

Steve's Film Festival Reviews 1987

[These reviews were originally written as daily postings to a long-dead BBS called Artworks. It operated with two, yes two dial-in phone lines for typewriter style posts. I have left in remarks about screenings people might catch to preserve the flavour of the original. Here, the postings are assembled in one document.]

I don't know if this is a sign of old age or what, but I actually find myself agreeing with NOW's John Harkness about a film.

"Wish You Were Here", directed by David Leland, GB, 1987.

Emily Lloyd stars as a rather headstrong if confused girl in her late teens who is rebelling against a stuffed-shirt father in a small town during the fifties in southern England.

The rebellion stems from her mother's death several years earlier, but we are given little material to bridge the time interval and to understand why she (and not her sister) reacted as she did.

This is a film with a lot of wonderful scenes, but I am not content with it overall, and it particular the ending which immediately after setting up what will be either a reconciliation or confrontation between daughter (with newborn child) and father, cops out with a shot into the sun of daughter holding her baby aloft. The writer/director seems not to have come to terms with his own material here. (By the way, Leland was a co-author of "Mona Lisa".)

Emily Lloyd makes a strong debut here, but I want to see her in a role with some real meat on it.

The film screens again today at 11:00 (I think) and will probably show up commercially next year.

As a postscript to the above, I should mention that NOW/Harkness points out that the film I just reviewed would be considered obscene under the new legislation because it concerns a minor who is involved in sexual liaisons. After last night's rout of the provincial Tories, I cannot wait for the feds to go next. It was almost worth the NDP losses to see the Tories pounded.

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As a warning to any festival goers who do not have the updated schedule, GET ONE. MANY screening times/dates/locations have been changed since the tentative list published a few weeks ago in the Sun.

Yer peripatetic (which by next week should read pathetic) reviewer will try to keep you up to date on what he's seen. Screenings start today at 9:30 am.

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"Johnny Monroe"/France/1987.

A first feature by Renaud Saint-Pierre who has been working in various media and formats for many years.

This was an excellent film to start my day at the festival, and well worth going to a 9:30 am screening (you will get another chance next Friday at 6:30 pm at the Showcase). This is an "odd couple" film with a few subplots, but not anything like that phrase might imply. The title character is a brash, 4-foot tall man of the streets, 27, who is befriended by a rather well-off 26-year-old man who has spent a great deal of life socially crippled by being mute (the result of a childhood accident).

If you wanted to be nasty, you could be trite and say that each learns a lot from the other in the night they spend together, but that type of analysis assumes that this sort of thing can't be well done. In this case, it is. Well worth seeing.

"Hullabaloo Over Georgie and Bonnie's Pictures"/GB/1979. A Merchant/Ivory production (see also "Room With a View" and "Maurice").

This film is part of the Buried Treasure series, and so you're not going to see it popping up on your screens. It is a wry comedy about that well-mined topic, the western fascination with India, but made before it became a commonplace video and film cliché. The plot concerns the machinations of art collectors/buyers who are anxious to get their hands on a matchless collection of classical Indian paintings. One is an American, with all the drive and avariciousness that term implies (at one point, there is a line about the collection being sold off to some millionaire from Buffalo, an unexpected local reference). The other is "Lady G.", an Englishwoman whose social standing was once greater when she was related to the then imperial power structure. Played by Peggy Ashcroft, she is a woman still aware of the importance of being British, but without quite the means to pull it off.

Both are guests of the maharajah (nicknamed Georgie by his governess) in a palace rather larger than most apartment buildings in this city. Georgie and his associates have great fun leading on the foreigners about the availability and fate of the collection. A nice, low-key social satire better suited to TV (for which it was made) than the big screen, but worth having seen if only to compare to other Indiana floating about.

"The Serpent's Way"/Sweden/1986.

This film, directed by Bo Widerberg, was described in this morning's Globe as being just what you always expected a Swedish movie to be like. That is not really fair as it implies a certain amount of unnecessary tedium and angst. The film paints a rather bleak image of late 19thC life in rural Sweden where the exploitation of people within the merchant/farmer/worker framework is so institutionalized, it literally passes from father to son and mother to daughter.

(Sorry about the typos people, it's late and I am not going to fix them up.)

[I fixed the typos in the consolidation.]

It could be said, loosely, that good wins out in the end, but it would be more accurate to call it a draw with some divine intervention to even up the odds a little. The entire film is character study -- people who are what they are and do not or cannot overcome their position in life or their inherited attitudes. Very strong acting and direction without those deadly lulls which befall so many movies of this sort.

