

Steve's Film Festival Reviews for 1999

By Steve Munro

Ratings

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

The reviews are arranged in the order of viewing.

General Impressions

This year's pickings were not up to the standard of the 1998 festival. Although I managed to fill out a complete program for the ten days, there were a number of occasions where there was little competition for available slots in my calendar. While I was building the template for these reviews, I started with last year's document, and browsing through it noticed just how many good if not great films there had been. This year, a few stood out, but from thinner ranks.

I'm also noticing a continuing decline in the quantity of films from Europe. Whether this reflects what is available or the programmers' tastes, I don't know. We do get special series devoted to individual directors and national/regional cinemas, but these tend to be off on their own and show in the smaller houses.

One film deserves special mention as a travesty: *Jakob the Liar*, which has opened in theatres across North America. I saw this back-to-back with a film about Holocaust denial, and to say that *Jakob* cheapens a deeply sensitive subject is an understatement. When Robin Williams cannot hold a press conference about a film set in wartime Poland without turning it into a gag-fest, I know all I care to about Mr. Williams. I will save the remainder of my comments for the review.

The Toronto festival is getting quite a reputation, and it's rather amusing to have films introduced by directors and actors who are in awe of us, the festival and the audience, rather than the other way around, but it has its benefits. We had at least three Q&A's which ran to half an hour. It's great to be at a screening where your applause can be heard where it counts and the audience and artists can talk as equals about the work.

A special greeting goes out to members of the Screen Actors Guild and their friends in the Craft Unions who would dearly love to see more production work in Hollywood than Toronto, Vancouver, London, and Sydney. A few months ago, a small band of buy-America protesters marched through Los Angeles demanding that *something must be done* about this flood of inferior, subsidized import productions. Turns out what they really wanted was the same tax breaks from the State of California as are available in such foreign climes as North Carolina. I can happily report that the festival was chock full of product made just about anywhere but Hollywood, with great scripts, acting, direction, music, set design, cinematography; probably even good catering on the set.

Toronto and environs got to play by turn Chicago and Racine, Wisconsin. Directors commented on how good (cheap, yes, that too, but good) the crews were here. Why shoot Racine in suburban Toronto (Uxbridge actually)? Because there are no crews in Racine, and it looks just the same.

Finally, the 7 West Café is still selling 99¢ cappuccino and café-au-lait during the festival. Vital to prevent terminal stupor during that fifth screening of the day (and the food's good too!).

Thursday, September 9

V Leru / Idle Running

Slovenia / Janez Burger

Rating: **

Idle Running is Janez Burger's first feature, and it's very much a low-budget (US\$250K), make-do-with-amateurs effort. For all that, the film comes off reasonably well.

Dizzy is a professional student content to sit in his grotty student apartment drinking beer, playing cards and philosophizing. Although he has a girlfriend, Marina, we don't actually see her until later in the film and then only to learn that she's tired of waiting for him to make up his mind about her. Meanwhile, everyone else around him seems to have someone – Dizzy may look the part of the cool, idle student, but it's an empty life.

Enter Marco, a freshman who's been assigned to the other bed in Dizzy's room. He looks a rural nerd most of the time, someone who will disturb Dizzy's carefully studied indolence, but he turns out to have more to his life including an attractive and very pregnant girlfriend.

This is not an action film, but one which concentrates on the characters with a series of vignettes between them. All are warmly, sympathetically drawn people who get through and enjoy their lives, pedestrian though they may seem. There is only one moment where things nearly come off the rails in an overlong parting scene between Dizzy and Marina. The apartment's cleaning lady acts as a chorus linking the scenes always complaining that she must sweep away the detritus of each day's activities. She kvetches, but that's all part of the fun.

There is a wonderful epilogue about buying a basketball on the cheap – the deck may seem to always be stacked against you, but only for someone trying to get a deal too good to be true.

1999 Madeleine

France / Laurent Bouhnik (Director, Screenplay and co-Executive Producer)

Rating: **1/2

Madeleine is the first in a projected series of 10 films about people living at the turn of the millenium. One is to be made each year, and hence the prefix *1999* in the title.

Madeleine (Véra Briole) lives alone in a sparsely furnished, brilliantly white apartment, and works at a dressmaker's shop which is clearly on the verge of closing. Her life is lonely, but she is constantly searching for friends through personals ads and dating agencies. Those she meets are not a happy lot.

One day, a vacuum-cleaner salesman appears at her door, and she invites him in. He's attractive, shy and a little naïve, and her fantasy life gets the better of the situation (at least in her mind). Later, they meet in a bar where he makes a casual invitation for her to drop by his home, an invitation which he quickly forgets. When she does show up, she finds he's married. By the film's end, Madeleine's life seems to be going on just as it was before.

If *1999 Madeleine* is any indication of where Bouhnik is going with the rest of this series, we are in trouble. The early moments of the film contain a number of extremely artfully composed shots, but these are never echoed in the action which follows. Indeed the tone of the film loses this artful composition almost as soon as Bouhnik has to start dealing with characters and plot. If this series is to continue, the characters will need more inner complexity to sustain the premise. When one sees the same name too many times in the credits, it's often an indication that there's nobody willing to ask tough questions about a project, and that's certainly an impression I got here.

Friday, September 10

El Akhar / L'autre

France/Egypt / Youssef Chahine

Rating: 0

L'autre was not on my original list, but I made a last minute change from a dark, Russian film about Hitler that had received abysmal advance reviews. So much for second choices.

Youssef Chahine has a long list of feature films (34), but if this is any indication, he's an acquired taste. *L'autre* can't make up its mind if it's a screwball comedy, a musical, or a political thriller. Adam, a rather wet-behind-the-ears student, has just returned from the US to Egypt to live with his wealthy family. At the Cairo airport, he is lovestruck by a beautiful girl – swell the music track here – Hahane, a journalist, very young, vary much on the trail of a big exposé. Her story – rampant corruption in the Egyptian tourism industry from which Adam's family profits.

To this mix add one terrorist brother, a loony architect (whose vision of a tri-faith temple arises literally from the sands of the Sinai), and a mother who loves her son just a bit too much. When Adam marries Hahane, the obvious problems follow.

I left at this point (one hour into the movie). The story was too choppy to stay focussed on one plot or style for very long. The *message* was writ far too large for even a modestly intelligent audience. The screening got off to a bad start thanks to the unannounced showing of an Egyptian film with French subtitles. According to a friend who stayed to the bitter end, about half of the audience stayed right through, and the film didn't get any better after I left.

One of the film festival's marvels is the chance scheduling of films which are related either by subject, cast, director or style. Unexpected bonuses – the ability to compare very different approaches to material – pop up, and films echo off one-another thanks to adjacent screenings.

This year, I happened to schedule three movies back-to-back which all turn on a single character, an actor who is part of almost every scene and without whom the story would not exist. In an era of special effects where even the actors are becoming props on a virtual stage, it's refreshing to see stories about real people, on real locations with real acting. *Ratcatcher*, *I Could Read the Sky*, and *Me Mysel* formed that trio of films.

