follows what some might call “antics” and others “political theatre” of a group who set out to satirize the World Trade Organization by setting up a parallel entity complete with its own website (see <http://www.theyesmen.org/wto> for more information).

The Yes Men's premise is that the WTO is an instrument of global corporations to further their exploitation of developing countries, and that this should be made clear in WTO statements. Masquerading as real economists and futurists, the Yes Men present WTO policy shorn of pretence, and with sidesplitting satire. What is so amusing is the number of people who are taken in by their fake WTO credentials.

An economist debates the benefits of free enterprise on CNN.

A team attends a textile industry conference in Finland to present the new management leisure suit, a gold-lamé wonder with a very large inflated, er, um, protrusion from the crotch complete with built in keyboard and monitor. Through this, the executive of the future can keep his finger on the pulse of, er, his enterprise, monitor his offshore workers, even send signals to electrical implants in their brain to boost productivity.

In a fiendishly clever “solution” to the problem of third-world hunger, they present a scheme for recycling hamburgers. Since only 10% of the nutrient content of a burger is captured by the human body, the opportunities are enormous. In an animated

presentation, a figure goes to the loo and, as they flush, we see on the toilet seat Ronald Macdonald's smiling face thanking us for recycling. We travel through the bowels of the sewer system where all of the vital plumbing has golden-arched logos, to the point where the burgers can be captured and repackaged.

This presentation was given to students in Plattsburgh NY who were served free burgers as part of the lecture. Handouts (which were also available at the screening, but I didn't get one) included map-of-the-world beachballs with a modified recycling logo: The familiar arrows are alternating white and black hands with the white hands passing burgers to the black ones. A well-known "M" sits in the middle of the triangle.

How was all of this captured on film? The filmmakers went along as the official WTO documentarians, of course!

I will be astounded if this ever makes it into general release or video given that some organizations have a very bad sense of humour. Catch it if you can.

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### ***Bright Leaves***

**USA / Ross McElwee**

**Rating: \*\*1/2**

Ross McElwee is best known in these parts (and many others) for his 1986 feature *Sherman's March* in which he retraced the victorious General Sherman's march of devastation through the southern Confederacy while reflecting on his own Southern origins, his love life, and war in general.

In *Bright Leaves*, we find McElwee on another Southern topic, the tobacco industry. *Bright Leaf* is a 1950 Gary Cooper film that shows up as part of his eccentric cousin's collection of old movies. The plot, in which a family fortune is destroyed through the machinations of competition and knavery between competitors, seems uncannily like McElwee's own family history. It seems that his ancestors were cheated out of the "Bull Durham" tobacco brand by the Duke family who went on to control much of the tobacco industry in North Carolina. Should "Duke University" really have been "McElwee University"?

McElwee is uneasy with this, not just for what might have been, but for his own link to tobacco and its poisonous effects. Yes, he may have been rich, but at what cost?

Unlike *Sherman's March*, the balance here tips more to family and mythology than to the wider context of the South and its relationship to Big Tobacco. This turns what could have been a documentary about the lasting political resentment in the South for the impositions of the North into a small-scale family history that does not sustain its length. In the end, we find that the author of *Bright Leaf* knew nothing of the McElwees and the Dukes, but just made up a good story. A wry joke, but not worth 107 minutes of our time.

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### **Thursday, September 11**

#### ***In This World***

**UK / Michael Winterbottom**

**Rating: \*\*1/2**

The name Michael Winterbottom almost always draws me to movies at the Festival. Here is a director who first came into view in gritty British TV dramas, and then moved on to cinema. Almost always challenging and worth watching, even when he's not on top of his form.

I had problems with *In This World* on a few counts, one of which was Piers Handling's description of the film in the program guide. He gives the impression that the whole thing was shot on a shoestring, with amateur actors, and frequent dodging the local authorities in many countries. This doesn't square with the cinemascope format. Yes, there's some handheld night photography that's an obvious blow-up from digital, but most of it looks like there's quite a crowd behind the camera.

But I have rushed ahead. The story. The premise. Yes, you must be wondering what I'm going on about here.

We begin in a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan, where two Afghan cousins are planning to travel overland, with luck, to England. This will take a lot of planning and payoffs along the way, and some legs of the journey are quite dangerous. We follow them through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and across the Mediterranean by container to France. Enayat, the older cousin, doesn't make it, but Jamal gets through and, thanks to his ability with English, he is able to work in London. Along the way, we see the desperation of people for whom life in the west is a dream most will never reach, and their desire to do anything necessary to achieve it.