Not for the thrill a minute crowd.

"Diary of a Mad Old Man"/Netherlands/Belgium/France/1987.

Directed by Lili Rademakers.

This film, adapted from a Japanese novel to a modern-day European setting where all the actors speak English giving us a rather confused cultural reference point, is not about a madman at all. In fact, the title character is quite sane, if now mute due to a stroke, and we learn a lot about him in extensive flashbacks. His obsession is his daughter-in-law, an alluring creature who uses his regard to her own benefits (some would certainly say selfish ends).

This film will have different effects on an audience depending on where your sympathies lie. The old man's obsession has clearly been around a long time before the onset of his illness (initially a pinched nerve in the neck which begins the humbling of an otherwise vigorous man), and our reaction to it varies with his age. His daughter-in-law clearly knows what she is doing, and her exploitation of him is brutal, but always erotically charged. (He loves it, we suspect.)

We're dealing here with a youth and age film, but well done once you get past the odd sensation that the print is dubbed (I think some of it is post-synch to cover accents of some actors, but they do seem to be speaking English. One of them actually changes from an English to a slightly French accent part way through the picture -- she finds her own voice, you might say.) A must for the foot fetishists among you.

"Slam Dance"/USA/1987/Directed by Wayne Wang.

After four films, I needed something purely commercial to let my brain air out a bit (we'll leave two hours of Japanese tax evasion for Saturday morning). This film, very unlike Wang's "Dim Sum", is a moderately exciting thriller of the good guy gets framed by cops/bigshots for murder of beautiful girl variety. I've given away some of the premise, because actually this starts out as a "man caught in a web of events", but the web untangles most of its strands by the midway point leaving it up to us (and our hero) to get out of the mess. Lots of good editing and enough characters to give us 90 minutes worth of subplots; however, at the end it's only the subplots we have left to think about as our hero does survive, but many loose ends are left over including the whole collection of baddies who set this thing in motion. (A few get offed, but it's the small fry.)

Having aired out my brain, I took it home to Max Headroom (see earlier item).

Oh yes. The Lille tramway shows up in "Johnny Monroe" which was my favourite film of the day, not because it was first, or had a streetcar, or had my father's namesake for its title, but because it was the best.

Sept 12, 1987

I arrived at the Varsity this morning to find that "A Taxing Woman", Juzo Itami's latest (see also "Tampopo" now playing and "The Funeral"), was sold out for its 9:30 am screening. I'll have to wait for commercial release, or hope that the festival schedules a third screening at a time I'm free.

"The Theme"/USSR/1979.

This film was suppressed for several years by the Soviet government because its theme is the compromise between state art and its demand for safe mediocrity, and great, independent, personal art which the state may dislike and discourage. The film is interesting, with a wry sense of humour, and I am sure that it means a lot to people who spend their every waking moment worrying about artistic freedom. Unfortunately, it is flawed by a rather unfocussed and melodramatic ending which, I will admit, may have itself been an artistic compromise. Art imitating art imitating life. There are a lot of fine performances here, but the scale is very much the sort of thing we expect for television in the west. Small, conversational scenes. As you can tell, I basically liked the film, but would not go out of my way to see it again.

"The Thief of Bagdad"/USA/1924.

This is one of the gems of the festival this year. A restored tinted print accompanied by a live orchestra playing the original 1924 score. Yes, Fairbanks hams it up, but it's great fun, and a tour de force for its time. The battles with the giant lizard, the spider and a bat which owes a lot to Mickey Mouse are hilarious to us who are StarWar-ed to death on special effects. The score has no great themes which lived much beyond the theatre, but it was much more appropriate than the compendium of bits from the Sheherezade which has accompanied this film in other venues.

Next year is the 50th anniversary of the international film archives federation, and a lot of good stuff will no doubt show up at the 88 festival. If you are a silent buff, watch for it!

Sept 13, 1987

"World Drums"/Canada/1987. "Juju Music"/Canada/1987.

These two films were double billed in that next-to-most appalling of theatres, the Cumberland 3. (The Cumberland 4 is the worst by far.) The sooner the festival gets out of these houses the better.

Notwithstanding this complaint, "World Drums" is by far the best I have seen so far at the festival. (Now I will admit a little bias here as I am rather fond of percussion, and of the efforts of John Wyre, who plays with Nexus, to explore various new musical realms.) Having said that, the film is a treat not just because of Wyre, whose production of the World Drummers' Festival at Expo this film documents, but because of the sensitivity of the director, editor and all others involved to the music.

