

## Steve's Film Festival Reviews for 2005

By Steve Munro

### ***Ratings***

- \* 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***

From the poster, a pair of hands making a square frame, I had expected something rather boring, but this year's title was a joy to watch 33 times over. A series of images, all made from hands, represents each of the aspects of the Film Festival including its library, the Sprockets Children's festival and the out-of-town film circuit. One night, as I waved to a friend who was looking for me in the house as this sequence ran, I realized that these are also the hands that shoot up in front of a screen to make pictures. A lovely 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary piece.

Universal Studios' salute to the volunteers is partly recycled from years past, and been updated with the new NBC/Universal logo. All the same, it drew applause at each viewing right up to the end, with especially lusty cheers on the last day.

Every screening began with an exhortation to turn off cell phones and not to photograph the film. The less said about this trailer, sponsored by Motorola, the better. It got very tiring by the third viewing.

(Several of my screenings had security folk scanning the audience for video pirates, but nobody was hauled out of any theatre and fed to the dogs. A shame as this would have been at least as entertaining as the onscreen action for a few flicks.)

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### ***Visa Trailers***

Times are getting tough. Only VISA produced trailers this year and these screened only at the Elgin a.k.a. the *Visa Screening Room*. Just as well. Of the two that I saw, both were based on violent scenes where a bad guy breaks up the set or shoots someone. But it's only the movies, so it really doesn't cost anything. For everything else, there's VISA.

Please guys – it was a bad premise, and it puts a negative spin on what should be a joyous moment – the start of a new film.

Thanks to VISA for sponsoring the Festival, but they should get a new advertising agency.

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### ***Screen Legends***

In honour of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, nine short biographies of major film folk born in Canada rotated as intros to the Gala and repeat Gala screenings. They were tastefully done, but short and we didn't learn a whole lot about the subjects. It almost felt as if we were trying to tell visiting Americans that some of "their" greats were "ours" too.

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### ***The People's Choice Award***

The award went to an English/South African co-production *Tsotsi* adapted from a book by Athol Fugard. I cannot comment on this because I didn't see it. However, my personal favourite, the Finnish/Swedish film *Mother of Mine*, was a close runner-up. Neither of these films had any hype before or during the festival, and it's good to see that Toronto audiences find the gems.

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## *General Observations*

2005 was a very strong year at the Festival, and I could only fit about half of my wish list into my schedule. You will see several films with a \*\*\*\* rating this year, and even two \*\*\*\*1/2. These are my runners up for favourite picture: *The Last Hangman* and *Liza With a "Z"*.

As I finish writing this, *Curse of the Were Rabbit* has just opened as the top-selling film in North America for the Thanksgiving / Columbus Day weekend. Yes, I loved it too!

There were three dogs out of the 33 I picked, and these were all films that were badly misrepresented in the program book. Avoiding this sort of thing is rather like tuning an email spam filter – as fast as you add new filters, those festival programmers figure out a way to slip something by you.

This has its worst effect on friends who single-ticket films because I have picked them and the write-up looked good. It does the Festival no good to rip off people for \$20 to see something that does not deserve the prestige of a TIFF screening.

The Box Office was reasonably efficient this year, although I overheard a lot of complaints. The main problem was that there were too few wickets at the location where everyone exchanged tickets (a separate place this year from the main pickup area), and this meant excruciatingly long waits for exchanges and single ticket purchases.

The Goddess of Box Offices smiled on me this year, and I did well in the draw. However, thanks to a few scheduling screw-ups, I had to swap tickets anyhow and endured the gigantic, slow lineup.

For the most part, the Festival ran on schedule this year. This is vital to people who really want to see “your” film but who have to rush off to see someone else’s work too. Many thanks to the directors, actors and writers who showed up on time, and even more thanks for the generous Q&A sessions after the films for those of us who could stay behind.

I was in one house with digital projection, the Varsity 8, which seats about 800. This technology gets better every year and, indeed, there were times I wish we could have seen the digital originals of works that had been transferred to film.

(In most theatres, the Festival opener had sprocket noise from a projector on the soundtrack. In the digital version, it was silent. A nice touch.)

And finally, the Ryerson Theatre has new seats!! Those of us who sat in those old seats for the past decades rejoiced, particularly with this venue taking over from the Uptown as the big screen, repeat Gala venue for the festival.

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**Thursday, September 8**

***Ballets Russes***

**USA / Dan Geller & Dayna Goldfine**

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

**Distributed in Canada by Capri Releasing for late October opening**

Opening night is always a hard night to get tickets. There are few screenings, and unless you do well in the draw, they will all be sold out before your order is processed. This year, I fared well, and had the joy of starting off with this excellent documentary.

Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russe began the modern (read 20<sup>th</sup> century) era in dance, and the Paris-based company lasted from 1909 until Diaghilev's death in 1929. René Blum of the Monte Carlo Opera Ballet and Colonel Vassili de Basil of L'Opéra Russe in Paris, resurrected the company. They hired George Balanchine as choreographer, but he lasted only one year and was deposed to make way for Leonide Massine. Struggles between Blum, Vassili and Massine led to a split with the "Original" Ballet Russe competing for dancers and attention with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Balanchine wanted very young dancers, in their early teens, and many of the originals from his year with the company were still alive in 2000 for a reunion in New Orleans. That event spurred *Ballets Russes*, a work, oddly, by two directors who had little background in the dance world. They were extraordinarily well served both by the memories of the dancers, and by the archival footage unearthed and restored over the years. Massine himself had filmed some of his dancers, not complete ballets, but enough to give a sense of the company's style. Geller and Goldfine married the old footage to modern recordings, taking the trouble to synchronize them so that we get the thrill of movement supported by music.

The archival material is cut together with modern interviews. We see that these are still larger than life characters that sprang from a very different world than ours. One of them, Fred Franklin, attended the screening, and it was the first time he has seen some of the footage of himself as a young man. Now 90, Franklin is working to set some of the great Massine works on dancers so that, at least, the movement and style can be recorded and preserved. Someone asked if this was his first visit to Toronto, and he replied that he had performed at the Royal Alexandra with the Ballet Russe in 1938 through 1942.

Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine mentioned that their previous films had concentrated on youth, but *Ballets Russes* was a meditation on old age. They were inspired to see people who passed their physical prime 50 years ago, but who were still active as artists and teachers.

This is a wonderful documentary with material beyond many dance fans' dreams.

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**Friday, September 9**

***Solntse [The Sun]***

**Russia/Italy/France/Switzerland / Alexander Sukurov**

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

Lovers of action movies be forewarned. Although I gave Sukurov's *The Sun* four stars, this is not a fast-paced film. Indeed, were you to watch it on video, you would probably be frustrated by the lack of colour and pace. This film is not for you.

*The Sun* is the third of Sukurov's films about powerful leaders (Hitler and Lenin were two previous subjects), and probably the best known in his output is *Russian Ark*, a stunning portrait of pre-Communist Russia set in the Hermitage. Here, again, the sun is setting again, literally. Japan has been defeated in World War II, the rising sun of the east is about to set, and the divine Emperor Hirohito is about to become human.

Although this film is shot on colour stock, everything is washed out, sunset on a cloudy day. Issey Ogata plays Hirohito with great dignity in defeat, a man who has accepted his fate and the loss of divine status. One senses that he knew he was mortal all along, and is now slightly amused at the change in state. The household staff is confused and deeply saddened, and Hirohito uses gentle humour to help them along.

His biggest problem, of course, is that as a divine Emperor, nobody will actually tell him what is happening even though he knows that the war is lost. This is a man with a complex background in languages, arts and science, and he retreats to his laboratory to continue studies of marine biology to pass the time awaiting the inevitable.

When American soldiers arrive at his residence, they find a man dressed in a simple morning suit, and don't even know who he is, much less the respect he deserves. Unknown to them, he understands English and all of the GI's simplistic, racist insults.

General MacArthur (Robert Dawson) is more civil and manages a balance of respect while keeping the upper hand as victor. He is surprised to learn that Hirohito speaks English and doesn't really need the interpreter, a Japanese-American who is clearly suspected of sympathizing with the enemy. The Emperor is the complete antithesis of the crazed, brutal image the Americans are expecting.

In the end, after a radio address to the nation, Hirohito asks whether the sound engineer who recorded it is all right, and learns that he has committed suicide. Did his staff try to stop this act? No. Now there is blood on his hands as a mortal.

This is an excellent film, a study in character and a profound change to a new role. Whether the portrayal of Hirohito as a simple man, a tragic figure attracting mild sympathy, is a valid one, is quite another matter.

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***Douches Froides [Cold Showers]***

**France/ Antony Cordier**

**Rating: \***

It says here in the program

“This emotionally complex coming of age story is breathtaking in its erotic power.”