As a docudrama, *In This World* shows us the gritty side of life, but cinema conventions and expectations make cinemascope hardly the medium for a true documentary. Many of the scenes necessarily are staged, and this undermines the feeling early on that this might actually be live footage. Crossing the mountains at night between Iran and Turkey, we may actually be there, or we could be on any sandy hillside in the Middle East or the California desert. This uncertainty about the provenance of the scenes unsettling, and it turned the characters into actors rather than real people whose were risking everything.

A film that means to show us the hardship of life falters in its uncertain footing – reality or drama.

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***Jeux d'enfants* [English Title: *Love Me If You Dare*]**

**France / Yann Samuëll**

**Rating: \*\*\*\***

*Jeux d'enfants* owes a stylistic debt to *Amélie* and to *La vie en rose*, both hits of past Festivals, but this is a darker, richer story than either film. We first meet Julien and Sophie as eight-year-old best friends. Julien's mother, dying of cancer, gives her son a small, toy carousel. This carousel becomes a token between the two children – whoever has it must accept a dare from the other.

Initially, the pranks are comparatively harmless, but as they grow older and more deeply in love, the complexity and audacity of the pranks grow in tandem. As adults, their dares can have a mean edge, and this eventually leads to argument and separation. For a decade they are apart, and although each has a life and a family, there is not the light, the spark, that they had together. Finally, one day, they are reunited dares and all. A final dare – something of a reach for the audience and maybe as much of fantasy for the characters as a real experience – ends the story. Almost. I will leave that final twist for you to see.

This is a story of the most eccentric of loves, "I'll do anything for you" carried to wondrous and dangerous levels.

There is a strong link in style, especially in the early part of *Jeux d'enfants*, with *Amélie*, but these are nastier characters, not cuddly ingénues.

Yann Samuëll, with a background in animation, illustration, stage direction and short cinema, makes his feature debut with *Jeux d'enfants*, and he is on top of the story from the outset. The use of the camera and the music track show someone with a great sense for directing, for using all of the aspects of a film as a whole to tell the story. His actors, both the youngsters Thibault Verhaeghe and Joséphine Lebas-Joly, and the adults Guillaume Canet and Marion Cotillard, pull off the roles brilliantly, and the transition between ages is entirely believable.

*Jeux d'enfants* has opened in France, but there is no North American release planned yet.

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***Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself***

**Denmark/UK / Lone Scherfig**

**Rating: \*\*\*\*½**

Wilbur (Jamie Sieves) and Harbour (Adrian Rawlins) are an unlikely pair of brothers living in Glasgow. Wilbur, as the title indicates, spends a lot of time trying without success to commit suicide. He isn't really serious. Anyone who hands his rescuer a cell phone to make the emergency call is not serious.

The brothers have inherited a used bookshop from their recently deceased father. Harbour tries to make a go of the failing business while Wilbur gets on with, well, you know. Into this mix comes Alice (Shirley Henderson), a single mother who constantly brings books in for sale. Alice works at a hospital, and the books are those left behind by the dead. She's also a single mother whose daughter is building up savings from these book sales.

Alice and Harbour marry, and Wilbur finally loses interest in suicide, but unknown to both of them, Harbour has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. During his hospital stay, the relationship between Wilbur and Alice grows stronger. The bookshop has fallen on hard times, but in a great twist, Alice's daughter saves the business.

This film, one of my two favourites, has a plot that is easy to summarize (although I have left out a lot of the good bits), but it's the characters and our sympathy for them that make this worth seeing. Particularly striking and brave for the director is the fate she allows to Harbour, the brother who fought so hard to keep his brother from actually succeeding. Great acting from everyone – a small, but quite beautiful film.

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## Friday, September 12

### *Nathalie...*

France / Anne Fontaine

Rating: \*\*

What more could I ask for? A film with Fanny Ardent, Gérard Depardieu and Emmanuelle Béart – great actors of the French cinéma. Well, no.