This is a Rhombus Media production for the NFB, and Niv Fichman has done himself proud here (a much better film than his treatment of "Blue Snake" last year). We are caught up in the excitement of drummers from all over the world meeting and hearing each other's music for the first time, as well as Wyre's dream of hearing them all playing together in a grand finale to his festival.

This film generated great excitement in the audience with several bursts of spontaneous applause which came because the filming of individual performances was so involved with the feel of the music and the dance. Tumultuous applause at the end. This film has a stereo track according to its credits which we did not get to hear courtesy of the archaic sound system in the Cumberland.

Very highly recommended.

"Juju Music" suffered by following "World Drums", and by being screened with the audio about 20DB above a reasonable level for the film (not to mention the audience). This is a co-production of several agencies, many Canadian, directed by Jacques Holender, about the hot hot new musical form in Nigeria, Juju. Lots of performance footage, a bit of local history and colour (no joke intended there) which seem to have been stuck in to placate the National Geographic, one of the co-sponsors.

This film has about 30 minutes worth of material which is stretched into an over-long performance film. The biggest problem is that the filming and editing just don't move with the beat the way that "World Drums" does. Very static in places where some fast cutting would do wonders. The other big problem is the cultural gap between the filmmaker and his subject. The oddities of the society in which an African pop star operates are set up as amusing and a bit extravagant or bizarre, when they are merely different. A disappointing film, even if the sound had been turned down.

"Barfly"/USA/1987.

To start off my fourth day at the festival, I needed something fairly light and commercial (one can handle only so much angst in one day; it's all a matter of pacing). As its title implies, this is a film about people who hang around in bars and who have very little visible means of support (except the occasional guardian angel). The film starts and ends with a fight between the title character and the barkeep (this is something of a leitmotif in the film).

In between, our hero, played by Mickey Rourke, at least I think he was acting, meets up with a fellow souse in the form of Faye Dunaway. I can almost believe her as this character, and she's a reasonably good, if classy drunk, but when she wakes up in the morning, she's Faye Dunaway again.

Rourke's character is based on a real person named Charles Bukowski who is supposed to be the perpetually drunken philosopher/author which inspired the script in the first place (he gets the screenplay credit for his own bio, for God's sake). The film, despite a few lapses in continuity (how do these people get cleaned up so fast after brawls/hangovers/etc?), is a nice character piece. Not a bad start to a day.

"Une Flamme Dans Mon Coeur" (A Flame in My Heart)/France-Switzerland/1987.

The latest from Alain Tanner is a film about obsession, and in particular the obsession for being in love/being loved. It starts out reasonably enough with an actress, one assumes fairly successful, whose ex (ten times yet) boyfriend is still pursuing her. They have one last fling (a few times), and then she moves out to a hotel (to avoid him). It takes all of a few minutes for loneliness to set in, and she picks up a reasonably decent chap on the metro. Turns out he's in journalism, and she falls madly in love. (She loves anyone who kisses her between the thighs.

In *Barfly*, Faye would hook up with anyone with a fifth of booze. I'm not sure which approach is the most preferable or successful.) Her new love has to go off for a business trip for two weeks, and at this part, our heroine falls apart before our eyes. We are no longer quite so unsympathetic to her ex-boyfriend's claim that she can't survive without him. Anyhow, the film spirals down from this point while we watch her fall apart and apart and apart.

Her own obsession becomes the film's obsession (there really isn't any other character around for us to follow), and it becomes one long tedious wait for the end (which came nearly 30 minutes after the advertised ending time in the program). A very self-indulgent film which will quickly be added to the films by Tanner which do not get seen in Toronto.

"Sous le Soleil de Satan" (Under Satan's Sun)/France/1987. Directed by and co-starring Maurice Pialat, with Gerard Depardieu in the principal role.

This is a film about faith, about a priest's inability to marshal his own inner strength, and his uncertainty about the source of any power he might have. To go into a complex discussion of the plot would be counter-productive and would occupy far too much of your time (the N key would get a good workout). This is a film which shows us a man who feels he has been tempted by the Devil, and is forever unsure of whether any benefit he brings to others through his care and insight is rooted in heavenly or hellish guidance.

A very philosophical film which could use a bit of cutting in the second reel when a subplot's main character has an eight minute long monologue of absolutely no interest to anyone in the theatre (or to the other character, for that matter). Can't help having the feeling something got left out to tie this into the rest of the film.

Good but flawed.

"Repentance"/USSR/1984.

This film is now being hailed as the beginning of the artistic "perestroika" in the Soviet Union and has been seen by 12 million people since its release four months ago. The film is an uncompromising attack on the Stalinist tradition made by a Georgian filmmaker, Tengiz Abuladze.