The illustration is of a teenage threesome, two boys and a girl, in a shower. I really should know better, but I chose this on the basis of the description (there was a lot more in the same vein). Noah Cowan, co-director of TIFF and successor to Piers Handling, has caught the dreaded Handling virus: he programs films that he clearly has never seen and raves about material that does not belong in the festival. Cowan should leave this work to others.

The only thing breathtaking about *Douches Froides* is how pedestrian and unbelievable the story actually is. The context is a judo club sponsored by a rich but wheelchair-bound man with athletic pretensions for his son, Clément. Mickael, comes from a very different family – his father is a loser, an ex-taxi-driver, with the motto “Vive le chômage” (long live the dole).

Clément is in the same weight category as Mickael, who is, of course, the better athlete. To avoid the rivalry, rich daddy comes up with the idea that Mickael should go on a serious diet and drop down to a lower category. This not only saps his physical ability but also does in his attractiveness to Vanessa who is soon scooped up by Clément. Frankly, I don't think she was much of a loss.

Mickael learns not to trust anyone, although I'm not sure that was the intention of this film.

This was the first of two films I saw from “Wild Bunch” whose only claim to fame seems to be that they are Noah Cowan's buddies. We will hear more of them later.

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*Liza With A "Z"*

USA / Bob Fosse

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

Restored 1972 Production by Michael M. Arick – World Premiere

Scene: The Elgin Theatre, downstage centre, a Festival programmer with a lifelong dream introduces the guest artist:

“Meine Dammen und Herren, Mesdames et Messieurs, Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Liza Minelli!”

1972 was a special year for Liza Minelli. *Cabaret* launched her career as icon free of her mother’s so-famous shadow, and she won a best actress Oscar® for her role in the film. Meanwhile, Bob Fosse scored a first: an Oscar® for *Cabaret*, a Tony for *Pippin* and an Emmy for *Liza with a “Z”* all in the same year.

*Liza with a “Z”* was staged in a theatre with a live audience, but made for television. It aired, and then it disappeared. Five years ago, Michael Arick approached Ms. Minelli about restoring the film – she owned all of the material, could he try his hand at putting it back in shape? Showtime jumped at the chance to bankroll the project.

This is TV, but it looks unlike anything else from the period. Fosse used eight 16mm cameras to pick up the action from all over the theatre much as a modern director would use video cameras. The pacing is classic Fosse, timed exactly to the music, and this in an era before digital editing. Luckily, there was a record album, and this provided the material for some of the sound track restoration.

After the screening, Liza, the producers and Michael Arick gave a generous and hilarious Q&A about the restoration and the original production. Liza talked about the hard work of rehearsing and dancing Fosse’s choreography, numbers Fosse himself considered among his best. She joked that her replacement hips and knee are partly due to Bob Fosse.

When the show was in rehearsal, Fosse refused to let anyone from NBC see the program until they demanded to be at the last rehearsal. Scandal! Liza’s short, short skirt and the style of some dancing – things we take for granted today – were just not done in 1972 network television. Singer (as in sewing machines), the show’s sponsor, would be outraged. The program standards people were taken aside and talked to gently, persuaded, and in the end with stars in their eyes, declared that the show was “art” and who were they to interfere.

At the last minute, Liza needed a chance to take a breather, have a shower, fix up her costume and makeup, but there was no place free in the theatre. Across the street was a hotel, and the crew tramped in to book a room. Short-term rentals, it turned out, were not a problem given the usual clientele. Then back across the street, through the line of people waiting to get in, and onto the stage.

We, the lucky audience in the Elgin theatre are among the few who will ever see *Liza with a “Z”* on a big screen. This was not just a great “new” concert and dance film, but we were watching, cheering and applauding with Liza sitting in the theatre.

Showtime will air it in April 2006, and a DVD (with extras) will follow in May.

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The balance of Friday was given over to celebration of my 57<sup>th</sup> birthday (deferred from Wednesday) and the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday of my old haunt, the Café Brussel that had just reopened after, appropriately, a film shoot.

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Saturday, September 10

*Mrs. Henderson Presents*

UK / Stephen Frears

Rating: \*\*\*

Stephen Frears should have called this *The Bob and Judy Show*, stuck Judy Dench and Bob Hoskins in a room with a camera, and just let them go at it for a few hours. That would have given us the best bits of *Mrs. Henderson Presents*. Alas he didn't and we have a film that I grudgingly give three stars, but only for the *shtick* between these two actors. This is a comedy of manners – hers very, very upper crust WASP; his man-of-the-world theatre impresario Jew. Of course, we have to find some way to throw them together. Implausible as it seems, there is a true story tailor-made for the situation.

Laura Henderson (Dench) is 70, recently widowed, very well off and looking for something to do. She spies a derelict theatre in London, the *Windmill*, and restores it. However, she needs someone to run it, and Vivian van Dam (Hoskins) is just the man. There's a lot of verbal jousting, but they reach an understanding and on goes the show -- *Revuedeville*.

For a while, it's a great success, but soon other theatres start to copy the style, the Depression sets in, and audiences thin out. What to do? Henderson lights on the idea of naked performers in *tableaux vivants*, as works of "art". The sequence of "auditions" and preliminary rehearsals is hilarious, especially when everyone has to take their clothes off to maintain some sort of equilibrium with the girls.

Dench is at her imperious best when Mrs. Henderson talks her friend, the Attorney General, into sanctioning her shows provided that the girls don't move.

By now, World War II is upon us, and the shows turn to patriotic themes as an entertainment for the troupes. The usual problems of backstage romance and pregnancy turn up, and of course the theatre is bombed. This part of the story is rather predictable.

Although the *Windmill* may be a fond memory to some, *Mrs. Henderson Presents* is a story that falls apart without the performances of Dench and Hoskins. He is co-executive producer – could this be an example of vanity cinema?

Oh yes – there's a nice animated main title that doesn't seem to connect with anything in the film.

Worth seeing for the first hour, but you may prefer to wait for the DVD and rent it.

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*Casa de areia [The House of Sand]*

Brazil / Andrucha Waddington

Rating: \*\*\*\*

Some years ago, Andrucha Waddington saw an unusual photo tacked up on the wall of a bar – a house half-buried in sand. The image stayed with him and provided the germ of this story.

In northern Brazil there is a long stretch of sand dunes along the ocean. The sand is constantly moved by the wind, and life such as it is goes on in a few oases.

The film begins early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vasco (Ruy Guerra) has convinced a group of followers that in this wilderness there is a place of fertility where they can farm and prosper. He is quite mad, and one wonders how the band managed to follow him this far. One night, they revolt leaving Vasco dead, and his pregnant wife Aurea (Fernanda Torres) and her mother Maria (Fernanda Montenegro) behind in a derelict house full of sand. They survive thanks to a group of former slaves who are living nearby in the desert. Massu (Seu Jorge) befriends them and becomes, in effect, Aurea's husband.

Many years later, Aurea's daughter, also called Maria and played by Torres, has grown to a young woman, and she wants to see the world beyond the dunes. Aurea, now played by Montenegro is content to stay where she is. A group of scientists arrive to record the solar eclipse of 1919 that was used to prove Einstein's theory of General Relativity. Young Maria befriends them, and they agree to get in touch and take her with them when they return for additional observations. Alas, Massu does not want to lose Maria and Aurea, and he conceals the scientists' return from them.

Much later, and officer who was with the scientists arrives. It is now the 1940s and we get the sense that civilization might begin to intrude in this wilderness. Aurea, now an old woman, decides to stay with Massu while her daughter goes off to the city. Finally, at the end of the film, with Montenegro playing both Maria and the frail and quiet elderly Aurea, mother and daughter are re-united.

This is a film about the passage of time, about the choices people make or that are made for them. The sand and the wind set the rhythms of life here with only rare intrusions from the outside world. Beautifully photographed and acted, *House of Sand* is well worth seeing if it is released in North America.

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### ***The World's Fastest Indian***

**New Zealand / Roger Donaldson**

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

With some misgiving, I picked *The World's Fastest Indian* for my schedule. Anthony Hopkins has been showing up for many roles lately as, well, Anthony Hopkins and this "character" would certainly not fit for an irascible Kiwi South Islander. To make things worse, I expected the lobby to be strewn with Indian Motorcycle *tchotchkes*.

A big sigh of relief here. Anthony Hopkins can still act!

Burt Munro was born at the turn of the century in Invercargill, NZ. He was a great tinkerer, and his 1920s vintage Indian motorcycle went through many, many changes as he tuned it up for high-speed racing. His dream was to run the bike at Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah, in the annual time trials. He did not get there until 1967.

Hopkins transforms himself into Munro, accent, speech rhythms, body language, everything. Luckily, Roger Donaldson had directed *Offerings to the God of Speed* in 1971, a documentary about Munro, and Hopkins had good source material to model. For much of the film, we wonder if he really is past his prime, a dotty old man trying to accomplish the impossible on a broken-down, 40+ years old motorcycle.