Ratcatcher

United Kingdom / Lynne Ramsay (Director and Screenplay)

In Glaswegian English with Subtitles

Rating: ***

James (William Eadie) lives in a Glasgow slum with his parents, a frequently-drunk and abusive father (Tommy Flanagan) and a long-suffering mother. It's 1973, and the garbagemen are on strike giving the already run-down neighbourhood an even more fetid and abandoned air than usual.

As the story opens, James and a friend are playing by a canal, and his friend is drowned. James carries his secret responsibility for the accident within him, and this adds to his isolation from other boys. One odd friend, Kenny, is a young, rather slow boy whose treasure is a collection of pet animals – mice, a gerbil – but unknown to James, Kenny saw the accident.

James dreams of life in a better neighbourhood, a house near a field in the country, but this dream will never be realized. He is trapped in the bleak setting of Council flats.

This is dark, depressing territory familiar to anyone who has watched films about the dubious impact of the newfound wealth in Great Britain on its poorer inhabitants. William Eadie carries the film as James, and through his eyes we see an unhappy mixture of childish innocence and hope with an inevitable despair of adulthood. Lynne Ramsay's direction must be credited both in getting this performance from Eadie, and in shaping a difficult story through his eyes.

Thanks to the thick accents, someone has added subtitles in American English. This produced some bizarre translations with Glasgow street language mutating to its suburban American equivalent. My favourite was the conversion of "dustmen" to "sanitation workers" – it loses something along the way. Thank goodness for my diet of Brit's and Scot's TV drama that I could understand the characters in their own tongues.

I Could Read the Sky

United Kingdom/Ireland / Nichola Bruce

Screenplay by Nichola Bruce from the photonovel by Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke

Rating: ****

I Could Read the Sky began as a novel with illustrations about the vanishing ways of Ireland and the many Irish who went elsewhere to make their living. The notion of the Irish as exiles and emigrants runs through the entire work. The title comes from a phrase in the story when the narrator's many talents, all of them now obsolete thanks to modern technology, are rhymed off one by one.

Along the way to publication, the photographs turned into essays of their own and became chapters in the book. Next came a staged version with the text as a reading accompanied by photographs, and finally a cinema adaptation of the material. Nichola Bruce has produced a truly artistic film in the best sense of the word. Technology is present behind the scenes, but it is used to produce images that could not be created otherwise, and these images are integral to the work rather than standing apart as a loud-mouthed *tour de force*.

An old Irishman (Dermot Healy) lives alone in a small London apartment, and reminisces about his life both in Ireland and away. The first 20 minutes of the film is a swirl of images, fragmentary, shifting, distorted, overlapping, and it is only when the man awakes that we realize what we have been seeing is his dream about past days. Even then, the past is seen through the haze of memory with scenes and events blending into each other.

This film deserves the adjective "painterly" as befits Bruce's background in design and painting. Complex sequences of images were worked out in advance to keep the shooting ratio down, and Healy's monologue was shot over four days in London separate from the Irish sequences. This is a beautiful, gently paced film where the time spent in a theatre absorbing Bruce's vision and Healy's wonderful narration will be well-rewarded. A stunning first feature.

Saturday, September 11

Me Myself I

France/USA / Pip Karmel (Director and Screenplay)

Rating: *1/2**

Pamela (Rachael Griffiths) is an award-winning journalist whose personal life is a mess. She lives alone, and is very much her own woman. All the same, she is torn by thinking of Rob, the "Mr. Right" to whom she said "no" 12 years ago.

One day, through a freak accident, she finds herself face-to-face with the "other" Pamela, the one who said "yes", and finds that they have traded places. Suddenly she must adjust to a new home, family, friends, three kids, and a life with Rob that's no bed of roses. Despite his faults, Pamela (I) still loves Rob only to find that both he and Pamela (II) are having affairs with others and are trying to put their marriage back together. Only one character, Pamela (II)'s youngest son knows that something's amiss and gives Pamela (I) a hope that she may return to her own life.

Rachael Griffiths is on camera for almost the entire film – she's enchanting, successful, disorganized, and trapped in her own life as it might have been. A great variation on the "if only" theme.

This is Pip Karmel's first feature. She has directed shorts, a documentary and TV, and was the editor for *Shine*.

Juha

Finland / Aki Kaurismaki (Director, Producer, Screenplay, Editor)

Rating: *1/2

The Kaurismaki brothers' work can be something of an acquired taste, and as I have mentioned elsewhere, having one person in so many production roles can leave a director without a valuable check on his ambitions.

The story is adapted from a 1911 Finnish novel by Juhani Aho which has been filmed three times before (1920, 1937 and 1956). In it, we have a love triangle of Juha and his wife Marja, farmers who live a simple, happy life. Enter Shemeikka, a stranger who lures Marja away to the city and a life of sin. Revenge is the order of the day with predictable consequences.

The great conceit of *Juha* is that it is a silent film made at least partly in homage to the centenary of the cinema itself. There are Kaurismakian jokes – sound effects such as a door closing or a car driving by in an otherwise silent setting. Intertitles give us the dialogue, and characterizations are deliberately overdone (or expressionist if you want to use the artful term). The music is a *big* problem – the film itself is too long (an hour would have done nicely for the plot and premise), and there is barely an hour's worth of music in the score. The staginess and the music wear thin, and the film runs out of steam because it cannot sustain the joke.

The Annihilation of Fish

USA / Charles Burnett

Screenplay by Anthony C. Winkler

Rating: ****

Three “loonies”, three over-60s, and not the sort of thing you would expect in a love story, but with a cast of Lynn Redgrave, James Earl Jones and Margot Kidder we have a gem.

Fish (Jones) is a Jamaican-American living in New York City who has been in an institution for years because of a demon with whom he physically wrestles at unpredictable and usually inconvenient times. Times in medical care being what they are, Fish is discharged to the streets, and he heads off to Los Angeles.

Poinsettia (Redgrave), whose real name is “Flower”, lives in San Francisco, and goes everywhere with her invisible lover, Giacomo Puccini. Nobody will marry them (you have to be visible to be married even in Nevada), and eventually, tearfully, Poinsettia ditches her love and moves to L.A.

Fish and Poinsettia wind up in the same rooming house run by Mrs. Muldoone (Kidder) – that final “e” is one of the film’s running jokes – a landlady with her own peculiarities. She carefully tends a weed in the garden that, she claims, was the death of her husband.

For all their peculiarities, Fish and Poinsettia fall in love over endless game of Gin Rummy which Poinsettia always wins. They become the most unlikely pair of lovers, and – wait for it – the sex scene between them is a real treat.

The title, *The Annihilation of Fish*, refers to the demise of Fish’s demon without whom his reason for living disappears. I will leave the resolution of this dilemma to your viewing of the film, but fear not, there is a happy ending.

Goya in Bordeaux

Spain / Carlos Saura

Rating: **½

Carlos Saura joins with cinematographer Vittorio Storaro to present the life and work of the great Spanish artist Goya. The trademarks of their earlier collaborations in *Flamenco* and *Tango* are here with dramatic lighting and surreal spaces bounded only by screens. Art, unlike dance, provides neither its own movement nor the machinery to advance a plot, and this creates structural problems which *Goya* cannot overcome.

Goya (Francisco Rabal) in his old age looks back on his life in dream, waking memory and stories to his young daughter. It’s a thumbnail sketch of Goya’s life, but the need for biography gets in the way of the art in the first half of the film. By the time the film reached the mature Goya and the events of his paintings, especially those inspired by war, came alive, this audience member had been fighting to stay awake.