It begins as a wry comedy in which the recently deceased mayor of a town (who is himself a cross between Stalin and Mussolini with a Hitlerian moustache thrown in for spice) keeps turning up having been exhumed by persons unknown. The story darkens, however, when we flash back into his history as mayor through an era of artistic simplification, persecution of any opposition, and irrational arrests of the citizenry.

There are some haunting, surreal scenes in this film in which mock trials are held in the oddest of circumstances with medieval guards to keep the folks in line. Justice (in white gown with scales and sword) goes off into the bushes for a conference with the protagonist of the scene who would be at home as an apologist for the worst of Reagan's cronies. The film ends with a strong pro-Church statement capping a theme which has been running throughout.

At 2 1/2 hours, it is a long film to sit through, but a landmark in attacks on totalitarianism. The great irony is that work on the script started while Brezhnev was in office, and the film was finished before the era of "glasnost". It was an "arrested film" for over two years until a review of such works was undertaken with the blessing of the new regime. Another great irony is that I am certain that if as vicious an attack were mounted on the ancestors of an American Government, the director would be banished as "un-American". (Save your hate mail, I know that there is a fundamental difference between the two systems, but the tyranny of the right is a little hard to take anywhere.)

Cannon has picked up the distribution for this, and so it may show up on the art house circuit. I should mention that the film, despite its ending, clearly argues that the state's sins of the past have NOT been repented for, and probably won't be.

"Matewan"/USA/1987/directed by John Sayles.

This has to rank among the best of Sayles work, and particularly when one considers that this is a "very low budget" film. Every penny is on the screen. And that is in no small part the doing of Haskel Wexler, the cinematographer.

The story concerns the beginning of the mining union wars in West Virginia in 1920. The miners' union is just trying to get a foothold, and the mining company (the worst collection of black hats I've seen recently -- nice guys who would sell their own grandmother for a profit) will stop at nothing including murder to block them. For advocates of laissez faire capitalism, this is not a movie I would recommend because it shows just how bad (it is essentially a true story) things have been within our parents' lifetimes when the government is in favour of whatever is good for business, and to hell with anyone else.

This is not, however, a preachy, left-wing diatribe about the noble miners (although I wouldn't have minded just a few more warts on the good guys) vs the dastardly mine owners. I suppose that my viewpoint as a Canadian, and as a left-winger at that, is not quite the same as a "typical" American's might be, and I will be intrigued to see how this film does south of the border.

Sayles himself as a nice scene as a God-fearing preacher for whom unionism, socialism and communism are all works of the devil. The frightening thing about watching him is that what he is talking about has an uneasily modern ring to it.

An excellent acting job all-round from many actors. A must see for any fans of Sayles' work, and worth it even if you voted Tory on Sept 10th. It is worth remembering at a time when everyone seems to be grumbling about unions just why they were formed in the first place and the almost feudal conditions under which some people worked earlier in this century.

"Vincent"/Australia/1987/directed by Paul Cox.

This film has received a lot of press and so I won't dwell on it too much. It deserves the praise it has been getting, but I will warn the thrill seekers among you that this is truly an artists' film, and one which demands that the audience watch, and see, and listen.

Almost the entire sound track consists of John Hurt reading Van Gogh's letters (in English translation) while the camera almost literally paints the landscape as Van Gogh came to see it. The film is mainly scenery (oh but what scenery) for the first half because the letters it contains predate Van Gogh's most productive period as a painter.

Nonetheless, the scenes give us the opportunity to see the world, the light, as he saw them. Almost everything is in muted tones and dark frames, and the riot of colour which springs out of the paintings in the second half is all the more stunning for it. This is a film for anyone with an eye to be opened to the world around them, and with the heart to share both an artist's hope and eventual despair.

A poetic film deserving a poetic review.

"Maurice"/GB/1987/a Merchant/Ivory production.

This is the latest from the team which brought us "A Room With a View", and it marks the 25th anniversary of their partnership. "Maurice" is, like its predecessor, an adaptation of a novel by E.M. Forster, but one which was not published until after his death because it is a homosexual love story. There is a wealth of fine performances here from what almost might be called the "Masterpiece Theatre Rep Company". The sexual material is beautifully handled and is, if anything, an example to the straight theatre in how to avoid excess.

Romance and joy rather than bare skin for its own sake.

Whether this film will hold its own in the theatres I am not sure given its content, its complexity, and its length (2:15). It will be a shame if it doesn't because it is a beautiful (yet not lavish) production which deserves screening in well-equipped houses (I saw it at the Uptown 1).