*Nathalie...* (don't ask me about the ... because I never could figure out why they're in the title) is a prostitute (Béart) who we will meet a little way into the story. Bernard (Depardieu) and Catherine (Ardent) are a couple whose marriage does not seem to have much spark left, but who are both quite well-to-do professionals. Bernard is off on a business trip in Frankfurt and misses the last plane back to Paris where a surprise birthday party is waiting. By itself this would be merely unfortunate, but a few days later Catherine picks up a voicemail to Bernard thanking him for the great time they had "the other night". Oh sigh. At this point, the plot comes seriously unglued.

Catherine decides to test Bernard, and hires Nathalie to seduce him. We see events from Catherine's point of view, and Bernard does seem to take the bait, provided that you aren't watching too closely. Indeed, the really observant will figure out fairly early that the voicemail was from Bernard's mother who is bedridden but just clowning around.

Meanwhile, Nathalie keeps taking Catherine's money and spinning a line about her affair with Bernard. Nathalie simply thinks that Catherine has a fantasy about her husband and another woman, and taking money for not really doing anything is the easiest trick to come along in quite a while. In fact, nothing is going on beyond Catherine sinking deeply into a distrust for Bernard.

All three of these characters are drained of emotion. Catherine is a wife without love who, in the end, is drawn to the icy sexuality of Nathalie. Bernard's focus is his professional life and he long ago stopped having any joy in intimacy. Nathalie is professionally detached from her clients and saves her warmth for her immediate friends of whom we see little. At the end, there is a *rapprochement* of sorts.

My problem with *Nathalie...* is that the premise does not work. This is a loveless marriage, but one that seems to have evolved by mutual consent. There is no reason to believe that Bernard has a lover much less to entrap him with yet another woman, rather than simply confronting him with the voicemail message. We, the audience, figure out what's going on half way through the film, so why doesn't Catherine?

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### *Noviembre [November]*

Spain / Archero Mañas

Rating: \*\*\*\*

Award: FIPRESCI Foreign Critics' Award

*Noviembre* explores a world quite foreign to North Americans – the use of art as a means of social comment and political change. A group of actors decides that their art should be free for all to experience wherever they decide to perform, and they take to the streets under the name "November". At first, their works merely entertain, but as the story unfolds, their productions turn dark and complex with "theatre" that is indistinguishable from the real world.

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If this were the entire substance of *Noviembre*, it would be little more than a polemic against the comfortable, well-ordered modern life of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the story is intercut with “flashbacks” where the same characters, now middle-aged, look back on their youth. We see both the nuances in each actor’s motivations and their wistfulness at what might have been. Some want more aggression and confrontation, while others fear the limits of street theatre, of art as socio-political commentary.

One wonderful irony, only available to those of us who have the program notes in the Festival guide: the older actors were themselves members of a street theatre *El Piojo Picón* that was active in the 70s while Spain made its way from fascism to democracy. *Noviembre* argues that there is still a place for challenging the accepted order.

Seen from the point of view of a comfortable Canadian theatre, the actors’ seem naïve, but we care enough about them to follow their story. We want them to succeed, to force their audiences who, like us, are comfortable in present-day Spain, to confront aspects of their society that don’t work, that don’t fit the image.

The FIPRESCI award may elicit some attention from the art house distributors, but I doubt that we will see *Noviembre* in wide release.

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***The Merry Widow [1925]***

**USA / Erich von Stroheim**

**Music conducted by Berndt Heller**

**Rating: \*\*\*1/2**

*The Merry Widow* continues a happy Festival tradition of screening silent movies with live orchestral accompaniment. Here we have that most ironic of films: a silent film of an operetta that can work only because the music is filled in at the theatre. Berndt Heller conducted the original score by David Mendoza and William Axt, in turn an adaptation from Franz Lehár.

The story is hilariously silly, as befits an operetta: a European country, “Monteblanco”, has an aging king, two rival cousins who are potential heirs, and the old, lecherous Baron Sadoja whose money really runs the country. Crown Prince Mirko is first in line and lots of moustache twirling establishes him as the one for whom we most definitely must not cheer. Prince Danilo lives in Mirko’s shadow, politically, but his graceful, dashing character tells us he is sure to get the girl (once she shows up).

A troupe of actors rolls into town, and the lead, an American blonde named Sally O’Hara (Mae Murray) quickly becomes the centre of attention. Anything beyond an affair with an actress is clearly not in the cards for royalty, but the Baron has no such constraints and soon he is married to Sally. Conveniently, he dies on his wedding night leaving the now-Baroness with both a title and a considerable fortune. She will eventually become Queen of Monteblanco, but we will have lots of fun along the way.