For the most part, this is a road movie about the trip to Utah, and this is its main failing. There are too many episodes along the way, a few too many characters crossing Munro's path. I wanted to wait for a quiet moment in the film to say "Are we there yet?" in as innocent a soprano as I could muster, but since I save the heckling for only the absolute worst of movies, I didn't.

We arrive in Utah to find that Munro hasn't registered to run his bike, that it doesn't meet any of the modern safety standards, and that he's the butt of jokes by most people there. But they give him a chance.

The first trial proves that the bike will actually run and Burt won't fall off, but there are a few technical glitches that keep him from reaching the speed he wants. The changes he needs will remove some insulation and, in the real time trial will cook his leg, but to the astonishment of everyone (and cheers in the audience) he sets a record of over 200-mph.

Burt Munro returned to New Zealand a hero rather than a cantankerous old crank. He continued to develop his bikes, and his records (for a motorcycle under 1000 cc) stand to this day.

During the Q&A, Anthony Hopkins said that he felt this was his best work in two or three years. It's an impressive, consistent piece of acting that is true to the character. Roger Donaldson told of a day when Burt Munro's daughter was on set, heard Hopkins rehearsing behind a screen and said "that's my father".

One young actor who plays a soldier Burt meets on the road was the only one who didn't speak of "Tony" but rather of "Sir Anthony". He talked about sitting in the car on set waiting for a shot. One moment he would be chatting with Sir Anthony, and the next moment, Burt Munro was sitting there. At that moment he realized how much he had to learn about acting.

There will be a limited opening in Los Angeles in December 2005 (probably for Oscar® nomination purposes). No word on wide release.

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## ***Breakfast on Pluto***

**Ireland/UK / Neil Jordan**

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

What am I supposed to say? *Breakfast on Pluto* got a lot of advance hype. Neil Jordan's the director. Cillian Murphy stars as pretty lad of indeterminate sexuality. I'm supposed to love this film! But I don't, and it wasn't the fact that it was my fourth of the day that did me in.

The story is told in 36 chapters, yes, with titles and all that. Almost Dickensian, but shorter. The titles that is, not the film.

We start off with a baby abandoned on a church doorstep. Animated birds twitter around and wonder what might be going on (probably, like me, you are wondering what's going on too). Mommy goes off to London, and the child "Kitten" grows up with a harsh foster mother whose main interest is the money she gets for raising the boy.

The absent mother becomes an obsession (along with Mitzi Gaynor whom she strongly resembles) and we soon find Kitten dressing up in women's clothes. It doesn't take us long, if we are paying attention, to figure out that his father is the parish priest (Liam Neeson) who takes an ongoing interest from afar.

Kitten starts turning tricks and gets involved with a series of men, some sympathetic and helpful, others not. At one point, he hooks up with a magician (Stephen Rea) whose tricks involve rather more gore than the usual rabbit out of the hat routine.

The priest anonymously tells Kitten how to find his real mother, and this takes him to London where, in the guise of a British Telecom surveyor, he visits his mother and her real family.

Later, through a friend, he gets mixed up with the IRA (how could we have a Neil Jordan film without the IRA?) and, guess what, he's in a pub when it's bombed. This gives Kitten a chance for a "saviour of the world" superhero fantasy, but by this time I was getting tired of extra subplots and characters even if there might be a good laugh in them.

In the end, father and son are united, and the birds twitter around the church for the end titles.

The episodic structure of *Breakfast on Pluto* allows Jordan to avoid the usual requirements for consistency of plot, transition and other minor nuisances. With fewer episodes this might have worked, but I was dragging by the time we got up to 20, and I realized there were 16 more to go.

The audience loved it, I applauded a bit, and then off home to bed.

Opening in New York in mid-November.

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## **Sunday, September 11**

### ***Neverwas***

**USA / Joshua Michael Stern (Writer and Director, first feature in both roles)**

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

Aaron Eckhart stars in two excellent films in this year's festival: *Neverwas* and *Thank You for Smoking*. The second film was the commercial hit of the festival with a bidding war between Fox and Paramount that played out in the daily news. *Neverwas* is a fantasy, and one that may not find its audience. As I write this, there are only two curmudgeonly reviews on the rottentomatoes.com website, and I hope that these are critics with hearts of stone. I loved it, and hope more folks will get a chance to do so.

When Zack Riley (played as an adult by Eckhart) was a boy, his father, one T.L. Pierson (Nick Nolte) wrote a famous children's book, *Neverwas*, that is a much-loved classic. Zack himself is a character in the book, and has long used his mother's surname to avoid publicity and fan interest. Shortly after the book was published, Pierson hanged himself, and this event haunted Zack ever since.

Twenty-five years later, Zack is a respected psychiatrist at Cornell, but he applies for a job at an obscure clinic in New England (actually, it's Nelson, B.C. and the keen-eyed will spot the Bank of Montreal on the main street). Why is he there? Because his

father was treated for depression at this clinic years ago and Zack wants to find out more. We will leave aside here the question of medical ethics and how long records of a dead patient would be easily found in the clinic's basement.

Although the clinic's head man (played by William Hurt) is uneasy about hiring Zack, he agrees to a tryout. Now something very strange happens. Zack meets Gabriel (Sir Ian McKellan), an old, crazy man who has not spoken more than a few words to the staff in years. Gabriel recognizes Zack as his saviour, but is wary that he is genuine.

It turns out that Gabriel knows rather a lot about *Neverwas* and claims to be its King. He grills Zack on minute details of the kingdom which, of course, Zack knows intimately. Gabriel decides to trust Zack and hopes that between them, he can be restored to his lost throne.

At this point, we're not quite sure if Gabriel is completely mad, or if there is something to the story. In any event, what is clear is that *Neverwas* is his story, and Zack's father transformed it into the book. Is Gabriel really the King of a magical land?

Enter Maggie Blake (Brittany Murphy), a childhood friend of Zack's who claims to be working on a tourism article, but is really writing an anniversary piece about *Neverwas* and Pierson. She befriends Zack, but when he discovers her true motive, the trust is broken.

I won't go much further with the plot to avoid giving it away, but it's enough to say that Gabriel's Kingdom is restored deep in the forest, although by one of those last minute interventions that makes everything come out all right, and Zack loses his childhood fears. This is a fantasy after all!

Sir Ian is very good as Gabriel and I'm sure it was no accident to have him cast as a powerless, wild madman believed by nobody after his work as Gandalf. A refreshing change while staying in the same genre. Eckhart is also good as Zack, a character completely different from the gung-ho spin-doctor we will meet in *Thank You for Smoking*.

Joshua Michael Stern makes a great debut as writer and director, and he's lucky to have such actors telling his story. Let's hope someone distributes it soon.

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### *Imagine Me and You [Working Title]*

**UK/Germany / Ol Parker (Writer and Director, first feature as Director)**

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

Here we are with another first feature by a writer/director. Ol Parker's debut is a bit on the lightweight side in the midst of so many serious Film Festival shows, but great fun. Oddly, I found that it played better than I had expected from the program notes. Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts.

Rachael and Heck (Piper Perabo and Matthew Goode) are about to be married. It's the usual last minute madhouse we sense that Rachael really doesn't want to go through with it. She's pretty, she smiles, she says the words, but Heck, her lifetime friend, is really not the man of her dreams.

Luce (Lena Headey) is the florist, and she's at the church almost by accident thanks to a last minute foul-up. Rachael and Luce see each other from afar. They know it's love at first sight, but can't or won't do anything about it.

Heck's best man, meanwhile, thinks that Luce is really hot, and tries hitting on her with much determination and no success.

The marriage works well enough, but Rachael is distracted by her feelings for Luce. Eventually they do get together, and Heck goes bananas. This is the hard part where so many first features come unglued: how to have a crisis, avoid wrecking the mood of the movie, and sort out a believable happy ending. Just when it looks like everyone will be unhappy and alone, love triumphs.

Fox Searchlight is distributing *Imagine Me and You* and it will have general release in February 2006.

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*Attente [Waiting]*

**Palestine/France / Rashid Masharawi**

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

Ahmad is a Palestinian director, despondent about the chance of meaningful work at home, who is about to leave for Europe. On the eve of his departure, a friend pleads with him to help in casting for a National Theatre. The Palestinian Authority has some money, and a building is already under construction, even if the work site is rather chaotic.

Ahmad agrees and sets off through the Palestinian Diaspora – Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – to find actors. A local TV personality whose familiar face opens many doors, and a cameraman who makes a living repairing electronics accompany him. Many people show up for auditions, but most just want to send a message home. The few real actors among them don't believe that here will ever be a theatre, much less that they will act in it.

How to audition so many people? Ahmad hits on the idea of doing something from everyday life – waiting for something to happen. The actors react in many ways, some quite funny, and one storms out claiming “this isn't acting”. In fact, many of these scenes were improvisations, and *Waiting* is almost a film about itself.