I may think differently of this film on a second, fresh screening, but suspect that it will remain on my “B” list of Saura’s films. It’s a great attempt but ultimately unsatisfying because there’s not enough of either the art or life of a great master.

Sunday, September 12

Le bleu des villes / Hometown

France / Stéphane Brizé

Screenplay by Florence Vignon and Stéphane Brizé

Rating: *1/2**

Solange (Florence Vignon) is a meter maid in Tours, France, and her life is, frankly, rather dull. Her husband works in a morgue and has about as much life and sensitivity as his clients, so to speak. They own a new house, but have not yet moved in, and hubbie and a friend are carrying out the now-and-forever decoration and finishing project. The décor is just one more of the many things he's out of touch on.

Enter Mylène, a schoolgirl friend of Solange, who has gone on to a celebrity life as the weather reader on Paris television. She's back in Tours on a book signing tour when she runs into Solange who has just ticketed her car.

Solange dreams of being a singer, and asks Mylène for pointers. The dream takes over soon afterwards, and Solange leaves for Paris with the hope of getting into the music business via her old friend. That's not as easy as it looks, but after an initial disappointment (and the film's only bit of melodrama) she finds her way on her own.

Le bleu des villes has a fine script written by Vignon and Brizé at a time when they were somewhat more intimate (Brizé was a bit circumspect on that subject), and the role of Solange was not originally intended for Vignon herself. There are two beautiful scenes involving the recipe for *Meringue Framboise* which I will leave for those lucky enough to see this film should it ever get to North America.

Unlike *Me Myself I*, this is a "what if" story where the heroine's dream does come true, although not as she expected.

Mein Liebster Feind / My Best Fiend

Germany/United Kingdom / Werner Herzog

Rating: ****

This film's title, a delicious bilingual pun, refers to the fruitful but difficult artistic relationship between director Werner Herzog and the late actor Klaus Kinsky. Each is a man who goes to great lengths for his art – Herzog mounts difficult shoots in remote locations straining the physical capabilities of the crew and his own ability to lead as director, while Kinsky the actor, always on the verge of madness, is capable of hour-long, uncontrollable rants. Even so, they have given us indelible images in the cinema – *Aguirre*, *The Wrath of God* and *Nosferatu*, *The Vampire* are the two best-known, but there are also *Fitzcaraldo* and *Woyzeck*.

Those who have seen Les Blanc's *Burden of Dreams* about the making of *Fitzcaraldo* will know the problems of Herzog's visions. He is no stranger to artistic madness in his own drive for reality, for actually staging the stories he told. The two huge egos, Kinsky and Herzog, were well-matched.

Mein Liebster Feind begins with Kinsky storming through a stage monologue as Jesus Christ, insulting his audience, daring them to believe in a messiah so openly dismissive of their failures. This was the actor Herzog found and nourished.

There's a fascinating outtake from the production of *Fitzcaraldo* with the original cast – Jason Robarts and Mick Jagger. Robarts became seriously ill during the shoot, and was replaced by Kinsky, while Jagger simply ran out of time for the project. We see identical scenes in a bell tower as Fitzcaraldo decrees that there shall be an opera house, here in a city deep in the South American jungle. Robarts is the out of control, probably drunk character we know from other films, and there is nothing original in his performance. Kinsky is possessed by the role and by the obsession of the character he plays.

That was Kinsky's trademark – he became his character so thoroughly that the role is inconceivable for any other actor. *Mein Liebster Feind* is Herzog's backhanded *homage* to his lost friend, and a documentary worth seeing by anyone who knows their work.

History Is Made at Night

UK/Finland / Ilkka Jarvilaturi

Rating: *

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! *History Is Made at Night* was programmed by Piers Handling, director of the Festival, and introduced by him as the “sort of work the Festival should be championing”. Well, Piers, I think you only saw the first reel, and since your introduction was at the second screening, there’s no excuse.

The cold war is over. The Yanks and the Reds are still spying on each other, but there’s precious little for them to do. The SVR, successor to the KGB, is reduced to peddling art treasures and used armaments. The CIA doesn’t seem to have any purpose at all. Meanwhile, out in the field, agents try to justify their existence.

Good premise, might have been a good movie, but it’s a lame script that bogs down too often in the love interest between Bill Pullen (CIA) and Irène Jacob (SVR). Ms. Jacob manages to provide some passing interest in the sauna scene, while the coy Pullman carefully hides what little is between his legs. Sigh.

A waste of time, and badly overpromoted by Handling who as Festival Director should reserve his enthusiasm for films which deserve it. Did he owe someone a favour?

Monday, September 13

30 Days

USA / Aaron Harnick (Director, Screenplay)

Rating: ***

30 Days is Harnick’s first feature, and it’s a comedy about relationships with no jokes. During the Q&A, Harnick made the point that he wanted to make a warm, funny film, but not one where we burst into laughter and especially not laughter *at* the characters. He’s succeeded.

We have a quartet of New York men whose ability to find girlfriends varies wildly. To one degree or another, they are stuck in that never-never land between school, family and living truly on their own. Our hero, Jordan, works in his parents’ wine store and is not good at commitment. Two friends (the only couple whose relationship actually works) set him up with girls, but it’s always a bust until ... Sarah. Even then, it’s rough around the edges and through his insecurity, he loses her.

There are many great things about this film – the script, music, editing – the actors work as a troupe and the characters are real, believable. Although *30 Days* was shot on a low budget with few retakes, a lot of rehearsal happened while people were reading for parts in the film. Harnick found what worked and rewrote what didn’t.

30 Days had no distributor when it came to Toronto, but it deserves one. Young director/writers like Harnick should be encouraged and, *pace* Piers Handling, this is what the Festival should be supporting. Hmmm .. maybe Piers went to the wrong screening.

Gregory’s Two Girls

United Kingdom / Bill Forsyth (Director and Screenplay)

Rating: **

Gregory’s Two Girls is Forsyth’s sequel, in a way, to his 1980 film *Gregory’s Girl*, right down to the lead actor John Gordon Sinclair. Gregory (Sinclair) is now teaching in the school he attended nearly 20 years ago, and he has a crush on a student, Frances. A fellow teacher, Bella, would love to bed him, but Gregory just can’t get past his fantasies.

To make matters worse, Greg is stuck in a pseudo-liberal mode of the concerned citizen – someone who quotes all the right authors to his students more because it sounds good than because he really believes in doing anything about world injustice. The story comes unglued for me here. There is an extensive subplot about a local electronics manufacturer, owned by a school chum of Greg’s, which happens to be supplying torture devices to the 3rd world. Two of Greg’s students, including Frances, are onto the story and see it as a potential journalistic coup. Add one Chilean human rights activist and an American UN worker who knows more about the world than Greg ever could. Stir well.

The plot runs aground by having the characters actually try to “do something meaningful”, to wit a hijack of a truck full of equipment (not even the right truck, it turns out). It’s a hopeless move – all they get is a truckload of ancient PCs which miraculously survive being pitched over a cliff to lie bobbing in the morning tide. (They built PCs better in the old days, ya know.)

