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 **Michael Giltz**
Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: September 21, 2009 12:23 PM

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Toronto Film Fest Day 7 and 8: The Homestretch

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I'm hitting the homestretch on Toronto. Six films in the last two days I'm here.

LEBANON ** out of **** -- The top winner at Venice, I was really looking forward to *Lebanon*, a film about the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as seen through the eyes of soldiers in one tank headed into enemy territory. I thought it might be a corker a la *Das Boot*. And while it's true I've never actually seen a film about an Israeli tank

crew, the movie proved unfortunately familiar. Actually, it came across like a play, thanks to the movie being set almost entirely inside the tank, with glimpses of the outside world coming through the viewfinder. The crew is the usual grab-bag of types, from the military regular to the raw recruit to the nervous gunner and the cynical weapons loader who always questions everything. These are the nicest soldiers imaginable: they are wary of using their weapons for fear of hurting civilians to the point of rebellion, discuss everything (even though the leader tries to shortchange this), try and protect a prisoner from a suspicious "ally" who wants to torture and probably kill the guy and even place a call to one of the guys' mother to assure her he's ok. No points for guessing which one of them doesn't make it. Not a patch on *The Hurt Locker*, the best war movie of the year so far.

NORTHLESS *** out of **** -- Another happy surprise. Again the times for some movies didn't work out and I randomly chose one of two movies that fit into my schedule. I believe it's the debut fiction film by documentary filmmaker Rigoberto Perezcano. In it, Andres spends the film trying to get across the border from Mexico to the US. On talk radio, such a journey is a piece of cake. But in real life, it's dangerous and scary. Andres is ripped off by a Coyote (a person who ferries across illegal immigrants) and abandoned in the desert. Picked up by patrols, he's just sent back via Tijuana. Then he tries again and again. Soon, Andres is ensconced at a local store near the border. The older female proprietor takes a fancy to him, but it's the shy younger female employee he seems to like more. But with a cot to sleep on and a job to give him a little cash, Andres owes too much to the owner to ignore her and they go out on a date. Apparently, exploitation doesn't take




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place just on the US side. Andres is a decent, kind man, hyper polite with a wife somewhere he sort of remains loyal to. But as both women take a shine to him, another local man (who probably likes the owner) decides to help get rid of Andres over the border so he won't have so much competition. It's a quiet, simple film that holds your attention and has a plaintive, memorable finale (though I'm not quite sure why Claire De Lune is the music cue).

I AM LOVE ** 1/2 or *** or maybe *** 1/2 or maybe ** out of **** -- Have I made it clear that you don't always know what you think about a film on a first viewing? *I Am Love* is a lush, Visconti-like Italian drama starring Tilda Swinton as the wife of a powerful businessman who takes over the family empire from the aging patriarch but must share duties with his less cynical, noblesse oblige of a son. Director Luca Guadagnino has made a string of films but I think this is the first one of his I've seen. On a technical level, it is masterful. Beautifully shot images, a cast that glides through their world like princes, with sound and image and production design and editing all working in concert to tell the story. Edoardo (a handsome Flavio Parenti) is the son with no interest for business. But when he's dragooned into a role, he becomes increasingly concerned with his father's desire to merge and grow and place economics ahead of the workers, fearing it is not what his grandfather would want and that the family is losing their soul. His mother (Swinton) meanwhile, begins a passionate affair with the chef Edoardo has befriended and plans to open an airy, mountain-top restaurant with as soon as the permits clear. It's another example of art (the chef has high standards and doesn't want to soil his cooking with crowds of people) trumping commerce. There's also a sister who falls in love with a woman but keeps it secret from the father because he wouldn't understand. It all builds to a gripping, operatic finale that is both silly (as finales in operas often are, with eight things happening at once) and quite moving. I was never bored, but the film is so arid and intellectual and removed, I felt I didn't really know the people I was watching. Why does Swinton have an affair? She seems perfectly happy with her husband. Is it unsatisfying, and why don't we know that? Or is she just drawn to the chef on a basic, passionate level? The sister only appears in a very few scenes and we barely know her. So why should we care that she approves of her mother's love (with tears streaming from her eyes) just because it, too, is illicit? Who are the other siblings, that appear in the background but barely register? Edoardo's wife is treated with indifference by everyone. Why? Is he attracted to the chef as well? A second viewing may reveal the glorious surface of the film covers up nothing. Or it may click more completely as a bauble, a gorgeous exercise in filmmaking that does indeed probe the heart of the upper class. There's no denying the power of that over-the-top finale or the moody epilogue during the end credits. Knowing where the film is headed, I might relax and accept the mysteries that are there. Certainly scene after scene is wonderful, the way the director uses every technique at his command to tell the story. I simply won't know where I stand until another viewing. And that itself is a compliment, since most movies aren't worth watching once.