By the time the trio reaches Lebanon, there has been a bombing in Israel and the border is closed. The Palestinian Authority's spending priorities have changed and construction on the theatre has stopped. But someday, maybe, they will start again.

During the Q&A, Masharawi talked about the difficulty of making a “road movie” in the Middle East. They could not take their crew from country to country, and had to arrange one for each of the four locations. A bit of this creeps into a border crossing within *Waiting* as they try to enter Jordan. At first, they are refused until they produce an official invitation from the government and attitudes change completely.

*Waiting* is, of course, a parable about life in Palestine where daily life is filled with queues and delays, and the Palestinian state never materializes. This is a story about hope for what will come that uses humour rather than political rhetoric or violence.

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*Mary*

**France/Italy / Abel Ferrara**

**Rating: ½**

*Mary* is the second film from Wild Bunch (see *Douches Froides* earlier in these reviews) that was over-hyped by Noah Cowan in the program book and in the introduction at the screening. The program book claims that it is a commentary on *The Passion of Christ* and:

“A smartly observed rejoinder to those who cynically exploit faith in God for money, power and fame.”

Humbug. This is a bad domestic soap opera masquerading as religious commentary.

Tony Childress (Matthew Modine) is a film director with an ego almost the size of Abel Ferrara's, a man whose incoherent Q&A after the film left no doubt in our mind about the source of this incoherent screenplay. Childress has just finished production of a resurrection epic starring ...

Marie Palesi (Juliette Binoche) as Mary Magdalene. Marie has taken her character *very* seriously, so much so that she remains in Jerusalem to devote herself to God. Meanwhile ...

Tony is back in New York promoting his film, and sets up an appearance on a talk show regarding the true meaning of Christ. This show is hosted by ...

Ted Younger (Forrest Whittaker). Younger seems genuinely well informed on his subject, and the show-within-the-film explores the question of a woman's role among the apostles. Was Mary originally one of them, only to be expunged by patriarchal rewrites of the gospels? This debate never goes anywhere. Meanwhile, Younger has problems of his own with an extra-marital affair. He is the modern flip side of Mary, the respected host with a sex life to hide.

This sounded like a good film in the program book, it managed to get the jury prize at Cannes, and the screening was packed. Ferrara called the prize a “booby prize” and I can see why. The only decent acting comes from Whittaker who seems trapped in a script that must have seemed to be a good idea at the time.

I will leave aside the irony of the title character’s profession and the question of how *Mary* got into the Festival.

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**Monday, September 12**

***Pride and Prejudice***

**UK / Joe Wright**

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

This is a tolerably good adaptation of Jane Austen’s novel if you have not seen the BBC Colin Firth version. Neither the director nor Matthew MacFadyen (Mr. Darcy) has seen it. They might have thought twice if they had.

Wright said that adaptations have problems with what went before, and he wanted to start fresh. He set the action in 1797, the year Austen started the book. This means, among other things, the costumes would be from an earlier period than we usually see when “women looked like cakes”. A nice idea in its own right, but it’s not a justification for trying to condense the novel into a 135-minute sketch.

Without question, the best character in the film is Mrs. Bennet (Brenda Blethyn) who scurries about every scene with the worry that she must marry off five daughters. Donald Sutherland as Mr. Bennet ably assists as a father who feigns not knowing what all the fuss is about. Keira Knightly is Lizzie Bennet, one of the intelligent daughters, who will eventually wind up with Mr. Darcy over the objections of his aunt, Lady Catherine (Judy Dench).

The film is enjoyable enough, but I couldn’t help feeling that I was watching set of stock caricatures – let’s hire Dame Judy to be imperious and Brenda to be a busybody – rather than real characters. Fitting everything into a short space forces Wright to leave out much of the back-story, and we learn the truth about people by report rather than by seeing it ourselves.

There is a “Special Thanks” to Emma Thompson in the credits and an alert audience member asked about it in the Q&A. Wright explained that he met Ms. Thompson one muggy day on Hampstead Heath, and she was interested in helping with the script, but not as a real job for credit as she was too busy elsewhere. Imagine the young director, at work on his first feature, with Emma Thompson reading through and performing the script, writing notes as she goes, sitting on a park bench. It would be intriguing to know how much of this is really hers.

This *Pride and Prejudice* is a decent film with lots of humour and a bit of drama, and if it were not based on a well known story with so much more detail, I might think better of it. As it is, it’s worth seeing for the acting, but don’t expect any surprises in the plot. After all, you *have* seen the BBC version, haven’t you?

Wide release begins mid-November 2005.

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***Adam’s Æbler [Adam’s Apples]***

**Denmark / Anders Thomas Jensen (Director and Screenplay)**

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

By now, you’ve probably noticed that I have chosen many films that are a first feature or that have a writer/director. First features are intriguing, the chance of “being there” when someone is taking their first step in a large format. Films with a writer/director can be excellent if the “director” can bring the story to life or they can be disastrous if the “writer” can’t let go of a favourite scene or character. Happily, *Adam’s Apples*, falls in “column one”.

Adam (Ulrich Thomsen) is an ex con who has just arrived at a rural church that takes in released prisoners as a transitional home. Ivan (Mads Mikkelsen) is the preacher, and a man with a more optimistic view of life and people you will never find. This sunny exterior hides troubles – his father’s suicide and his own disabled child. Other characters include a Saudi immigrant who robs gas stations with the aim of taking back his country’s oil one gas station at a time and a petty thief with a love for junk food. They are an odd bunch.

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Adam is a skinhead. When he moves in, he replaces the crucifix in his room with a portrait of Hitler. It falls off of the wall often. The bible in his dresser keeps falling open at the Book of Job. Adam is not going to have an easy time.

Ivan wants his inmates to have a goal, and Adam chooses to bake an apple pie. An old tree in the churchyard, Ivan's pride and joy, bears much fruit, but what the crows don't get the worms do. Ivan gives Adam the job of tending the tree.

The story turns on Adam's gradual development of care for others. First for an old man, then for Ivan who is a medical miracle living with a brain tumour. Is God testing Ivan or abandoned him? We're never quite sure, but Ivan is saved and cured (!) by an astounding stroke of fate.

Meanwhile, during a truly biblical storm, the apple tree is struck by lightning, and it seems that Adam's task will never be complete. I won't give away the twist in the plot, but there is pie in the end.

This kind of tale could easily turn into a heavy-handed piece of pseudo-religious drivel, but it doesn't. Part of the reason may be that the director, Jensen, is himself unsure of his faith but has a capacity for belief. This is a story about belief in the possible, a warm and humanist outlook that is refreshing in our fundamentalist times.

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*Vers le Sud [Heading South]*

**France/Canada / Laurent Cantet**

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

Our setting is a resort in Haiti, the time is the 1980s, and for the visitors, the horrors of the Duvalier regime only happen to other people. We follow three women visiting on their own as sex tourists.

Ellen (the always-excellent Charlotte Rampling) is from Boston. She has been there before and has an ongoing relationship with Legba (Ménothy Cesar), a lovely young man who is clearly the ladies' favourite. Ellen is in her 50s and fully understands the transience of her situation.

Sue (Louise Portal) is from Montréal and for her, this is a throwaway vacation. She's not expecting much and just tries to keep everyone around her happy.

Brenda (Karen Young) is an innocent from the midwestern US. We learn that three years ago she found sexual awakening with Legba, and she is disappointed that Ellen got there first. Such are the problems of vacation planning.

On the periphery we have Albert, the manager of the resort, a man who sees everything that's going on but knows that interference can be dangerous.

One day, Legba walks into town, and a passing car stops him. His (ex?) girlfriend is inside and she wants him back, but she's also a plaything of someone powerful. She should know better than to stray, and this will be hers and Legba's undoing.

In the end, nobody has Legba. Brenda learns sadly that she can't recreate a memory, and Ellen must accept that she cared more for Legba than her reserved exterior showed. Both must return home without illusions.

Laurent Cantet directs a script that he co-wrote with Robin Campillo from short stories by Dany Laferrière. He presents the characters as they are, with no attempt to moralize or to manipulate the audience's sympathy. We feel their tragedy ourselves without being told what to think.

(*Vers le Sud* is another of Noah Cowan's choices for the festival, and this time I have to admit that he got it right. Maybe he actually saw the film.)

## **Wah-Wah**

**UK/South Africa/France / Richard F. Grant**

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

*Wah-Wah* is Richard F. Grant's first feature as a director. It's autobiographical, it's his own script, and he's exorcising some personal demons along the way. Hmm. Well, let's see what he manages anyhow with Gabriel Byrne, Miranda Richardson, Julie Walters and Emily Watson.