Forsyth just doesn’t know what to do with his characters, and the machines take over – why have a credible plot when you can just have a chase. No resolution. A nice idea gone badly astray.

It’s interesting to contrast *Gregory’s Two Girls* with *30 Days*. Both end inconclusively, but *30 Days* has a positive, credible ending and we care enough to think where the characters’ lives might go next. Greg and Frances are facing years in jail, and I for one think they deserve it for being so stupid as to be characters in this film.

Lef / Guts

The Netherlands / Ron Termaat (Director and Screenplay)

Rating: **

Guts is a film about making a film, a first feature from Ron Termaat who took several years to assemble the financing, a process not unlike the plot of the film.

Olivier, a scriptwriter, fantasizes about *films noirs* with himself as the lead character, but his own script is stuck on the interpolation of scenes from other films. One night, “on the waterfront”, he sees a girl, Marielle, fighting her boyfriend, but he is too timid to intervene. It turns out that the man is a photographer and the woman’s face shows up on a poster opposite Olivier’s apartment.

By chance, they meet again and she becomes the female lead in his fantasy. Meanwhile, his rivalry with Luc, the director of his film, threatens to undermine the whole project. Olivier is always too unsure of himself and resents his weakness, while Marielle needs someone more confident.

A good first attempt, although technically the intercutting from “live” colour to “fantasy/noir” black-and-white is uneven. The climax/catharsis should have come in the inner movie, but Termaat makes the mistake of continuing into a contrived ending, complete with chase scene and car crash, that leaves little resolved. Better luck next time.

Janice Beard: 45 WPM

United Kingdom / Clare Kilner

Screenplay by Clare Kilner and Ben Hopkins

Rating: *½**

Janice Beard is one of those stories where you have to accept the premise – Janice’s father died as she was being born, and her mother has been agoraphobic ever since – and with this small leap of faith, everything follows. Janice has a rich fantasy life. She needs it to keep her mother abreast of her fictitious accomplishments. Even after moving to London, she sends a stream of videos home to mom detailing her supposed exploits.

In real life, Janice is a temp. In one job and out another, and her résumé is as creative as her letters home. Janice gets a job at a motorcar company who are about to launch the product of the century, a product the opposition would love to sabotage, but they need someone nobody will even notice on the inside to do their dirty work. Janice, the temp, is ideal. The office mailboy, Sean, really an industrial spy, recruits the unsuspecting Janice to his plot.

Janice is a great character, a juicy first movie for Eileen Walsh, an actress whose previous work is in theatre. The office politics, the low-girl-on-the-totem-pole, the stratified world of male managers, designers, engineers and female office managers and clerks – it’s all there. Janice’s offbeat charm keeps this from becoming just a caricature of office politics and dynamics everywhere. In the end, Janice emerges triumphant after a car crash (this seems to be my day for car crashes) that, for a change, makes sense and provides a fitting climax.

Les enfants du siècle / Children of the Age

France / Diane Kurys

Rating: ****

Every festival needs its great period epic, and this one fits the bill perfectly. France and Italy in the mid 19th century. Costume design by Christian Lacroix. Beautiful buildings. Streets that are unchanged from the period. Wide, wide screen cinematography (never mind that the producers are a French TV network, this is film for the grand theatre).

We begin in 1832 in the midst of the revolution. Baroness Dudevant (Juliette Binoche), better known by her nom-de-plume George Sand, has arrived in Paris with her children. She has left her husband to take up the life of a writer with a bohemian, albeit decidedly well-financed lifestyle. Her behaviour (dressing like a man and smoking cigars) and writing (feminist before the word was invented) scandalize Paris. Soon she attracts the attention of Alfred de Musset (Benoît Magimel) a poet given to orgies and drink. They become lovers, but the public scandal forces them to leave for Venice.

Sand falls ill, and her doctor (Stafano Dionisi) is himself infatuated with his notorious patient. This is more than poor de Musset can stand, and his descent to near death from alcohol and drugs follows shortly. By the film's end, de Musset is dead, while Sand has other conquests to come, though she may not know it.

Les enfants du siècle is one of those costume dramas where we know how it's all going to come out, and the fun is going along for the ride. The characters are well-drawn, and we care about them even though we know their fate in advance. That's the mark of a good historical drama.

Tuesday, September 14

But I'm a Cheerleader

USA / Jamie Babbit

Rating: **½

Ah, to be young and gay! Our heroine, Megan (Natasha Lyonne), is a cheerleader, she dates the captain of the football team, she's an ideal student, but her family suspects otherwise. Horrors!! Megan's a vegetarian, she loves Melissa Etheridge and Georgia O'Keefe, and kissing her boyfriend is something she'd rather not do. Obviously <gasp> a lesbian!

It's time for a twelve-step program to recognize and rid herself of those deviant tendencies, and for this she's packed off to "True Directions", a rehab camp for homos. Here she meets camp director Mary Brown (Cathy Moriarty), an escapee from 50s family TV shows, and her assistant, Mike (played by RuPaul, not in drag for a change, but honey we know where your heart is). To round out the new family, we have an odd-jobs man who can do wonderful things with a chain saw.

The campers are a mixed lot of lesbians and gays, who try as they might, just can't get things straight [*you can boo now ... I had to make up one line in this review that was as much of a groaner as the script itself*]. Some try, oh how they try, but most are subversives going through the exercise to satisfy their absent parents. Midnight brings a raid by the local gay liberationists, a pair of queens in army fatigues who whisk our merry band off to the local gay bar. Megan finds that may she's not so straight after all.

But I'm a Cheerleader is laden with jokes at the expense of a tight-assed, straight society which longs for those glorious days when men were men and women were women, but the jokes wear a bit thin as the film goes on. Great for a Saturday evening with lots of popcorn and the friends of your choice.

Jamie Babbit has directed several shorts. *But I'm a Cheerleader* is her first feature.

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai

USA / Jim Jarmusch

Rating: **

In *Ghost Dog*, Jarmusch is still in the slow, philosophical mood of *Dead Man*. The film is too long by at least 20 minutes, and we have lots of footage with the title character driving around looking vaguely stunned (“what am I doing in this movie anyhow”) while we play through the music CD of the movie.

The plot: Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker) is a professional hitman, a black man from New Jersey who owes his life to a local white mobster. Ghost Dog adopts the role of the samurai, a warrior indebted to his lord. The problem here, of course, is that the aging Italian Mafiosi are not what they once were – they can’t even keep up the rent on their office in the back room of a restaurant. A difficult contract killing of a Mafia boss goes awry when the man’s daughter witnesses the execution, and Ghost Dog’s anonymity is compromised. Now he must kill off his pursuers before they get to him.

In a subplot, Ghost Dog stops by a local park and chats with his friend, a Haitian ice-cream vendor who speaks only French, and there’s a running joke that they cannot understand a word each other says. A young girl in the park befriends Ghost Dog, and she, in the end, will inherit his tradition.

Yes, if that last line sounds like a stretch, it is. Jarmusch pads out the story with intertitles and voiceovers of text from a samurai text. Can you say “pretentious”?

Wednesday, September 15

Third Miracle

USA / Agnieszka Holland

Rating: ****

Third Miracle is a film about the difficulty of faith and the belief in divine intervention through miracles. What happens when a miracle really does occur? How do we know and can we believe, can the established Church believe what has happened? Can the Church deal with a God who works through the poor, the outcasts and those whose own belief is frail?