Must be seen unless you are a homophobe, in which case I will assume you have already hit the space bar to skip over this.

"A Prayer for the Dying"/GB/USA/1987 directed by Mike Hodges.

This film is a very well made thriller about an Irish assassin who's had enough, and who wants to emigrate to the US to get away from it all. To do this, or more correctly to get the bogus papers he will need, he has to do one last favour (a killing, of course). As if that isn't bad enough, the IRA is on his tail because he has gone AWOL, so to speak.

Mickey Rourke, who I saw earlier in the festival in/as "Barfly", is the assassin, and he's almost unrecognizable from the other film. Alan Bates has a juicy role as a mortician who is really a gangster I wouldn't want to meet, let alone turn my back on. Bob Hoskins is a priest who has the misfortune to witness the "last" killing and thereby becomes embroiled in the affair. I am not going to go any further into the plot (this is a thriller after all), but will say that this is an excellent example of how to make this sort of film.

Very good sound, with music that plays an important role in building mood (a Dolby track). If you go, (it is obviously going to be released commercially), do not miss the opening as it both sets the tone for what follows and establishes the lead character's reason for trying to escape his role. (At the end of the film, someone in front of me said, in a serious tone, "I don't know what he was trying to SAY with that film." Some people don't seem to understand that there are films made for their entertainment value first and foremost.)

"Jean de Florette"/France/1986/directed by Claude Berri.

This is the first of two films (the second, "Manon des Sources", is screening this weekend) made from a novel, itself adapted from a play, itself based on a story heard in childhood by Marcel Pagnol. This roundabout parentage (usually the kiss of death for a film) brings us a masterpiece which, in my humble (sic) opinion, is among the best of the fest this year. It has not had the advance press of other films such as "Vincent", and that's a true shame because the Uptown 1 was about half full this evening and should have been packed. The quality is on a par with or better than "Maurice" which did turnaway business the night before. ("Jean de Florette" repeats Thursday morning, and will be released commercially.)

It stars Gerard Depardieu in the title role of a well meaning, good (in the biblical sense of the word) man from the city who inherits a piece of land coveted by a neighbouring farmer (an almost unrecognizable Yves Montand). Despite his best efforts, Jean is doomed to failure because he does not know that the neighbours have dammed up a spring on his property with which his farm would blossom. Yes, it is a story of courage in the face of adversity, and for some people, that is not trendy enough these days. Too bad for them.

Wonderful sound (Dolby again) and photography (70 mm I think).

A must see film.

**"Korol Lir" (King Lear)/USSR/1970/directed by Grigori Kozintsev
based on Boris Pasternak's translation of the Shakespeare play.**

This is another in the Buried Treasure series at the Festival, and as such may be hard for you to find in a theatre. Taking full advantage of the medium (black and white cinemascope), Kozintsev makes the "stage" on which Lear is played out a forlorn, medieval, barren countryside -- all rocks and grass and overcast skies and wind amidst which stands a castle as impressive but cold as the country around it. Yuri Yarvet's Lear begins as a strong, if misguided King whose emotional disintegration does not come until his rejection by the second daughter, Regan, and the brilliant storm scene. This is truly a man raging against nature.

The text, necessarily, is not the full one, but in excellent taste the subtitles use the original English poetry which we know so well. Much is conveyed by setting, by the unspoken interplay between characters, by camera location and music -- all things unavailable in the theatrical setting on the scale possible in cinema. What is striking is that this is not just a costume epic, but a telling of "Lear" that is as heartbreaking as the original.

(The music, by the way, is by Shostakovich and lends an unearthly tone to the already bleak physical surroundings.)

If you ever have a chance to see this version, do not miss it!

"La noch de los lapices" (The Night of the Pencils)/Argentina/1987.

This film by Hector Olivera (probably best known here for his "Funny Dirty Little War") was introduced by him with the following story. When he went to his banker in his early days as a film-maker, the banker said "how can I lend you money, all you are making is dreams, and dreams don't sell". This film is not a dream, but a nightmare, Olivera said, and a memory of a period in Argentine history he hopes will never be repeated. The story is of a group of students who were agitators for a student bus pass just before the Junta took power. Not long afterward, they were all rounded up and all but one eventually "disappeared" (the one who survived is the source of the story which is, with minor artistic license, true).

It is a film about the stupidity and brutality of state terrorism, and it may strike those of us who live in such blissful times and places as being just a tad altruistic. (It is odd, somehow, that some of the most jaundiced people I know who feel that people get what's coming to them in politics live in a country where this sort of thing rarely happens.)