According to Piers Handling’s introduction, Von Stroheim based the costumes on the royal family of Montenegro (then a monarchy). The real Prince of Montenegro brought suit against MGM for invasion of privacy and eventually settled out of court.

*The Merry Widow* is the sort of film that must be seen theatrically where one is surrounded by an audience full of amused reactions and happy familiarity with the music. Bless the Festival (and maybe even Piers Handling, despite my earlier comments) for making this possible.

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***The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 1. The Moab Story***

**UK/The Netherlands / Peter Greenaway**

**Rating: \***

Earlier in the week, I had seen “Episode 3” of Peter Greenaway’s work-in-progress, and could not decide whether it was overblown and pretentious, or a true innovation in cinema. Now that I’ve seen “Part 1”, I know.

The first hour of *The Moab Story* begins in England at the end of WWI, and shortly later takes us to Tulse Luper’s early life in Utah, home of the Mormons. I get the impression that Greenaway wanted a sect that was both uniquely American and right

wing, and somehow settled on the Mormons as his example. I would simply have preferred a loony right-winger with an admiration for Fascism, but hey it's Greenaway's film.

The second hour is a condensed version of "Episode 3" that we had already seen. It may differ in some small respects, but appeared to be substantially the same, just less detailed and a lot less interesting. The highly detailed imagery from the long version (reviewed on page 4) was mostly absent, and what was left simply did not justify our time in the theatre. Greenaway's claim to embrace non-linear storytelling took a real beating in *The Moab Story* which is not just linear, but deadly dull. Where two hours flew by in *Antwerp* (thanks to the richness of detail, if nothing else), they dragged on and on in *Moab*.

I should have walked out but I was sitting with a cute friend. We should have entertained ourselves better elsewhere.

Greenaway has a scheme for a series of films, books, DVDs and a website that would turn Tulse Luper into a minor artistic industry. I am not sure that the world will or should care.

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**Saturday, September 13**

***The Boys from County Clare***

**Ireland/UK/Germany / John Irvin**

**Rating: \*\*\*\***

To start off my last day at the Festival, and my last day in the Uptown, I needed something light, something that the audience would love, something that I could applaud wholeheartedly. John Irvin provided exactly the right thing in *The Boys from County Clare*.

John Joe (Bernard Hill) hopes to lead his band from County Clare to a repeat win with his *ceilidh* band in the All-Ireland Traditional Music Competitions. Danger lurks when his brother Jimmy (Colm Meaney) brings his own band from Liverpool where he has lived for the past 20 years. Family rivalries run deep with both John Joe and Jimmy out to win the prize any way they can, and in a way to replay a personal contest from their youth.

What story would be complete without an ill-fated love? Anne (Andrea Corr) is a crack fiddler in John Joe's band, but she is falling for Teddy (Shaun Evans) who plays flute for Jimmy. To round it all off, there is a third brother, long-departed to missionary work in South Africa, but making an unexpected return.

I'm not going to attempt a plot summary beyond saying we have a lot of fun on the way to the grand prize. This is a film that occupies some of the familiar territory of Irish yarns we saw in *Waking Ned Devine* (also shot in the Isle of Mann), but with fewer side-splitting laughs. A fine piece of ensemble acting that can almost make me forget that Colm Meaney should be on a starship somewhere.

John Irvin was in the Uptown to introduce his film and answer questions. The full house at 9:30 am amazed him, but even more gratifying was the warm reception after the screening. Odeon (Atlantic Alliance) is the Canadian distributor, and I hope they don't sit on this one too long.

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***Buongiorno, Notte [Good Morning, Night]***

**Italy / Marco Bellocchio**

**Rating: \*\*\***

In March 1978, the Red Brigade kidnapped Aldo Moro, the former Prime Minister of Italy. Two months later, he was murdered. In *Buongiorno, Notte*, Marco Bellocchio recounts this period from the point of view of the terrorists and of Moro himself. The strength of this film is that it does not overtly take sides to preach either against the corruption of the state or the senseless violence of the terrorists. That is left for the audience.