Agnieszka Holland – a Polish director of Jewish/Catholic/Atheist family background, and a devout Catholic in her youth – could have made a religious polemic attacking both the loss of faith in modern society and the Church’s self-appointed monopoly on the interpretation of the divine. Instead, she has given us a real drama, a real challenge in which the audience must believe that miracles are possible and be inspired by the difficulty of the search for faith.

Father Frank Morris (Ed Harris) is a run-down, cynical man, still a priest, but very much outside of the Church. Because of his earlier experience in a similar case, he is approached by his Bishop to investigate the new claims of a statue of the Virgin which cries blood. Father Frank drinks, his own faith is in tatters, and he wrestles with the memory of that previous case where he debunked a supposed miracle and destroyed the faith of an entire community. However, he becomes convinced and agrees to act as Postulate for the case. This is a delicious role for Harris who jumped at the opportunity to play it.

Roxanne (Anne Heche) is the daughter of the woman in whose name a miracle is said to have occurred. Roxanne is a non-believer who felt rejected by her mother, a woman who turned to the Church and devoted her life to working with the poor.

Armin Müller-Stahl plays the papal emissary, the devil’s advocate whose job is to challenge all claims of miracles. It is very clear that his own faith, and by implication that of the Church establishment, rests on sand. He stopped believing in the possibility of miracles long ago. If there is a polemic in this film, it’s in this character who must carry the burden of the Church in all its bureaucratic stupidity.

As *Third Miracle* opens, we are in Slovakia where a town is about to be bombarded by the Allies in World War II. A young girl carrying the statue of the Virgin runs to a local church and prays while all around her flee for cover. The bombs drop, but they never land. Years later, it is this girl who is running a soup kitchen for the poor in Chicago, and whose death brings tears of blood from the Virgin’s statue, blood which miraculously cures a young girl’s illness. The title refers to the three miracles required of a candidate for beatification, and as the film ends, we are awaiting that miracle.

Toronto stands in for Chicago here, and it is intriguing that very few of the sites used are actually Catholic. One wonders whether the Archdiocese of Toronto was less than inspired by a clearly anti-clerical script. For me, it is a deeply moving examination of what it means to have faith in anything.

The War Zone

United Kingdom / Tim Roth

Screenplay by Alexander Stuart based on his own novel

Rating: ****

Tim Roth makes a fine directorial début with his film *The War Zone*. The subject is father/daughter incest, a difficult topic handled without sensationalism or heavy-handed editorializing.

Ray Winstone is the father, salt of the earth, an apparently devoted family man. Tilda Swinton is his wife, pregnant when the film opens, and she gives birth to a daughter as the story unfolds. Their teenage children, Tom (15) and Jessie (18), are played by Freddie Cunliffe and Lara Belmont, both in their first film roles. Their performance is a tribute to Roth's skills both as a director and as an actor, and they carry *The War Zone* with very strong performances.

The story is set in Devon where the widescreen beauty of the rural exteriors contrasts with the claustrophobic house where the family lives. They have moved recently from London, and everything seems normal. Tom is lonely, and at the difficult age of an early awareness of sexuality without any way to explore his feelings. Jessie is dealing well with life in the country, probably because she hopes to return to school in London soon. By chance, Tom sees his father and Jessie, and thinks he knows what is going on, but everyone including Jessie denies it. The story builds to its climax as the true nature of their family life emerges.

Tim Roth gave a generous 30-minute Q&A after the screening. He has learned a lot from directors he has worked under, especially the bad ones, and he has a keen sense of the need to work with each actor and crew member to bring out their best. It is hard to believe the performance of his young actors could have been drawn out without such sensitivity. The music is integral to the mood of the film. Roth wanted an old-fashioned score which supported the film rather than a collection of tracks for a saleable CD.

I was very impressed both with Roth's articulate knowledge of acting and filmmaking, and its clear presence on the screen. Roth shows that he can handle complex, controversial material, and I look forward to his future work on both sides of the camera.

A Map of the World

USA / Scott Elliott

Screenplay by Peter Hedges and Polly Platt, based on the novel by Jane Hamilton

Rating: **

Sigourney Weaver stars as Alice Goodwin, a superstressed mother and school nurse. She was a city girl, but moved to the country so that her husband Howard (David Strathairn) can follow his dream of life as a farmer. (The story, set in Racine, Wisconsin, was filmed in Uxbridge.) One day, a neighbour's child drowns in the pond on the farm, and soon afterwards, a child from the school accuses Alice of abuse. Suddenly she's a pariah, and a mob mentality takes over in the community. Eventually, after a brief stay in prison and an acquittal at court, she emerges a stronger woman.

This is supposed to be a great role for Weaver playing supermom, but I have serious problems with both the premise and the plot. Howard is unsupportive, self-centred and rather incompetent at farming, and it's hard to believe that this family does not already have severe problems with his insensitivity to the stress in Alice's life. How she was ever convinced to leave Chicago to pursue Howard's dream is a mystery. Alice's stay in jail is very atypical – she is charged after school closes (July) and is tried and acquitted by fall. The real world doesn't work that way. There is even a scene where her consultation with her lawyer is interrupted – time's up – in a clear violation of her right to brief counsel.

Too much has been compressed for the convenience of the plot and to show Alice's ability to rise to any challenge, to sail through everything life throws at her. The story may be well-intentioned, but in the end it is trite crap. If this is how suburban families spend their days, thank god I'm single in the city.

Mansfield Park

United Kingdom / Patricia Rozema

Screenplay by Patricia Rozema based on the letters, early journals and *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen

Rating: ****

Patricia Rozema has a real triumph in *Mansfield Park* which is not just a film adaptation of a novel, but a reworking of Austen's writings and characters. Fanny Price (Frances O'Connor) is far more assertive here than in the novel, and the balance with other characters is adjusted to suit.

We meet Fanny in a dockside hovel in Portsmouth as she is packed off to live with her aunt at Mansfield Park. Her relatives treat her as a poor cousin to be pitied and used, but not, they think, too overtly. Sir Thomas Bertram (Harold Pinter) is a gruff old fart with clear ideas about his position in the household down to dictating Fanny's choice of a husband, the superficial and secretly bawdy Henry Crawford. Meanwhile, Edmund Bertram, the long-suffering 2nd son of the family, is under full attack by Crawford's sister. Her mercenary aims, exaggerated from the literary version, become all too clear when Tom, the elder son, becomes deathly ill.

Needless to say, everything works out in the end, and the fun is just getting through the plot with such delicious characters. Rozema's fine script and direction, together with the acting she inspires, are a treat to watch. As in *The War Zone* (reviewed above), we have a film where the music is a score, not a soundtrack album. The epilogue, in which the fates of all are revealed, is a miniature gem of cinematic choreography.

[With thanks to my cousin, Deb, whose intimate knowledge of Austen's works added to my understanding of the changes wrought by Patricia Rozema in her script.]