We're in Swaziland at the moment of independence. Ralph Compton (Zachary Fox, later Nicholas Hoult) grows up in a privileged, white, military family. Much pomp and circumstance, but not very much to actually do. His father (Byrne) is actually respected by the locals for trying to build a decent education system, but he's the odd man out among the colonials. His mother (Richardson) has social graces rooted somewhere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but this doesn't stop her from running off to Europe with a neighbour. Hubby's just too boring, and besides he drinks a lot.

Ralph retreats into the fantasy of a miniature theatre with doll puppets as characters (the figures are actually Grant's own from his boyhood). Meanwhile, dad is befriended by a woman who's as much of a drunkard as he (Julie Walters), but nothing comes of this. One day, a new stepmother ("aunt Ruth", played by Watson) shows up. She is an American and about as far from Ralph's real mother as possible. She has no use for the "wah-wah" of phrases with which the Brits lard their vocabulary when they don't want to say anything meaningful.

We are watching the end of an era, the dying moments of empire, made all the more desperate by the degree to which everyone tries to hang on to something "normal". A surreal production of "Camelot" is mounted as an amateur theatrical.

At the end, we have the dual reconciliation of Swaziland's independence (complete with archival footage) and of Ralph and his new family. Daddy dies of a brain tumour, and Ralph has to make his own way in the world.

The symbolism and plot here are rather heavy. I wish that Grant had made a comedy of manners in which he wasn't one of the characters. That way, he could follow the people rather than the framework in which he cast them as a writer.

In the end, he is clinging to his childhood just as much as his parents' generation clung to the Empire. Everything passes away.

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## **Tuesday, September 13**

### ***Een Ander Zijn Geluk [Someone Else's Happiness]***

**Belgium/The Netherlands / Fien Troch (Director and Writer)**

**Rating: \*\***

*Someone Else's Happiness* opens with a long pan down a wooded hill to a roadway. We hear, but do not see, an approaching car, a thump, and then the car drives off. Down closer now, we see the figure of a child crawling along the road and slipping into the water-filled ditch by the side. Who did it? Whose lives will be changed?

There are two parallel families with more co-incidences than are decent in one script. One is upper middle class. There are two sisters, each with an estranged husband. The other is working class, a cop and a housecleaner who happens to work for the other family. The dead child is part of a twin and pines for the lost sibling.

We have parallel stories of guilt and anguish. The cop is trying to find out who killed his child while the wife agonizes over what she has done. First, the cops blame a local sex offender, but in the end, the act is blamed on a local crazy who is living, in squalor, in a neighbourhood far beyond his means.

The underlying problem with *Someone Else's Happiness* is that Fien Troch takes too long to set up her characters and their conflicts. By the end, the wrong person has been blamed, one family must live with their loss while another woman lives with her guilt. The upper/lower class relationship just adds a veneer of social comment that really isn't needed here.

This is a first feature and screenplay for Fien Troch, a young Belgian director. I will watch for her next film, but hope that she has guidance on writing and editing.

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### *Little Fish*

**Australia / Rowan Woods**

**Rating: \*\***

Oh dear, oh dear. *Little Fish* feels like one of those movies where someone had an idea and some money, but not the good sense to leave it in the bank.

Tracy Heart (Cate Blanchett) runs a video shop. She has hopes of expansion, but a lack of capital. Her background as a junkie is a serious problem in raising funds.

Her unofficial step-father Lionel (Hugo Weaving) was once a sports star, and lived off his reputation and a chain of stores (now dwindled to one). He's still an addict, but has just been cut off his free supply by his long-time lover, a local big-time dealer who is about to retire (Sam Neill). His assistant has other plans.

Blanchett is simply not credible as an ex drug addict. She's too clean, too well organized and too gullible. Weaving gets to go over the top in his role, and one can't help drifting into visions of Elrond and Galadriel high in a very different world. It shouldn't be possible to wander off into other movies like that, but one has to do something for amusement.

Tracy is tricked into investing in a deal by a former boyfriend. She entrusts every penny she can raise to a scheme that the whole audience can see through. She thinks that it's legit, we know it's a drug deal. Things go wrong, of course, but amazingly she gets her money back from a rip-off. It's night, it's a remote area, it's the assistant dealer, he has a gun, but somehow ... oh never mind, it's a dumb plot anyhow.

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### *Why We Fight*

**USA / Eugene Jarecki**

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

Eugene Jarecki's last film, *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, gives no doubt about his political agenda, the examination of the United States' complicity and dark involvement in and manipulation of world affairs. In *Why We Fight*, he turns to a wider historical theme, that of the corporate interests that drive US foreign policy.

*Why We Fight* was a series of World War II training/propaganda films produced by the military. In that war, there was a clear military enemy, but years later, at the end of his term, President Eisenhower warned about the growing influence of the "military industrial complex". Huge corporations depend for their existence not just on government contracts, but on the manipulation of foreign governments, by force if need be.

The big-ticket item is oil, and the big player is Haliburton Corporation, originally a small oil company. Now we go to war because business needs it, and what's good for business is good for America. None of this is news to anyone remotely aware of current events, and Jarecki has simply packaged a lot of familiar history.

A frustrating omission is any mention of the religious right and their exploitation as a new dimension in American political dynamics. Jarecki replied that he wanted to take the broad view from the 1950s onward, and the religious dimension was absent for much of that time, notably in the Viet Nam War.

I beg to differ. It is precisely the arrival of right-wing religious exploitation that has strengthened the militarist role in foreign affairs. The spectre of "godless Communists" underlay the Cold War, but the combination of anti-Muslim and anti-terror foreign policy with anti-liberal domestic policy is dangerous new ground. Alas, Jarecki doesn't go there, nor does he examine the economic distortions brought on corporate dominance of policies.

This might be a good introduction to one aspect of corporate influence in American politics, but for me it was nothing new. The film will be seen by already right-thinking people, but it will do little to educate a wider audience.

Wednesday, September 14

*The Last Hangman*

UK / Adrian Shergold

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

World Premiere

Timothy Spall has been one of my favourite character actors ever since I saw him in *Shooting the Past* in the early 1990s. He keeps popping up in TV dramas and movies, always good, never predictable in his roles. More recently, he played a crazed door-to-door salesman in *Vacuuuming Completely Nude in Paradise*. A recent search on the net showed me how many films I have not seen of this busy and excellent actor.

*The Last Hangman* is a powerful film about Albert Pierrepoint who, in a career from 1934 to 1956, hanged over 450 people. He was the last Chief Hangman in Britain, and his career mirrors the shifting public mood about capital punishment.

Albert's father was also a hangman whose job drove him to drink and an early death. When he entered the trade, Albert's aim was to excel at providing a swift, humane execution for the condemned. Considerations such as the type of rope and length of drop were vital to ensuring a fast, clean kill, while a quick, professional move from the antechamber to the gallows ensured that it was all over before the victim could suffer the terror of impending death.

At his first execution, Pierrepoint is present only an assistant, but has to take over when his partner doesn't have the stomach to go through with the job. In time, he was known as the best in England, although to a select group. Executioners commanded respect in the prison system, but they were very private and their identities were not revealed. (In Canada, all hangmen were called *Mr. Ellis*.) Initially, Pierrepoint did not even reveal his job to his wife, and kept up his work in grocery deliveries.

We see the beginnings of Pierrepoint's undoing in his care for the deceased. In one scene, he takes down a woman from the gallows, washes her body and wraps her for burial. The scene is tender, and analogies to the *Pieta* are deliberate. Albert believed that once a person was executed, they had paid the price for their crime and deserved to be treated with dignity.

After World War II, Pierrepoint was recruited by Field Marshall Montgomery to execute war criminals in Germany. Britain was going to show the Yanks and the Russians that they could do this job in a civilized way. The sheer magnitude of the task wears on him starting with the first day when he executes 13 men. Later, discovering that there are only 12 coffins, Pierrepoint is outraged at the oversight.

When he returns to England, he is a hero and a very public figure. Initially this pays off as he and his wife (Juliet Stevenson in a wonderful supporting role) buy a pub. Everyone wants a drink from the man who slew the Beast of Belsen, but this mood does not last. Public sentiment is turning against hanging and Albert becomes the object of scorn by abolitionists.

For two decades, Albert has kept the professional act of execution separate from his private feelings – he is doing a necessary job in the best way he knows – but the two worlds can't be kept apart. There is a marvelous, short scene where Pierrepoint wrestles with his inner demons, and the whole battle plays out on his face without a word of dialogue.

Eddie Marsan plays "Tish" Corbett, a friend of Albert's who murders a woman who would not be his girlfriend. Pierrepoint executed Corbett in real life, and nowhere is the tension between the professional and the personal stronger than in this death.

After retiring suddenly and unexpectedly in 1956, Pierrepoint wrote that all executions are about revenge.

*The Last Hangman* forces the audience to see Albert Pierrepoint as a sympathetic, tragic character. His job may be revolting, but his professionalism and care gain our respect and we come to know him as a rather ordinary, likeable chap. We go through Albert's transformation with him, but in doing so, we too have blood on our hands.