Things begin simply enough with a young couple buying a house. But this will be no ordinary house – it will be both a safe house for a wanted terrorist and a cell, specially built and hidden within the building, for Moro. Once he is captured, the story concentrates on the terrorists whose motives, we learn, are far from uniform. One of them, Chiara, reads a book given to her by

her father, that contains letters from victims of the Fascists. Her commitment falters as she finds uncomfortable parallels between her own actions and those of a hated former regime.

Attempts to negotiate with the government, including an appeal by Moro to the Pope, are fruitless. It is clear that Bellocchio's view condemns the fat, unmoving government for Moro's death as much as he abhors the Red Brigade. In the end, Moro is murdered when, we suspect, he might have been saved.

The strength of this film lies in the characters: the terrorists and Moro are complex people dealing with a situation largely beyond their experience. Each reacts in a different way, and Moro must come to grips with the likelihood of his death. *Buongiorno, Notte* is very much worth seeing for the quality of writing, acting and direction, although I am not sure if it will get a Canadian or North American distributor.

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### ***Shattered Glass***

**USA / Billy Ray**

**Rating: \*\*\***

Stephen Glass is a real person, a journalist who wrote for *The New Republic*. He was very good. His articles gained lots of attention and he was well liked among the staff. Only one problem: at least half of what he wrote was pure fiction – the people, places and events he described simply did not exist. How could this happen?

Billy Ray, in his first feature, gives us a story of real events, but as a drama, a view from the inside, rather than as pure documentary. Some of the characters are composites while others are real people. We must take it on faith that the conversations are representative of what actually happened.

Hayden Christensen plays Glass, a likeable young man who is everyone's friend, almost a little too eager to make sure that he is noticed as someone who cares about the little things around the office. Less obvious is the sham on which his career rests, a series of stories that were just plausible enough to get past the fact checkers, or which could not be checked because Glass was himself the primary source. Only when his world begins to unravel do we see the desperation as Glass tries to keep the stories alive, almost as if he really believed them.

Glass worms his way out of questions about his sources and accuracy even, on occasion, actually saying he made a mistake and throwing himself on his editor's mercy. Only when he fabricates a story that a rival online magazine would have died to publish is he finally unmasked.

Were it not that this story is based in fact, and that a similar problem recently shook the New York Times, it would be difficult for me to believe that such deception is actually possible. It would be one thing to have media that deliberately distorted facts to suit a political agenda, but to have an organization so blind to deception from within brings us to question the relative importance of sales, ratings and notoriety over accuracy and truth.

Christensen is excellent as Glass, and we don't really want to dislike him even as we see what he is really up to. That's his secret – he even manages to suck the audience in to his tragedy. The characters around him include junior writers who will never make it big in journalism, editors who want to support their staff and a publisher who is more than a little out of touch with what running a magazine is all about.

"Ethics" is a dirty word in our neo-conservative times, and it is refreshing to see a story where the term has meaning. Sadly, the bigger fish in our society are not so easily caught.

Lions Gate Films is the Canadian distributor. *Shattered Glass* opens in Toronto on October 24.

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### ***The Cooler***

**USA / Wayne Kramer**

**Rating: \*1/2**

William H. Macy and Alec Baldwin star in a film that should have been a bittersweet romantic comedy, but they are sabotaged by the director Wayne Kramer. Macy plays Bernie, the "cooler" of the title, whose presence is guaranteed to bring bad luck to

anyone near him. Baldwin plays Shelly, the manager of a Las Vegas casino and Bernie's employer. Bernie's job is to move from table to table, especially those where someone is on a roll, to ensure that luck will turn against them as quickly as possible.

Bernie owes the casino a lot of money, and has been working it off for several years. He wants to leave, but he is too valuable, and Shelly recruits Natalie (Maria Bello) to seduce Bernie and give him a reason for staying in Las Vegas. I don't need to go much further into the plot beyond saying that Natalie really falls for Bernie, and suddenly his luck changes along with the fortunes of the casino's customers.

Up to this point, we have a comedy, but suddenly a violent interlude arrives that belongs more in a gangster flick, and it poisoned the audience's taste for the film. Things get back on the rails, sort of, until the end of the movie where the violence returns. There is a funny ending (if having someone killed can be called funny) that wraps up the themes of luck, retribution and violence all in one scene, but this left a very bad taste in my mouth. Middling applause indicated that I was not alone.