Thursday, September 16

Est-Ouest / East-West

France / Régis Wargnier

Rating: *

World War II has ended, and Russian émigrés are lured back to the motherland with promises of a new life. In reality, most are murdered and only the best, those with the skills needed by the state, survive. Sandrine Bonnaire plays Marie, the French wife of Alexei (Sergueï Bodrov Jr.), a doctor who moves with wife and young son to Kiev. It's obvious on their arrival that this was not a brilliant move. Marie adapts a petulant ("But I'm French! They can't do this!") air that endangers herself and all around her.

She turns her attentions to a swimmer, the son of a "disappeared" woman who had been supervisor of their apartment block (and whose removal by Stalin's goons was a direct result of Marie's insensitivity). She coaches him to championship form even after he has been dropped from the official team, and hopes to use him as her conduit for a message to the west. He fails. Alexei is forced to disavow her, and off to a labour camp she goes.

Eventually, Catherine Deneuve shows up as a travelling French actress naïvely sympathetic to the Russian government. Oh sigh. Those nasty Stalinists are not what they seemed to be. But I have no sympathy for Marie – she may be an alien trapped and crushed by a culture she does not understand, but ultimately she has brought the state's attention on herself and destroyed her family. In an epilogue, we learn that her husband, after spending a few decades on Sakhalin Island, got back to the west thanks to the rise of Gorbachev. Do I care?

Régis Wargnier has made a film that belongs in the corny days when Reds were Reds, and all god-fearing Americans knew what was right for the world. The world has changed.

8½ Women

United Kingdom/The Netherlands/Germany/Luxembourg / Peter Greenaway (Direction and Screenplay)

Rating: *½

What is the world coming to? Peter Greenaway with plot! Dialogue! A Englishman takes over a chain of Pachinko parlours in Japan in payment for a debt by a Japanese who loses much face in the transaction. The man and his son's lives are insulated from reality by their wealth – they can build and buy whatever they need or want, and this turns out to be a seraglio in Geneva with a collection of women, some Japanese, some European, all beautiful, all their consorts.

The arrangement works for a while, but gradually the power shifts to the women who become demanding and then leave for other pursuits. Daddy dies with a smile on his face. As usual, we have Greenaway's love for beautifully composed sets and shots, but in the end, who cares? Hortense the pig is my favourite character.

A footnote: Tim Roth on working for Peter Greenaway: The great director would arrange the set so that it was *just so*, and then when his back was turned, the cast would subtly re-arrange the furniture.

Buddy Boy

USA / Mark Hanlon (from his own screenplay)

Rating: *1/2

Francis (Gillen) is a rather withdrawn lad living in a squalid apartment with an astounding harridan of a mother, a one-legged amputee whose life consists of drinking, smoking and watching television. He spends a lot of time watching people, especially an attractive woman who lives in a building across the street. [*This is one of those inconsistencies I just have to mention: we learn later that she chose the apartment because it was higher than surrounding buildings and afforded some privacy, and yet Francis is able to look down into it. Hmmmm.*] Gloria (Emmanuelle Seigner) is attractive and a decided improvement for his fantasies from porn magazines. By chance one day they meet, and he is drawn into her life.

To say that Francis has problems with relationships is an understatement, and Gloria is simply too much for him. To make matters worse, his mother has taken up with an incompetent plumber who never manages to fix the bathtub, but stays in the apartment for days on end eating their food and drinking their beer. The twist in this movie is that we are seeing everything from Francis' point of view, although that is not immediately obvious. To further complicate things, the mother is no woman at all, but Francis' older brother in drag playing a role he took after an obviously unhinged family lost both parents. How? I'd rather not ask.

Francis becomes more and more delusional, and the film turns from a mildly comic view of poor maladjusted Francis to a brutal horror flick. A nice idea, but most of the audience didn't catch on probably because there isn't enough information independent of Francis to clarify things.

I was attracted to *Buddy Boy* by the combination of its being a first feature, and the lead, Aiden Gillen, whom I've seen in British TV shows. It's an intriguing, if somewhat disconnected attempt, and I couldn't help noticing that most audiences will not have the benefit of a Q&A to clarify some twists in the plot. Maybe Hanlon needs a better scriptwriter on his next outing.

Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.

USA / Errol Morris

Rating: *1/2**

Errol Morris describes *Mr. Death* as a portrait of an accidental Nazi. Fred got his start as a tinkerer building electric chairs. He is very proud of his work in "painless execution" and is strangely detached from the world around him. His experience with electrocution leads to designs for lethal injection machines, gas chambers and gallows technology. In his mind, Fred is making the business of execution humane while avoiding the less pleasant or stomach-turning side effects which might unsettle witnesses and guards. He sanitizes death.

In the late 1980s, Leuchter was recruited by Ernst Zundel's defense team to disprove the history of Auschwitz as a camp for mass murder, specifically by gas. Leuchter and his team go off to Poland and surreptitiously remove brick and concrete samples everywhere in the camp, but label nothing to properly identify its origin. This desecration was recorded on videotape which forms part of Zundel's trial record. Fred astoundingly concludes from the ruins of the gas chambers that nobody could have been executed there because he cannot see how they could have worked. His most chilling line comes as he stands on a site where 500,000 people were murdered and cheerily says that if that's what the Germans had wanted, he could have built it. Leuchter never sought nor examined the detailed drawings of the plans for the camp which exist in the Auschwitz museum.

Mr. Death portrays a man whose need for acceptance and publicity overshadow any sense of moral outrage, a man with only a rudimentary pseudo-scientific method to his work, a man who continues to speak to meetings of neo-Nazis and Holocaust deniers as a hero justifying their bigotry.

Although Morris has an obvious editorial position in his work, he does not set out to refute Leuchter point-by-point as that is unnecessary. Morris' fascination and warning is not only that Fred Leuchter exists, but that the need to deny history is still so pervasive.

Friday, September 17

Jakob the Liar

USA / Peter Kassovitz

Rating: None

What an appalling way to start a Friday morning. I had really hoped that someone would keep Robin Williams in line, bring out a fine tragicomic performance where the character and the story would rise above Williams' ego. But it was not to be. I should have known better – with Williams as the Executive Producer, this was clearly a cinematic equivalent of the vanity press.

Jakob the Liar started life as a book, then a film adaptation in the 70s (with an Oscar nomination for best foreign film), and now it's an example of the fine work coming out of Hollywood. [Well, yes, it was shot in Poland, but they don't have ghettos, at least not the right kind, in Los Angeles.]

Jakob is a café owner living in the ghetto in 1944. It's been a while since he served anything because there's no food to serve. One night, while in the city commandant's office because he's out after curfew, he hears a radio broadcast about a battle between the Germans and the Russians. The Russians are only 400 km away! Great news, and he rushes to tell everyone in the ghetto. But how did he know? The myth of Jakob's clandestine radio is born. Rather than own up, Jakob keeps inventing fresh "news" to keep spirits in the ghetto bright. But soon, word of this radio finds its way to the Nazis who come hunting.

Meanwhile, a subplot. A little girl has escaped from a death-camp transport, and she shelters with Jakob in the attic of his store. Her job is to be cute and a tad brighter than Jakob who never quite realizes what he is getting himself into.

And so, you ask, isn't this a knock-off of *Life is Beautiful*? Well, no, the producers claim that *Jakob* was under production before they knew of Benigni's film. Just as well. Benigni's stature and deserved Oscar remain intact, and I can only hope that the Academy has the good sense to ignore *Jakob the Liar*.