In this week's NOW, John Harkness complains that the first part of the film goes on at such length to portray the student leaders as cheery happy care-free sorts. That is just the point -- they were no threat to the government, but the government is rather stupid when it comes to seeing that. Anyone, ANYONE, who has ever offered dissent is a potential traitor.

Remember this when you read about infiltration of Quebec Labour Unions and Sikh temples. I don't support any or all of what happens with the militants among them, but if you are foolish enough to think that your name isn't on somebody's list somewhere, you don't understand how things work. The only bright side is that our government probably couldn't pull it off, but that won't stop them from trying if the times are right for it.

(A cheery paranoid editorial for a rainy Thursday afternoon.)

Well, gang, tonight was two world premiers, and what a contrast in styles, in attendance, in quality, in coverage.

"Rachel River"/USA/1987/directed by Sandy Smolan.

This is a quiet, "small" film which shows life in a small town in Minnesota over a few weeks, at most. There are many characters, but no single actor/actress walks away with the film -- this is an acting ensemble even though the scenes in which many participate at once are few. It is a film about loneliness which takes many forms, and about the ability to see that there is more to life than feeling alone.

I was disappointed to see only a 50% house in the Varsity II, and that was possibly due to the fact that the FofF did not stamp "premiere" all over it in the book and hustle the media to hype this screening. Several people associated with the production attended (and they actually sat through the screening), and I was pleased to add to the solid and sustained applause at the end of the film. Whether this film will play commercially, or end up on PBS, I don't know.

Definitely worth watching for.

(I omit a plot description mainly because not a lot happens -- this is mainly a character study and, to some extent, a memory play -- memory is often the hardest part of loneliness to bear.)

**"Baby Boom"/USA/1987/Directed by Charles Shyer.
Starring Diane Keaton, Sam Shepard and others.**

This is the most hyped event of the fest. Keaton herself attends (briefly, sans even a hello to the crowd). The lineup is enormous an hour before the screening, and the theatre is full 20 minutes before it starts. It is important enough that we get a projectionist at the Uptown who knows how to focus an image on the entire screen, not just one corner at a time. The media cover the arrival (and presumably departure) of the entourage, and the audience feels cheated before the film even begins because Keaton barely acknowledges us. Many (judging by the boos mixed in with the less than overwhelming applause from a 900+ seat house) felt likewise after the film ended, although I saw few walkouts during the screening.

I will get the premise and plot out of the way. Diane Keaton is a successful, ambitious management consultant, about to become a partner in her firm when out of the blue (almost literally) she inherits a 2 1/2 year old child (played by twins who do some of the best work in the film). After toying with putting the girl up for adoption (to a positively bleak, American Gothic couple from Duluth) decides to keep her. This leads inevitably to her leaving her job which she can no longer handle (time time time) and moving to Vermont. After moving into a beautiful, if in need of repair, house on 62 acres in Vermont, and living off her bank account, she gets into cooking (which she miraculously learned somewhere along the way) and voila -- designer baby food. It is discovered by two yuppie couples touring the small towns, and a national success is born.

Well, gang, this film holds up for about the first two reels by which time the baby jokes are wearing a bit thin. After the move to Vermont, the falling down house jokes are not milked as much, and Keaton has a nice "I've had it up to here" scene. But it's all romantic mush and a downhill ride from there. She meets a veterinarian (Shepard), falls in love, and refuses to part with her by now thriving business for scads of \$\$\$\$. It is really yuppie heaven in the second half to balance yuppie hell (the arrival of a child) in the first half. Should do well commercially, if only because Keaton is in the film.

Otherwise, a big disappointment. (Say goo goo to the camera everyone ...)

"Personal Services"/GB/1987/directed by Terry Jones.

"This film is not about Cynthia Payne" says a super at the outset, thereby provoking general mirth in the audience. The story is, shall we say, inspired by her, and her much publicized run-in with the British legal system concerning her alleged brothel.

What we have here is a hilarious comedy (mainly) about one of the stock characters of fiction, the prostitute with a heart of gold. Ms. Painter (the name of the character in the film) starts out running a string of flats rented by prostitutes, but graduates to a house of her own where her regulars (and a few newcomers) regularly come (sic) for their sensual pleasures. They are a mixed bag with a mixed bag of fetishes (some of which would be illegal to show under the proposed new legislation, even though this is a comedy).