Granada produced this film originally for TV, but a theatrical opening is planned in Britain for early 2006. WGBH Boston is listed among the co-production credits, but I will be very surprised to see this film on PBS given the prevailing political mood in the USA. With luck, TVO will pick it up.

## *Festival*

**UK / Annie Griffin (Director and Writer)**

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

Annie Griffin sets her first feature in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. At first, it has the feel of a documentary, but it's not long before we recognize a few actors and realize this is a scripted comedy. Comedy is the subject, or rather the pursuit of the best comic award at the Festival.

We follow several actor/comedians through their travails of drumming up an audience and getting noticed. Tommy O'Dwyer (Chris O'Dowd) is an Irish comedian who has been here before, and he is resigned to never getting an award because they don't ever go to Irishmen. Sean Sullivan (Stephen Mangan) is a television star and a judge. Everyone wants him to like them, but Sean actually has a few principles. Stir in Lyndsey Marshal as Faith, a woman possessed by her one-woman show about Dorothy Wordsworth, a Canadian group from Halifax who set new standards for disorganization, and an ambitious would-be starlet/comedienne who looks like the odds-on favourite to win.

Some of the best scenes here are with the jury, a mixed bag of people, most of whom wouldn't know good theatre and comedy if it bit them.

*Festival* is a bit uneven, but a good laugh along the way. Annie Griffin's future work is worth watching.

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## *Sorstalanság [Fateless]*

**Hungary/Germany/UK / Lajos Koltai**

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

Lajos Koltai has along career as a cinematographer, notably with István Szabó, but *Fateless* is his debut as a director. The story is based on Imre Kertész's semi-autobiographical novel.

Budapest. Early World War II. German occupation.

György Köves (Marcell Nagy) is 14 when his father loses his business and is shipped to a labour camp, and György finds himself in Auschwitz-Birkenau not long after. He will survive the war because, it seems, fate does not touch him until the end, when transfer to a medical ward miraculously saves him. Ironically, the very people who interned him nurse him back to health, but one can only guess what might have happened in the clinic if the war had not ended.

After the war, he returns to Budapest to find his apartment occupied by another family, but Jews (who somehow were never rounded up in the same building) take him in.

Obviously, I have left out a lot here. You don't go through the war and concentration camps without deprivation, brutality and death, but György seems strangely untouched by this emotionally. Other writers, including Michèle Maheux writing in the program book, talk about György's growth as a character, and Nagy's acting in portraying this. For me, somehow it was the opposite – a boy who through chance makes it through the war relatively untouched by its horrors.

With the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day last year, we had a lot of films set in World War II. This year, we're still mopping up, and somewhere I overheard a remark about "another holocaust film". I wasn't offended by *Fateless* although, sadly, concentration camp scenes tend to look the same after a while and directors have to up the ante just to keep our attention. This may be an interesting film, but it will have trouble finding an audience.

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***The Notorious Bettie Page***

**USA / Mary Harron**

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

**World Premiere**

The 50's. Black and White. A seedy bookstore. Men browse through the racks of magazines. One nervous soul approaches the counter. "Do you have anything, you know, special?" The clerk looks around and offers a few suggestions, but the customer is persistent. Finally, from under the counter, a few bondage magazines. After some eager page flipping, the "customer" reveals his true intent: he is a policeman and this is a raid!

So begins *The Notorious Bettie Page*, a docudrama about the greatest of the 1950's fetish models. Page's image is synonymous with the fetish scene – Toronto's own Fetish Night started life under the name of the Betty Page Social Club. (The name was corrected years later when Bettie herself emerged from obscurity and the fetish world learned of her preferred spelling.)

Bettie's great attraction was and is her naïveté, the way she always embraced first cheesecake images and later fetish photos (extraordinarily tame by modern standards) with a smile, a fun way to pass the afternoon without any sense of perversion. Ironically, Bettie came from a conservative background.

Gretchen Mol plays Bettie with an innocence that is almost too good to believe. Although her early life included unwanted sexual attention and rape, none of this seems to colour her later character.

Bettie was born in Nashville in a typically religious Southern family. As she grew into an attractive young woman, she entered beauty contests as a lark, never turning into a femme fatale, then moved to New York and a try at modeling. Soon she was doing special, private sessions that were more risqué than swimsuits at the beach. From this, it was a short step to the office of Irving Klaw (Chris Bauer) and Bettie's life as a fetish queen.

Irving and his sister Paula (Lili Taylor) along with John Willie (Jared Harris) produced reams of material with Bettie as a model. Photos gave way to short movies, and ordinary pinups gave way to stilettos, high boots and bondage. Eventually the police, urged on by a Congressional war on smut, shut Klaw down.

Much of the story is told as a flashback while Bettie waits to testify to Congress, and at the end of the day, they send her home, unheard. Whether this is historically accurate, it avoids the problem of having "Bettie" in the film subjected to a harassing examination by the protectors of public morals.

As a story, *The Notorious Bettie Page* is familiar to anyone familiar with the history of the fetish community, although it's fun to see these characters brought to life, and to see well-known Bettie poses re-enacted. The real interest and value of this film is its commentary on a culture where repression so often is at war with permissiveness. From our perspective 50 years later, the idea that Bettie's photos and movies were unredeemable smut is hilarious.

Closer to home, it's worth remembering that raids on Gay and Lesbian bathhouses are recent events. Some years ago, Her Majesty's Finest even had plans to raid the original Fetish Night at the Lizard Lounge, but it had moved to a new venue. They went to the wrong address.

How much energy have we wasted being "at war" with pointless, mythical enemies for the better part of a century?

Limited release in March 2006.

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Thursday, September 15

*A Porcelánbaba [The Porcelain Doll]*

Hungary / Péter Gárdos

Rating: \*\*\*1/2

*The Porcelain Doll* is a trio of short stories set in Hungarian farm villages. The places are slightly magical, although not always in a benevolent way. This magic can be read as the force and mystery of ordinary people compared with that of the state. These are stories of death and rebirth that only the land can give.

In the first, we have a boy, Hötöle, who is rather ungainly, tall and thin, but a keen athlete. A group of passing cavalry challenges him to a contest, and the best of the soldiers take turns at shot put, high jump and running. The boy wins every time, but at the end of the race, the Captain shoots him dead.

Afterwards, Hötöle's grandmother sings over the boy while washing his body in a horse trough. The wounds disappear one by one, the boy sits up, spits out the bullets, and all is as it was before.

In the second, a man named Csurmándi arrives in a black car. He could be a bureaucrat, he could be a stand-in for God. To the amazement of the villagers, he announces that they own everything now, they are in charge of their futures, and they can have anything they want. Two women, mourning for their dead children, ask if they can have their children back. Csurmándi thinks for a moment, then announces that he will be back tomorrow at noon, and they should have the children ready for him.

The bodies are exhumed, and the children are in perfect condition as if they were asleep. But the villagers are greedy, and they also exhume the body of a dead woman. Next day, at noon, the villagers wait, but instead of Csurmándi there comes a wind tearing through the village. The children's flesh melts away, and the town is cursed.

The third episode is based on historical clearances of ethnic Germans from Hungary in 1952. One old couple refuses to go. Instead, they lie down in a wheat field and disappear. Later that day, a farmer hears strange music from the field, and discovers two sapling poplars growing where the couple had vanished. Carefully he transplants them to be side by side, and by the next morning there are two full-grown trees in the field.

Most of the actors in *The Porcelain Doll* are amateurs recruited by Péter Gárdos from real farms. The credits include vignettes of each actor as themselves.

This brought problems in shooting because Gárdos had to keep his requests of the actors simple, but the result is charming. The short story format requires little complexity of character development and is suited for an amateur cast.

At the Q&A, Gárdos told of the old couple from the third episode. They were not, in life, married to each other, but a scene called for them to be in bed together. After much negotiation, arrangements with intervening sheets and clothing maintained everyone's propriety. The woman was still worried about her real husband's reaction, but when they saw the film, they were sitting hand-in-hand in the cinema.

There is an eerie musical track by a Hungarian soprano, Ágens, who improvises on classical works for solo soprano with percussion accompaniment. The music continues the resurrection motif with Vivaldi's *Spring* sonata and the haunting opening phrase from Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*.

Although *A Porcelain Doll* is unlikely to show up in North America, if you get a chance, it's worth seeing.

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***Romance and Cigarettes***

**USA / John Turturro**

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

Some people don't like musicals. They should not see *Romance and Cigarettes*. Some people hate karyoke. They should stay away too. For everyone else ...

We all know that musicals are fantasies with the most threadbare of plots. The plot is a device to pull together the characters and paper over those necessary transitions from one number to the next. If you wanted great literature, go somewhere else.