SOLOMON KANE ** 1/2 out of **** -- A talky, sword and sorcery tale that is based on a character created by Robert E. Howard (the man who birthed Conan). The film had an ideal setting: it was the last movie I saw at the public Midnight Madness screenings. The audience is as enthusiastic as one could hope, the venue nice and the time perfect for a little mayhem after a day of art films. There's a lot to appreciate here. First, the film is serious and not silly, the way so many live action fantasy films can be. James Purefoy is fine as Kane, a rampaging warrior who is the second son of a nobleman kicked out of his home for refusing to become a priest. Turning to a life of violence, he becomes the fiercest warrior of the 1600s. But Satan is ready to claim his soul and that takes a man up. Kane retreats to a monastery to atone for his evil ways and renounces violence. But God has other plans. Kane is kicked out of the monastery but still sticks to nonviolence, even when it means robbers mug him and nearly beat Kane to death. He can withstand any pain, but when Kane befriends a family headed to the New World and finds them accosted by the supernatural thugs taking over Europe, he learns to slaughter again (for the side of good this time) and vows to rescue their daughter come what may. That's about it, with more thoughtful talk than you normally expect and the battle scenes pretty well done. There's a genuinely creepy scene with zombies underground and the digital effects are pretty well done. The whole film plays more like a pilot for a series rather than a complete work in and of itself, but no one can make a film like this anymore without visions of trilogies dancing in their heads. Not bad and since the genre is usually so wretched, quite welcome.

HUGH HEFNER: PLAYBOY, ACTIVIST, AND REBEL ** 1/2 out of **** -- Filmmaker Brigitte Berman delivers a 135 minute ode to Hugh Hefner with the emphasis on his wide cultural impact and genuine commitment to civil rights, rather than the naughty bits. Certainly, it's clear that Hefner and Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone* are by far the two most influential magazine publishers of the second half of the 20th century. They both played an outsize role in the culture, arriving at just the right time to let their personal obsessions flower into creativity and a genuine



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passion for good writing support many talented figures. Hef published Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* when no publisher was interested. His series of interviews were indeed iconic. Through his string of nightclubs and syndicated TV shows, he championed multi-racial acts like jazz legends Lamberts, Hendricks and Ross when network TV wouldn't go near them. Comedian Dick Gregory was perhaps the first black comic to break out to a white audience (and paved the way for Richard Pryor and countless others) via the Playboy clubs. And paramount of course was Hef's demolition of sexual fear by making clear that both men and women liked sex, thought about sex and enjoyed sex. Hardly ground-shaking today but a revolution in the Fifties. I was especially fascinated by the syndicated variety show *Playboy's Penthouse*, which ran for only one year but had a disarming structure and loads of top club talent like Tony Bennett and Sammy Davis Jr. The film shows Hef losing touch with the times when feminism grows dominant in the Seventies. He is confounded that women might think Playboy was denigrating to women -- what's wrong with looking at a lovely girl? But even here, Hef is allowed to reflect on it today and speak intelligently about the issue and admit that at the time he just didn't have the words to explain his ideas. He's much stronger when talking with Mike Wallace in the Fifties or Sixties and insisting that Playboy is not smut. The film is certainly kind to Hef and its emphasis on his influence on the culture is convincing. But it repeats his commitment and support of civil rights (and how that played out in his empire) again and again and again, along with his love of board games. A recognition of the company's downturn in the Eighties and early Nineties is nice, but they give the impression that *Playboy* is back on top, when in fact the company has reduced its number of issues, fired much of the staff and seems on its last legs thanks to free porn on the internet and other factors buffeting the magazine industry. This isn't a business film, but those omissions feel misleading. Certainly with a good 30 minutes cut out of it, the film would be brisker and not lose even a tiny bit of relevant info. I'd love to hear Hef's explanation of why he didn't make the obvious step of launching *Playgirl* (that was a competitor) and how that might have buttressed his argument that sex can be enjoyed by everyone and that women should be able to look at naked men just like men should be able to look at naked women. But all in all, an interesting work.

COLE ** out of **** -- The festival ended for me the way it began, with an independent film that may or may not get a theatrical release but is classic fest fare, this time a coming of age story. Cole (Richard de Klerk) is a college age kid living in the very small town of Lytton (population 350) but dreams of becoming a writer. When Cole gets accepted into a summer writing program at a tiny college three hours away, he's thrilled, but his harried sister is wary. Her dreams have been so tamped down she doesn't like to see anyone else have any, either. Besides, who's gonna help her run the gas station, look after her son from a previous relationship and their catatonic mom who either sits in her chair staring off into space or wanders out onto the highway? But Cole is determined to go no matter what. Cole's buddy Frogger (the corporately named Michael Eisner) supports him, in a way. Frogger is classic best bud in a small town: he's a screw-up who spends his days getting drunk but he wants Cole to follow his dream, even if Frogger isn't quite sure what that is and probably hasn't read a book since *Cat In The Hat*. Cole makes the trek to class and soon falls hard for fellow classmate Serafina (Kandyse McClure), who is lovely and has wealthy parents who look down on Cole's blue collar background. The melodrama piles on from here, with Serafina offering nothing I can discern to Cole (their first "date" involves her using Cole to get out of the house and meet friends and they don't really bond over anything except his nephew). Cole's sister has a redneck boyfriend who abuses her and hates her son, saying so many disparaging things about the little boy it beggars belief that she would stay with him, codependency or not. The events pile on, all of it ringing increasingly false, with the standard Americana soundtrack of indie bands not helping when it comes to avoiding the indie film cliches. The saving grace here is de Klerk, who has had small roles in *Supernatural* and *Stargate SG-1*. He can't manufacture any real reason for Cole and Serafina to be together, but his quiet, steady presence anchors the film nonetheless. Cole has to learn to do what's best for himself, even if that means hurting his sister and best friend, because they're hurt by actions that shouldn't bother someone who really loves him. Still, Cole has to push away from them to a degree and de Klerk does that with an innate decency that makes clear Cole has no other choice. Cole may not make it as a writer (the only piece we hear is far too freighted with portent for us to get a sense of his talent) but de Klerk has proven he has the charisma of a leading man.

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