Our heroine is eventually raided (an act in which a favoured few are judiciously let go by the coppers because to arrest them would make life rather uncomfortable), but it is clear at the ending that the state hasn't got a prayer of convicting her. I don't want to get into describing scenes both out of concern for the dignity of the board, and to avoid spoiling the jokes.

I think the best thing I can say about this film is that the jokes are good enough to make it worth seeing again, even though I know what's coming.

"Aria"/GB/1987/various directors.

This film takes an interesting premise, and shows how it can go awry. Take a bunch of renowned film directors and turn each of them loose to make a short using an operatic aria as the musical backdrop for a scene, narrative or otherwise. The problem is that too many of the directors want to do a star turn, and to make THEIR segment memorable. This produces some very uneven viewing because you ride up and down emotionally rather faster than you want to, and the hills on this roller coaster are steeper and the turns harder than we normally expect in movies. Individually, some of the segments are at the very least good, but there's too much self-indulgence from directors who want to stamp "ME" all over each frame. There are exceptions -- Bob Altman of all people gives us a bawdy restoration era audience (we never see the stage) who would be at home at "Rocky Horror", but the effect wears a little thin.

If anything, it proves that film directors don't know much about making videos.

And now some addenda to previous reviews:

"**A Prayer for the Dying**" has, according to today's Globe, been disavowed by the director, Mike Hodges, and the principal actor, Mickey Rourke after being edited by its US distributor. I would love to know why -- come one Globe, tell us more -- having seen the film myself.

"**Repentance**" will open at an unspecified date later this year. There is a fairly large piece about it in today's Globe, and I agree with the sentiments expressed there that such a film could not be made in the US where vicious satirical criticism of past governments just is not tolerated, much less state funded. An intriguing sidelight is that the film was made with the support of Edward Shevardnadze, now Foreign Minister, who was at the time head of the Georgian Republic which financed the work.

For the benefit of those of you who have seen "Tampopo" (one of my two favourites from last year's festival), Itami's "**The Funeral**" (which screened here two years ago and introduced him to Toronto audiences) will open in October. (You learn a lot talking to people in FofF lineups.)

"A Winter Tan"/Canada/1987/various directors (a co-op)

This film stars Jackie Burroughs (the main reason I stood in line so long to see it. I shouldn't have bothered. The pretext for this film is a book of letters by Maryse Holder which were published by Grove Press, excerpts from which were performed by Ms. Burroughs at an anti-censorship benefit in 1984.

I should have known that something was amiss when the film was introduced as being "unlike anything ever made before in Canada". Ya, well, maybe nobody has made a Canadian film in which an American woman spends her time slumming around Mexico looking for all the young well endowed men she can lay her hands (and any other part of her anatomy) on while writing graphic descriptions of her pursuits to a Canadian friend.

Maybe I'm just suffering from Festival burnout, but when I see yet another film about someone (man or woman) whose essentially self-destructive behaviour leads to depression and ends in death, I expect something more than a bitchy, boozy, slutty performance lasting 90 minutes. What motivated this woman to act as she did? She describes herself as "being on a holiday from feminism" in her pursuit of sex (an interesting concept that is never explored is just why sex and feminism are mutually exclusive to her).

Jay Scott gave the film a good review, but I think he must have been being uncharacteristically kind. It will open over the winter, and I am going to be interested to see how long, and in how many houses of what size it manages to attract an audience.

As an aside re FofF organization, I was particularly upset at the fact that a large number of people who were "friends of the company" managed to jump the long lineup (which

was already in a vile mood because the Varsity II was running late that evening). A large number of people who should reasonably have expected to get in (judging from their place in the line), waited nearly an hour, and were then unable to see the film because the theatre was full of hangers-on. This (aside from trepidations about quality) is one thing which will keep me away from screenings of Canadian films in the future -- if the cast and crew want to invite their mothers, ex-lovers, parakeets, etc., to a screening, let them have their own screening, or make them queue along with everyone else.

A waste of a Friday evening.

"Mauvais Sang" (Bad Blood)/France/1986/directed by Leos Carax.

This film is nominally about a few men who have an unspecified debt to pay off to a mysterious and dangerous American lady, and who concoct a scheme to steal a culture of a new virus (akin to AIDS, except that it is passed on by a caress) and sell it to a competing drug company for many \$\$\$ to settle the debt. This is what Hitchcock refers to as "the McGuffin", the thing which exist as the *raison d'etre* of the plot, but in which the audience has no interest. The only problem with this film is that there is little plot, and the whole virus business is only loosely worked out (almost an afterthought).

What makes this flick interesting is the camerawork -- it is 128 minutes of very clever and moody shooting, coloured film noir if you will. Otherwise, forgettable.