Best scene: Bernie lives in a dive of a motel, and the next room is often used for very noisy sex. Bernie and Natalie retaliate in a hilarious way that I won't describe to avoid spoiling the joke. A great scene, but it does not save *The Cooler* from deserving to disappear from view, quickly.

Lions Gate Films is the Canadian distributor.

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### *And a Few Words About 2002 ...*

#### *Les Diables [The Devils]*

**France/Spain / Christophe Ruggia**

*Les Diables* is the tough, dark side of *Jeux d'enfants* from the 2003 festival. Chloé and Joseph are two street kids who, to the outside world, are just delinquents, but each has a story. Chloé (Adèle Haenel) is autistic, and Joseph (Vincent Rottiers) was abandoned by his mother. Both were recruited from the street and trained as actors for this film.

They travel through the city together stealing food where they can. Inevitably, they are caught and sent to a children's home. Slowly Joseph loses his role as Chloé's protector and his established way of interacting with the world. By the end of the film, Chloé starts to emerge from her shell, but Joseph faces separation from her due to his violent behaviour.

This is a coming of age film that treats the sexuality of its characters openly but without exploitation. It is also about the search for "home" and the recognition that it exists not as a place, but as a set of relationships, of belonging. Ruggia wanted to show children as people with their own stories partly a product of circumstance, and partly the result of their own actions; as people capable of choice.

*Les Diables* is a powerful film with amazing acting in difficult roles. It has not yet appeared in Toronto, and I doubt we will see it here.

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#### *Marius et Jeanette*

**France / Robert Guédiguian**

This was the only film in a Guédiguian retrospective that I saw, and I didn't take notes.

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#### *Movern Caller*

**UK / Lynne Ramsay**

I expected a lot of Lynne Ramsay's *Movern Caller* based on her very strong work in *Ratcatcher* (1999), and was badly disappointed. The screenplay was supposedly adapted from a novel. If so, the book had very large print on a few very small pages.

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Movern Caller (Jane Morton) is a young woman with an utterly boring life. She and her friend Lynne work in a supermarket and spend their nights in pubs or dance bars where they, and we, see the world through a haze of drugs.

Her boyfriend commits suicide. Nothing unusual about that, but wait, he left a completed novel behind. It's rather good, and Movern takes it for her own. She disposes of the body, loots her boyfriend's bank account and pops off to Spain with Lynne. After a short stay at a hotel, they're off to the wilds of Almeira. They argue and split, then magically are re-united as if nothing had changed. A publication deal for the novel shows up with an offer of \$100,000 – the cheque is in the mail. Caller is as disconnect as ever from reality and continues to wander the back roads of Spain.

*Movern Caller* got a lot of hype when it came out in the fall of 2002 as a bold film showing an independent woman. It's amazing what publicity folks can dream up! In reality, it was a soundtrack album attached to the barest of plots.

I would have walked out if I hadn't been sitting in the middle of the row.

### ***Oligarch* [English Title: *Tycoon*]**

**France/Russia/Germany / Pavel Lounguine**

Another film with no notes. A look at the emerging Russian Mafia.

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### ***Heaven***

**France/Germany/USA / Tom Twyker**

*Heaven* attracted me because the script was an unfinished project of Krzysztof Kieslowski, the late director of linked stoires notably *Red, White and Blue* trilogy and ten part *Decalogue*. *Heaven* was to be the first of another trilogy.

Tom Twyker took over the script and has been faithful to Kieslowski's style. The cinematography by Frank Griebel gives us a land of straight lines – city streets, buildings, walls, doors, bookshelves – contrasting with the undulating curves of the countryside that may itself be a kind of heaven.

*Heaven* begins, appropriately, in a high-rise office block where, Philippa (Cate Blanchett) is planting a bomb. She is a British teacher living in Italy, and her target is a businessman who finances the drug trade. The scheme goes awry when a cleaner empties the garbage can where the bomb is ticking away. The cleaner goes to the elevator and rides off with a man and his two children. The suspense building up to the explosion is worthy of Hitchcock. Philippa is caught, eventually, but one of her interrogators, Filippo (Giovanni Ribisi), falls in love with her and aids her escape. Yes, the similarity of their names is deliberate, and their characters begin to fuse as the story goes on.