John Turturro's *Romance and Cigarettes* is an off-the-wall musical for the little guy, for the working class man who never gets to speak poetry. He has a wonderful cast for whom, in most cases, the roles were written.

Nick (James Gandolfini) is husband to Kitty (Susan Sarandon). They have three grown daughters: Baby (Mandy Moore), Rosebud (Aida Turturro) and Constance (Mary-Louise Parker) who, chorus-like, play very bad music in their house's small backyard. (What are these girls still doing at home? Don't ask. It's a musical.) Nick's best friend is Angelo (Steve Buscemi), and his lover is Tula (Kate Winslet).

Opening: Nick is asleep on a sofa. Snoring. Constance walks in and plants a lit cigarette between his toes. Fade to black. Howl! Main title.

Kitty is cleaning up, and what does she find, a poem to Tula from Nick. She's outraged! Who is Tula? Why has Nick never written poems for her? The daughters gang up on Nick and drive him from the house. For a moment, we might be in a down-market *Sopranos*, but Nick pauses on the front porch to reflect, and then breaks into song – *A Man Without Love*. Soon he is joined by passersby including garbage men and a young boy on a bicycle (Turturro's son in a cameo appearance).

The whole film goes on like this as Nick tries to reconcile his love life. Every actor gets to play over the top including Winslet as Tula, the English tart, and Christopher Walken as Bo, Kitty's cousin who will avenge her honour.

The list of songs in the credits goes on forever, and that gives you some idea of the nearly operatic quality of *Romance and Cigarettes*. It's hardly Puccini in New Jersey, but it's a lot of fun.

Sony Classics is distributing *Romance and Cigarettes*.

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*U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*

South Africa / Mark Dornford-May

Rating: \*\*\*\*

Winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival

The Dimpho Di Kopane lyric theatre company mounted *Carmen* translated in setting from Spain to Capetown, and in language from French to Xhosa. This production, directed by Mark Dornford-May, played at the Elgin theatre in 2003, but somehow, among all of the cultural events in Toronto, I missed it. This year: a second chance.

Dornford-May and the company have adapted their production yet again as a film actually set in Khayelitsha township. The well-known story is adapted to local customs and characters (the bullfight is replaced by a ritual sacrifice honoring a local singer famous for the Toreador's role), names are adapted (Don José becomes Jongi), but Carmen is still Carmen.

Pauline Malefane is superb as Carmen. She has a great voice and the strong personality needed for the role, even while she's about as far as you can get from the classic European image. The novelty of familiar music in an unfamiliar tongue quickly wears off and I found myself watching the story on two parallel tracks: one the original (how will they adapt that scene anyhow?) and one the South African version in its own right. Not much is lost (unless you are pining for those Spanish costumes), and much is gained by seeing *Carmen* in a new setting where you actually watch the story rather than waiting for the next aria.

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Thursday evening brought another break in the Festival. Russell Braun sang Schubert's *Winterreise* at the St. Lawrence Centre.

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**Friday, September 16**

This morning, I dispensed with my first planned screening. Looking at last year's notes, the same thing happened on Friday morning. Festival Fatigue is setting in.

*John & Jane*

India / Ashim Ahluwalia

Rating: \*\*\*

Outsourcing is a hot topic, and India has a huge share in this market. Ashim Ahluwalia began work on *John & Jane* in 2002 by shooting footage in a call centre under the pretext of documenting the rise of the Indian IT industry. Today, as he told us in the Q&A, he wouldn't have a hope of gaining access – nobody wants to reveal the secrets of their clients or the lengths taken to make agents acceptable to their American callers.

With this as a starting point, Ahluwalia then recorded long interviews with his subjects, and these became voice-overs within the film.

What we see is fascinating in two ways. First, we have the deception typical of any sales organization where the aim is always to pitch another option, to sell more, whether the customer needs it or not. At the extreme, one agent has a script offering a "free medical kit", but cannot explain just what it is or why he is calling people about it. We also see how agents are schooled in the way Americans think, what they care about, the importance of family and country, and of course how they talk. Agents assume an "American" name so that their clients can better relate to the unknown voice on the phone.

The flip side to this training is that the agents see America through the glossy pages of product catalogues. They see only the hype that they are selling, not the real world. Couple this with a work style and hours that isolate the agents from everyday society, and we get some weird cultural crossovers. One agent hopes to be a millionaire although his target date has changed a few times. One dreams of a grand villa. One transforms herself into a California blonde, a natural one, she claims, even though she had black hair early in the film.

*John & Jane* gives us a view of the first world through foreign eyes, eyes pressed to a store window that shows the fantasy of America.

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***Äideistä parhain [Mother of Mine]***

**Finland/Sweden / Klaus Härö /**

**Screenplay by Jimmy Karlsson and Kirsi Vikman, based on a novel by Heikki Hietamies**

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

**Runner-up for People's Choice Award**

**Official entry by Finland for Best Foreign Film Oscar® Nomination / Opens in Finland on September 30, 2005**

One standard measure I use in ranking the quality of any year's Festival is the length of time I must wait to see a film that knocks me and the rest of the audience right out of the theatre. 2005 was an odd year. There were many very good films, but none that I would rave about to anyone who would listen. Finally, on Friday afternoon, *Mother of Mine* came along.

During WWII, over 70,000 Finnish children were shipped off to foster families in neighbouring, but neutral, Sweden. Finland was occupied by and fighting with Germany against Russia, and the Finns didn't have a good time of it. When the war children returned, their woes of being torn first from a birth family and then from a foster family were considered unimportant beside the trials of those who stayed in Finland. Only in the last decade have the former war children started to talk about their experiences. Klaus Härö, intrigued by this aspect of Finnish history, started work on this film in 2000.

The story begins on a country road. A man gets out of a taxi carrying a small bouquet and walks up a hill to a church. He is visiting his foster mother's grave. As for his birth mother, the relationship is quite cool and we will soon see why.

Cut back to the 1940s. Eero (Topi Manjaniemi) is nine, and he is close to his father. They play mock battles even as dad is about to go off to war. This is the last time Eero will see his dad. Meanwhile, it's time for Eero to be packed off to Sweden where he is assigned to a family in a rural area – Eero is the only Finn. His foster father, Harvald (Michael Nyqvist), is welcoming in a shy sort of way, and knows a few words of Finnish. His foster mother, Signe (Maria Lundqvist), is very cold and treats Eero as little more than a servant.

In time, we learn that Signe and Harvald lost a daughter who drowned a year before Eero arrived, and Signe resented that Eero was a boy. Eventually, she comes to accept Eero into the family. This will make his inevitable departure after the war much more difficult.

Meanwhile, Eero's mother sends letters to Signe, but never to Eero. The only news he gets is of his father's death, and later, by accident, of his mother's romance with a German officer. She would like to move to Germany, and is torn between leaving Eero with his foster family and following her love. In the end, the German deserts her and Eero must return home.

The story is told in the present (in black and white) and the past (in colour). At the Q&A, Klaus Härö joked that he could have assigned some deep significance to the choice, but the main one was to ensure the audience would keep the two time periods separate. This sort of plot – a child torn from his family, thrust into foreign surroundings, growing to love them and then torn away again – could be done melodramatically at a level barely above a soap opera or a Finnish version of Dickens. Not here.

Eero is not the most loveable child, and Topi Manjaniemi conveys his hurt and resentment without going over the top as a hapless waif. Maria Lundqvist gives us Signe's icy remoteness, but we sense there is more going on. When she finally accepts Eero, and later loses him back to his mother, the emotions are big and genuine. Lundqvist is a comic actor in Sweden, and Härö chose her for the ability to put her emotions out on the line when the story needs it.

The music for this film is quite beautiful without overwhelming the action or overworking the audience's emotions even though a full orchestra is used at times. When I mentioned this to Härö, he joked that in Finland anything beyond a solo instrument was considered excessive, although in Sweden he could get away with a quartet. At the very end, Eero and his mother are reconciled. A friend of mine might call this a "two hanky" film, but the sentiment is well earned.

The screening I attended was the second in the world as the film had not yet opened in Finland. Although we were in a relatively small house (the Cumberland 2), four of the audience were Finnish war children. One woman began the Q&A by complimenting Klaus Härö on telling her story so well. Another spoke of the tragedy of translating, after the war, for a child who went to Sweden at age 1, and now could not talk to his Finnish parents. Eventually, about 15,000 of the war children returned to live in Sweden.

Columbia Sweden has a hand in this film and will distribute it in Scandinavia. I have to assume that we will see North American distribution some day since Finland has chosen it as an official entry for next year's Oscars®. Watch for it!

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***La Vie avec mon père [Life With My Father]***

**Canada / Sébastien Rose**

**Rating: \*1/2**

There's a certain irony in seeing a film called *Life With My Father* back to back with *Mother of Mine*. Would that it could have at least been worth the time I spent in the theatre. *La Vie avec mon père* would get two stars – it starts and ends well enough – but loses its way in an artificial and needlessly graphic crisis.