"La Mitad del Cielo" (Half of Heaven)/Spain/1986/directed by Manuel Aragon.

This film contains much fine acting including the lead actress Angela Molina. She plays a poor country girl who rises gradually to becoming the proprietress of a posh restaurant in Madrid frequented by high government officials (her big break is getting a job as a wet-nurse to the child of the Minister of Food whose wife died, and she milks (you can groan now) that connection for all it is worth). This is a woman whose ambition generally takes precedence over her passion, although if they can both work to the same end, so much the better.

There is a subplot concerning her mother and daughter whose relationship symbolizes a connection to the old, rural beginnings, and which continues after the old woman's death. The film has a nice "feel" to it thanks in part to the cinematography of Jose Luis Alcaine, even if the plot travels a well-worn road.

"Manon des Sources" (Manon of the Spring)/France/1986/directed by Claude Berri.

This is the second half of the story begun in "Jean de Florette" which I reviewed earlier. I will not go into great detail except to say that this film is not quite up to the level of "Jean" mainly because we do not have the heroic and doomed struggle to propel the action, but rather have a working out of events which are already in motion. Yves Montand is again superb as Le Pepet, the patriarch of an almost extinct family in Provence whose dreams of regained social stature poison his life and lead to its ultimate tragedy.

Both films are beautifully photographed, and contain a wealth of bit parts with uniformly excellent acting. They are now playing in Montreal, and should open here later this fall. Try to see them in a big house with a good sound system.

"Un hombre de exito" (A Successful Man)/Cuba/1986/directed by Humberto Solas.

This is a film about a man who rises through the pre-revolutionary social and political world at the expense of his wife (whom he really doesn't love), his brother (who is a revolutionary) and other relatives whom he exploits as necessary for his own political gain. The film ends with the revolution, and we are unsure whether he will survive even that by exploiting the memory of his now-dead brother. My principal complaint about this film is that it spends the first 80 minutes or so detailing the era up to the early 40s, and then collapses the remaining time up to the revolution into the last 30 minutes.

The sudden loss of studied detail is quite noticeable and spoils the balance of the picture just when it should have its greatest effect.

There is a hilarious wartime scene in a night club in which we have a staged tribute to Spain's allies, the Nazis, which has to be seen to be believed. You must first imagine the waltz "Wiener Blut" transcribed for Cuban dance orchestra, and follow this with a pantomime of scantily clad (and very un-Aryan) ladies performing a montage of scenes from Wagner (swans and all) to the Tannhauser overture. This cultural burlesque is precisely the sort of thing which is lacking in the last third of the film -- not in the humorous sense, but in the attention to detail.

A good but flawed picture.

"Die Wannseekonferenz"
(The Wannsee Conference)/W. Germany/1986/Heinz Shirk.

This film does not invite applause even though its production is an act of some courage at a time when many people prefer to forget about events of the Nazi era. It is a reconstruction (from recorded minutes) of a meeting in Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin, on January 20th, 1942, at which the machinery for the "final solution" to the "Jewish problem" was set in motion.

The film is deeply troubling because there is a familiarity to the setting -- a meeting of high level bureaucrats who joust for their place in the scheme of things and who are certain that their own concerns have precedence. It is like any business meeting except for the topic of discussion.

The setting is the original house and room, the actors were chosen for their resemblance to the real characters, and many of the artefacts -- uniforms etc -- are originals, not copies. The inevitability of the decision is obvious from the preparations which have already been underway by the SS, and the meeting's purpose is principally to bring other parts of the government and military "onside" as we would say these days.

There are a few historical insights of which the strongest is the passion for dealing with the Jews which caused priorities to be skewed within the government. They were regarded as a "front" as real as the one in the Russian snow, and considerable materiel and support (such as trucks and trains) were pressed into service to transport people to the camps over the objections of people trying to resupply the army. Of particular irony is the attitude to Poland where the Nazis took advantage of the resident anti-semitism to assist and to hide their activities, but where they planned to wipe out the entire local population to allow settlement of the land by Germans after the war.

The current historical significance of this film is also to show how easy it is to discuss the unthinkable when you reduce it to a problem in logistics and public relations. Very much a message for our time, and any to follow.

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This brings me to the end of the 1987 Festival and my reviews. Many of the films I have commented on will open commercially over the next year, although some will probably (and deservedly) never see the light of day. I hope that you have found the reviews at a minimum interesting, and a contrast to the info provided by the press. I will now retire from Artworks for a while pending the eruption of some new political or (dare I hope?) artistic debate.