We have a film not just set in a ghetto, but actually filmed in a real ghetto untouched since Nazi times. It's populated with fat, happy Jews who would probably have been overweight even pre-wartime. To see Alan Arkin, tanned and healthy, barter a stick of bread for half a potato goes beyond belief. The waif is always clean, always bright, always alert. Williams, unable to pass up a chance at exercising his mimicry, feigns a radio broadcast in which he plays the BBC announcer and Sir Winston Churchill, among others. The most scathing review of this scene I have read to date called it "Good Morning, Birkenau!".

By the film's end, the Russians are near, and it's time for the Nazis to empty the ghetto. By now, Jakob has been shot, and his character remains only as a voice-over narration telling us that the townsfolk were never seen again. But he can't stop there, no, we get the alternative ending where the train is saved by Russian invaders and the trainload of doomed Jews gets a USO band serenading the *Beer Barrel Polka*.

The people from that ghetto did not come back. Robin Williams has tried to make a happy film about the Holocaust and only managed to demonstrate just how shallow a man he is. Even his press conference after the premiere was a joke-fest, something which, mercifully, we at the repeat screening audience were spared.

This film should not have been made.

The Big Kahuna

USA / John Swanbeck

Screenplay by Roger Rueff from his play "Hospitality Suite"

Rating: *****

At last! A film that had me stepping back even as I watched it in appreciation of the acting, the script and the direction. Easily my best of the festival. [I did not attend *American Beauty*, Kevin Spacey's other film this year, because it was due to open imminently in theatres. It won the Popular Choice for Best Film.]

This is a story about salesmen and their need for customers, stature and recognition. Larry (Spacey) and Phil (Danny DeVito) are old partners who are on the road again selling industrial lubricants at a trade show in Kansas City. Bob (Pete Facinelli) is a kid from the research labs who is along for the ride to lend some credibility and answer any unlikely technical questions. Phil and Bob have arrived first and set up the hospitality suite for their company, and it's a far cry from the spreads put out by the competition. Larry arrives and tries to make the best of a bad situation.

All of them are in search of a mystery client, a man none of them knows, but whose business will make or break their careers. Will he show up? Will he want to talk sales and product, or just schmooze? Three egos are on the line, and each reacts to the situation in a different way.

Larry has the killer instinct. He will home in on a customer with only one goal – sell that product. He's cynical and knows what works, but he's also at the top of his craft, a peak from which he will soon fall without a big sale. Phil is the old hand, the one who's seen it all and lets a lot of Larry's cynical criticism wash over him. He's the low-pressure man to close up the details of a sale once Larry has the customer on his hook. Bob is so naïve it hurts – a straight arrow for whom the most important message is not the sale, but his belief in God. So intent on his mission is our Bob that he turns a conversation with the elusive client into a pitch for Jesus rather than selling his own product.

At the Q&A, Spacey and Rueff commented that the three are really one character at different points in his career – the young know-it-all, the middle-aged cynic who gets the business in spite of himself, and the world-weary senior partner who sees more than he lets on, and saves his energy for the things that count. Comparisons to that other stage salesman, Willy Loman, are inevitable, but here we see the great salesman as he might have been before the world passed him by.

Spacey outlined the origins of *The Big Kahuna* during the Q&A. The play dates from 1991, and was a script he had always wanted to work with. John Swanbeck, an old friend and theatre director came into the project, and Rueff reworked his script for the screen. The 16-day shooting schedule overlapped Spacey's rehearsal for his role as Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* in New York, and DeVito came into his role as a replacement only a week before shooting. Many scenes required only one take thanks to the skill and preparation of the actors and director. In spite of the difficult schedule and low budget, the film is a wonderful, moving piece of acting.

Guinevere

USA / Audrey Wells

Rating: ***

Audrey Wells directs her first feature from her own screenplay, an exploration of the dynamics of a May-December romance. Harper Sloane (Polley) is the 20-year old daughter of affluent lawyers, and she is destined to Harvard Law School. How this is possible strains credulity as she has passed through life utterly unable to form an opinion or make an intelligent comment about anything. At her older sister's wedding, Harper is attracted to the 50-year old photographer, Connie (Stephen Rae), who does this sort of thing to make ends meet between his more-artistic efforts. He has been making ends meet a lot lately.

Connie is a man with an *idée fixe*, a desire to mold a young girl in his image, to bring out the artist in her, indeed the artist he may never himself be. She is to be his *Guinevere*, his idol and protégé, provided that she will stay with him for five years. There is an unsettling, manipulative side to Connie's character that, no doubt, has wrecked a series of affairs through his life. In some ways, those Guineveres are prey as much as companions for Connie, and none has stayed the course. We meet many of them, and from the similarity of their ages, it's clear that the relationships self-destruct as each woman's fascination with Connie's attention is replaced by resentment of his desire for control.

Connie cannot accept women on their own terms and seeks out those who enjoy the flattery and attention of an older man. He wants Harper to grow as an artist, but she's a flower that must grow to his specifications, and she must not grow too much. Meanwhile, the trick he's turned so many times is wearing thin, and a self-destructive streak, never far from the surface, takes hold.

This is a romance whose characters are fascinated by each other's superficial natures, and they are incapable of growing together. Harper has no experience of her own, no life, no character to add to the relationship. Connie is long-set in his ways and seeks to groom only a fantasy rather than a new partner. By the end of the film, Harper has learned some much-needed independence and Connie is dying. The dénouement in which he is saluted by his many women is a sequence only a "Connie" could dream up, that they could all still care enough to give him a fond sendoff to the next world.

The success of this film turns on the acting. Polley rises to the task of turning the empty-headed Harper into a woman who grows through her experience. Stephen Rae makes Connie likeable enough for us to care about his problems. The Irish accent probably helps – who can hate someone with such a warm smile and charming voice? But he is a tragic figure, a man caught in an endless pursuit of the woman of his dreams.

TOPS & bottoms

Canada / Christine Richey

Rating: **½

Christine Richey is no stranger to the dark underbelly of society. Her previous documentary, *In the Gutter and Other Good Places* (1993), sensitively examined the life of street people, a world little understood and much maligned by conventional society. In *TOPS & bottoms*, Richey explores the history, practice and social context of sadomasochism.

The need for structure, for someone to be "top dog" and others to be their followers, has probably existed as long as humanity itself. Some consent willingly, or are seduced, into being followers, while others must be coerced, painfully if need be. Suffering as a path to redemption, and pain either self-inflicted or as a willing recipient has a long history integral to Christianity. Practitioners of S&M pervert this social structure by taking control of it, by defining their roles and emphasizing the pleasures both physical and psychological of the TOP/bottom relationship. These are the central themes of Richey's film.

TOPS & bottoms is an ambitious project which follows three broad tracks in its exploration of the S&M world. One is the historical context. The practice and imagery of pain in religion goes back millennia, and the willing participation in S&M games with sexual overtones has been depicted in artworks and photographs for centuries. These games, however, did not have society's official stamp, and such illustrations were not widely available. S&M parlours where men could act out (or have acted out) their fantasies date back well into the 19th century.