Like much of Kieslowski, the ethical framework here is uncertain. Actions have unintended consequences. A large, unseen scheme, is at work. If only Kieslowski had lived to fine-tune the script and tidy up the loose ends.

*Heaven* had a limited commercial release in the art houses, and it's worth tracking down if you're a fan of Kieslowski's work to see what might have been.

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### ***Lost in La Mancha***

**USA/UK / Keith Fulton & Louis Pepe**

Terry Gilliam had a dream to make a film about Don Quixote. He had this dream rather too long, a decade in fact. Like other Gilliam works, it needed lots and lots of money, far more than a typical independent film production. He planned a \$38-million project, raised only \$32-million, but tried to go ahead anyhow. A lot was spent on design and costumes, but the actors were working for less than their standard fee.

The actors were not always available, especially Jean Rochefort who was to play Don Q. Rochefort had medical problems that precluded his sitting on a horse, a rather basic requirement of the part. The location choices were appalling – a site in the desert used for military flyovers. The sound stage was a warehouse in Madrid with lousy acoustics. The first assistant director had a hopeless task of scheduling and rescheduling. Finally, we have actors, we have costumes, we have lights, camera, ... oops ...

the extras have not been rehearsed, and the first day's shooting is largely wasted. Not long afterwards, a downpour (in the middle of the desert, no less) launches a flood of biblical proportions carrying off props and equipment.

During the Q&A, Gilliam said that his problems were typical of film production. If so, nothing would ever get made. It's clear that there was little work and planning beyond Gilliam's own storyboards when production finally began. Gilliam was his own worst enemy because he was always designing what might be, not building with what he already had.

*Lost in La Mancha* is a sad tale of an artist who reaches too high, and a cautionary tale for those among us who might be approached to finance someone else's dreams.

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*L'idole*

**France / Samantha Lang**

No notes again. No review.

## *The Story of Steve's Kneecap*

Midway through Saturday evening, September 7, 2002, I was at the Uptown 1, and had arrived early enough to get a seat down in the front row. Those of you who know this house will remember the stage in front of that row, and the fact that to get to a seat in the middle of a section, it was easier to step up onto the stage than climb over the folks already settled in for the show.

I did just that, and as I lifted my weight with my left leg, there was a very loud \*crack\* audible over the sound of several hundred people chatting in the theatre. I didn't feel anything was amiss, but knew something was wrong. Fortunately, my weight was still on my right leg, and I was able to spin around and sit down on the stage. At this point, feeling my left knee, I discovered a large lump above the knee that had not been there before. I tried standing up, but quickly found that this was (a) impossible and (b) very painful.

A fellow sitting along the row from me realized that I was having problems, and got the house manager. With a bit of effort involving me going backwards up the stairs on my bum, followed by a transfer to a rolling chair, we made it out to the upper lobby of the theatre. Ice came from the refreshment stand, and I sat there awaiting medical attention.

Many thanks to those who were filing into the theatre and expressed concern about my condition. The odd thing was that I was in no pain and was sitting there happily chatting away. I was in the same cheery mood later in Emerg.

What had happened was that my patella (kneecap) had broken into two pieces and there was now a chunk of bone about 2.5 centimeters thick sitting above my knee. It should have been with the rest of the kneecap in its normal location. This bone is attached to the muscles in the thigh, and provides leverage over the kneecap to the muscles in the calf. With the bone in two pieces, I could not lift my lower leg, and the joint had no structural integrity.

Toronto Western Hospital put me back together over the weekend. The staff had lots of fun looking at my tattoos, and despite ongoing shortages, and the fact that they had people in far worse shape than me, they were great. Kudos to Dr. Mohamed and his team for such a great job. There are now two pins in my kneecap that were inserted to hold the bone in one piece while it healed (which it did quite nicely, thank you). Three months of physio later, I could walk normally enough to forego a leg brace and crutches. Stairs took a while longer to get back to normal, but things are reasonably good these days. Just don't invite me for the CN Tower stair climb!

One has to make the best of a bad situation, and there was one bright moment. When the paramedics arrived, they turned out to be two young women dressed in the standard dark blue of their profession. After sizing up the situation, they transferred me into their chair, strapped me in, and carried me off down the back stairs to the lower lobby. Then we were out into the darkened laneway and their waiting van for a drive off into the city night. If any of you have kidnapping fantasies, eat your hearts out!