Paul (Paul Ahmarani) is a writer who does not write. Saying someone has writer's block implies that he actually produced something once upon a time, but Paul strikes me as a layabout poseur. He lives in his father's house, a run-down pile in Outremont (Montréal). One might describe him as Bohemian if he had a little more style and actually did something.

Patrick (David La Haye) is the complete opposite of his brother, Paul. He is a successful pharmaceutical executive, he has a beautiful wife and children. The marriage is strained, and Patrick's wife kicks him out. Where does he go? To the family home and Paul, of course.

Enter François (Raymond Bouchard), the father, a man who wrote one best-selling book decades ago and has lived off it ever since. He's seen better days, and has returned to live with his sons. François is quite a character and the family dynamics are thrown further akilter by his arrival.

Up to now, we have the makings of a gentle comedy with misunderstandings, misadventure and eventual reconciliation, but alas director Sébastien Rose was not content to stop there. François is aging, and one day has a serious accident with incontinence. The intent of this sequence is to bring the sons and father back together co-operatively and supportively, but it's too explicit and throws the audience unexpectedly into uncomfortable territory. The dramatic effect could have been achieved with any of several other afflictions.

François survives, although I wonder if that's only to set up the happy ending. Paul finally writes his book – a gloss on his father's own successful novel – and everyone's off on a long-planned trip to New York. The end.

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**Saturday, September 17**

***Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit***

**UK / Nick Park & Steve Box**

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

**North American Premiere**

**Opening in Toronto October 7, 2005**

*Wallace & Gromit* fans rejoice! A feature-length adventure for our mad cheese-loving inventor Wallace and his trusty, if long-suffering, dog Gromit. (If you don't know who these characters are, run, do not walk, to your nearest video store and rent *A Grand Day Out*, *The Wrong Trousers* and *A Close Shave* – three masterpieces of stop action animation comedy.)

Thanks to Dreamworks, our heroes get to go big time! Wallace and Gromit's latest enterprise is a humane pest control company, wait for it, Anti-Pesto, that guards the town's vegetable patches from marauding rabbits. This is no ordinary veg, but giant specimens grown for an annual competition hosted, as it has been for five centuries, by the local gentry. Lady Tottington (voiced by Helena Bonham-Carter) is among Anti-Pesto's biggest clients, and she's a bit sweet on Wallace, or at least on his ability to catch rabbits without harming them. Wallace's rival and would-be suitor to Lady Tottington, Victor Quartermaine (voiced by Ralph Fiennes) prefers to shoot the little darlings. As always, the now 85-year old Peter Sallis voices Wallace.

All of the usual W&G gadgetry is here, including updated versions of machinery from the earlier short films. Also as usual, things don't work out quite as planned. Wallace has a scheme to brainwash the bunnies into hating veg – they won't eat what they don't like – but the experiment goes awry when he attempts a mind transference from himself into a rabbit. Soon a gigantic rabbit is loose, and gigantic vegetables disappear overnight.

I will leave it to you to see the film because, after all, it's a comedy and we know that everything comes out OK in the end. The fun is getting there by way of quotations from half a dozen other flicks and a chase scene that Snoopy would die for.

Nick Park has three Oscars® to his name for animated shorts. He has come along way from the early 90s when I saw him introducing *A Grand Day Out* at the Bloor Cinema. He had a few of the figures from *Creature Comforts* with him, and they went astray in a taxi after the screening. Fortunately, they were returned, and a few show up, to the sharp-eyed, in the museum display in *A Close Shave*. Bloor Cinema to Festival Gala in about 12 years!

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***Pavee Lackeen [Traveller Girl]***

**Ireland / Perry Ogden**

**Rating: \*\***

In Ireland, there are about 40,000 Travellers, an underclass that has lived for centuries on the margins of society in rudimentary dwellings, never putting down roots. Today, they live mainly in trailers in out-of-the-way corners of cities, and have little access to services that “settled people” take for granted. They are gypsies in the wandering sense, but ethnically they are Irish.

This film lies somewhere between a documentary and a dramatic film. The actors are almost all non-professionals drawn from Traveller society. This gives it a genuine feel – why try to write, cast and direct actors when you can just film the real thing – but the downfall is that the story is simplistic and the acting is pedestrian.

Winnie (Winnie Maughan) is a 10-year old girl, part of a large family. We follow her rather dull life and her mother, Rose’s attempts to connect with various services including the school system. Well meaning people, one of them herself a Traveller advocate, come by with promises of action, but nothing happens. The family trailer is moved to another site because its old location is planned for construction (which never appears). The new site is a worse location, and the city’s promise to set up a new tap for running water never comes through. Winnie must walk some distance to a hose that is inexplicably running in the corner of an abandoned field.

From remarks in the Q&A, Ogden clearly wants to bring attention to this hidden side of Irish society. However, his choice of form leaves me wondering about one critical question: where do the Travellers get money? Rose has a huge family, and though they may pick through clothing bins to find what they need, they must get food somehow. In one scene, Rose is negotiating for the purchase of a new trailer, but I wonder how she would ever pay for it. Without question, the Travellers live in great poverty but they’re not the only poor in Dublin. As a piece of advocacy, *Pavee Lackeen* assumes that the audience is familiar with much of its context, but as a documentary it does not travel well.

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***L’Enfant [The Child]***

**Belgium/France / Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne**

**Rating: \*\***

***Palme d’Or* at Cannes**

*L’Enfant* arrived in Toronto fresh from its win in Cannes and a host of critical acclaim. It’s a fairly well made film, but not one I particularly liked for because it fails my critical test – why should I care about these people, about this story, enough to invest my time it watching it.

We have a couple, Sonia (Déborah François) and Bruno (Jérémy Renier). Sonia has a newly born child, and returns home to find that Bruno has sublet their apartment while she was in hospital. Right here you want to scream “leave him, leave him”, but she doesn’t and we spend the next 90 minutes following them.

Bruno is a petty crook, but he gets in well over his head when he tries to sell their child. Sonia is beside herself, and they do get the kid back, but at a price. Bruno is now in hock to his criminal friends for several thousand Euros, an amount he will never be able to pay off at his scale of crime. Another silent chorus of “leave him, leave him” from me in the audience, but of course the plot would fall apart if Sonia walked out. You can see where this is going. Everything comes unglued in a robbery gone wrong. Do I care? Not one bit.

*L’Enfant* is worth seeing only if you want to know what the Dardenne brothers are up to and to see what rates a *Palme D’Or* these days. Otherwise, don’t bother.

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***Thank You For Smoking***

**USA / Jason Reitman**

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

**Opens Winter/Spring 2006**

*Thank You For Smoking* is an hilarious satire of political lobbyists that managed to spark a bidding war between Fox and Paramount during the festival. When the smoke cleared, Fox was the winner, and they plan to release this film early in 2006.

Aaron Eckhart plays Nick Naylor, the master of spin, a man who can turn a cancer victim into an admirer of the tobacco industry. His fellow alcohol and gun lobbyists style themselves as the “MOD Squad” – “Merchants of Death”. Their job is to make their products sound good and any opponent, in politics or the media, sound like an idiot.

Nick is a protégé of The Captain (Robert Duvall), the last of the old southern tobacco tycoons. The Captain may be a victim of his own industry, but he believes in Nick almost like a son. Their nemesis is a senator from Vermont (William H. Macy) who hopes to have a skull-and-crossbones printed on every pack of cigarettes. Nick skates rings around the senator at hearings into the proposed bill.

Tobacco is losing market share, and one big problem is that nobody smokes in movies any more. (Nobody smokes in this one either!) Nick hits on the idea of pitching Hollywood to bring cigarettes back to the cinema, and flies off to meet an agent in Los Angeles who can make this happen. Rob Lowe has a delicious small role here, the one person in *Thank You For Smoking* who is an even bigger BS artist than Nick. They run through the possibilities of cigarettes in space (there are small problems with the high oxygen atmosphere), and even plan a marketing tie-in with a new film and brand launch.

Katie Holmes plays a journalist from the Washington Post bent on unmasking trade secrets, and the supremely confident Nick is undone by sleeping with her. Days later, it’s all there in the Post, and Nick’s days as a lobbyist are over.

Or are they? There is always another product where – repeat after me – there is no scientific study linking our product with any adverse health risks – is the mantra, and Nick Naylor won’t be worrying about paying the mortgage.

Jason Reitman has found the perfect balance of vicious humour and sympathy, such as we might have, for his characters. He has no love for them, but we admire their sheer gall. At the Q&A, Reitman mentioned that he had talked to some real-life lobbyists, and they were less than thrilled about the “MOD” tag, except for the gun lobbyist who offered to send a pair of cufflinks made from bullets.

A great way to end one of the best of festivals.

Limited opening March 2006.

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