The second thread we follow is the personal relationship. Contact ads for men and women seeking various forms of S&M play are now easy to find both in print and in telephone services, and fetish clubs provide public venues for the more public leatherfolk to see and be seen. But there are also the private relationships. We meet a couple, Robert and Mary Dante, who live as Master and slave, a relationship which both clearly enjoy deeply. Although Mary is a masochist reveling in her pain and servitude, she is Robert's intellectual equal.

A new slave, Mercedes, is introduced to the household, and we learn how she sees this as an alternative family context in which she can feel secure, a relationship where that security is more important than any sexual play. This arrangement is a difficult one, and by the film's end, Mercedes has broken her slave contract leaving Robert embittered with a deep sense of betrayal.

Finally, we have the sociopolitical context. Richey argues that phenomena such as the rise of Hitler reveal a deep need by society to be controlled. Everyone is controlled, and has, in turn, someone else who is lower in the social structure with dark consequences which we see repeated to this day. In the business world, we have the capitalists and the workers (to use the film's own black hat, white hat language) where industry exploits workers on whom it is in turn dependent. These are the weakest of the arguments in *TOPS & bottoms* because they fail to recognize the unbalanced power structure of the state or the enterprise with subjects and workers. Coercion and subjugation (physical or economic, it makes little difference) are quite different from willing submission.

TOPS & bottoms does not provide detailed answers to the "why" of S&M play and culture, but rather the context in which it has always existed. The most significant shift in our times is the public nature of such activity and the embrace of its imagery by mainstream culture. Richey argues that eras in which sexual liberalism flourish, such as the Europe of the 1920s and the Weimar Republic, may be a precursor to a new darkness. My own difficulty with this thesis is that it avoids questions of cause and effect.

Technically, this film is well made with a daunting amount of material – both imagery and commentary – packed into its 80 minutes. Some associations, however, are less than ideal, especially a transition from the marching jackboots of Nazi Germany to the tender mercies of a professional Dominatrix in a Toronto S&M dungeon.

Liberalism of many kinds has flourished in politics, social philosophy, the arts and in the acceptance of unusual sexual practices. There will always be someone willing to suppress liberalism in behaviour in the name of social betterment and order, usually as an antidote to the social discomfort of economic depression or the threat of war. The existence and practice of S&M don't create Hitlers, they merely provide a convenient scapegoat, an "other" on whom the ills of society can be blamed.

Funding was provided by many sources, mainly public, with the lead coming from TVO who will screen *TOPS & bottoms* in mid-2000. The film opens commercially at the Carlton in Toronto on October 22 for a three-week run.

Saturday, September 18

Wonderland

United Kingdom / Michael Winterbottom

Rating: *1/2

Michael Winterbottom has directed a series of films both for the cinema and TV which, when they work, are compelling and gritty – the first episode of *Cracker*, *Butterfly Kiss*, and *Jude*. Over the top on occasion, but certainly dramatic. This cannot be said of *Wonderland* in which one wonders whether there was much of a script. It's the back-to-basics, let's see what we can do with super 16mm, natural lighting and location sound.

We're in South London following the lives of several characters which interweave in many ways. This goes on for four days, complete with intertitles announcing "Friday", "Saturday" and the almost audible sigh from the audience when we finally reach "Sunday". Nadia (Gina McKee) works in a café where she seems bored stiff, and seeks dates through an agency. They never work out, and it's not hard to guess why – there is no life, no sparkle in Nadia, and she is unwilling to make emotional contact with anyone. That's a problem with the characters in general – we need to care about them rather than watching them through their rather mundane daily lives.

Molly (Molly Parker) is pregnant and happy, but did we really need the on-camera birth of her child as one of the few emotional highs of the film? The birth is real enough, but its presence in the film feels like a contrived substitute for plot.

Winterbottom's films are often set in a post-Thatcher England among the lower classes never touched or uplifted by prosperity. They are the maladroits or the just-plain-ordinary folk who lead just-plain-ordinary lives. Maybe that's how Winterbottom sees merry old England these days, and it's a dark, uninspiring place to be. The problem with *Wonderland*, and by extension England itself, is that its characters are content to lead such bleak, uninspired lives. There may be a message – that England is not the "wonderland" it's made out to be – but at the end we shrug our shoulders and ask "So?".

A waste of good actors including Gina McKee. However, such is the magic of the Film Festival that I had only to wait for the next screening to set that aright.

Women Talking Dirty

United Kingdom / Coky Giedroyc

Screenplay by Isla Dewar based on her book

Rating: *1/2**

Women Talking Dirty arrives with a lot of baggage: Elton John provided the original music and shares the executive production credit with his lover, Jean Doumanian. This story and Elton John's visit seemed to pre-occupy the press during the festival while the film itself played second fiddle. It didn't deserve to.

Ellen (Gina McKee) and Cora (Helena Bonham Carter) are fast friends sharing all their secrets of life and love (hence the title, which is a titillating misnomer). Ellen is superficially the more sensible of the two (although a creative streak is clear in her work as a cartoonist) while Cora is a single mother with a focus barely on the current day, let alone her future. Daniel (James Purefoy), the great love of Ellen's life, is something of a ne'er-do-well who spends all his money on the horses and is perennially in hock to the bookies. He also happens to be the father of Cora's child, but this tidbit is not revealed to Ellen until late in the film when it almost destroys their friendship.

This is a wonderful light comedy that plays mainly for the grins rather than the belly-laughs. Ellen's neighbours include a delightful lady (Eileen Atkins) and a delicious elderly gay couple (Richard Wilson and Julien Lambroschini) whose delightful presence give Ellen a wonderful set of friends and us, the audience, more characters to love. Great writing – this is a very literate bunch thanks to Dewar's script.

Bonham Carter's character is miles from the porcelain figurine we know from earlier costume epics, and her off-the-wall look allows McKee to shine as the beauty of the film. A marvelous contrast to her role in *Wonderland*, the immediately preceding screening.

Oh yes – the music track's great too.

The Last September

Ireland/United Kingdom / Deborah Warner

Adapted from the novel of Elizabeth Bowen by John Banville

Rating: **

Oh sigh. The English in Ireland. What a sorry lot. A bunch of upper class twits hanging onto their land and power with the help of the Black & Tans while the day to day business of flower arranging continues uninterrupted.

In *The Last September* we have the final days before partition, the rebels are making life miserable with assassinations and general harassment, while the gentry, here represented by the wasted talents of Michael Gambon and Maggie Smith, go about their affairs as if the rebellion is a far-away annoyance. Sir Richard Naylor (Gambon) and his wife, Lady Myra (Smith), live in their country house. Enter their niece, Lois, an English Captain and a republican on the run from the army. The predictable triangle: the Captain loves the beautiful niece, the niece loves the republican. She is more than a little out-of-it when it comes to the reality of warfare, and the republican is found by the simple expedient of following the niece.

Beautiful to look at, but with two-dimensional characters. There is a hint that Sir Richard may know more about the military operations afoot in Ireland than he lets on, but this thread is never explored. Lady Myra tends to her flowers. Lois is a foolish romantic girl utterly out of her depth. With this demonstration of intelligence, it's no wonder the English lost Ireland.

Deborah Warner is an experienced theatre director, and *The Last September* is her first feature film. Unless she can get better scripts, it should be her last.

A very disappointing end to the 1999 festival.
