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Toronto Film Fest Days 1 And 2: Midnight Madness

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DAY ONE

I've just arrived at the Toronto International Film Festival -- which runs through September 19 -- and I'm already falling behind. Travel snafus mean I missed the first and sometimes only press screenings of movies like *The King's Speech* and a few other key films. Yikes!

I rushed out to a 9 p.m. unofficial screening of *Conviction* at a theater located far, far away from the main fest, which means a \$22 Canadian cab ride each way when money is very tight this trip. The cabbie told me business has been slow since the film festival LAST

YEAR. But this Middle eastern gentleman said rightly "It's a world-wide recession and we all just have to hang on and wait it out." Yep, and that \$22 is coming out of my children's college fund. (I hear the same thing in NYC where cabbies and limo services say business is way, way down and apparently never returning.)

CONVICTION ** out of ****

This drama based on a true story tells the remarkable story of a woman (Hilary Swank) who knows her brother (Sam Rockwell) has been wrongly sentenced to life in prison for murder. So she spends the next decade or so of her life getting her GED, a college degree and a law degree all while trying to dig up evidence to exonerate him. The easy dig is that it's a Lifetime movie. But I like director Tony Goldwyn, who always brings out fine performances from his actors. His debut *A Walk On The Moon* is a real

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sleeper and *The Last Kiss* is a good Zach Braff film with a great supporting turn by Casey Affleck. Here again, Goldwyn works with subtlety. I love the casting all around: everyone in the film looks real, even the movie stars (like Minnie Driver as Swank's law school pal and soon best friend) but especially all the supporting roles like her sons. And opportunities for high drama are quietly sidestepped. But none of this can compensate for a story that can be easily predicted after the first five minutes. The only question is where Swank is headed towards another Oscar, since this has Oscar bait written all over it. Certainly a nomination appears inevitable. But let's hope Rockwell gets considered too if Oscar votes take the movie to heart. He's worked a long time and often been very good, so his affecting turn here as a bit of a loser who only has his sis to depend on deserves any attention it gets, even if the movie does let them both down. Too bad a triumph over the system seems so rote at the movies. It certainly isn't in real life.

I also hear bad buzz about *Never Let Me Go*, the drama starring future Spider-Man Andrew Garfield, which screened right before. Gee, I haven't even finished the book yet and they're dissing the movie. At least I know I'll have fun at *Midnight Madness*. If there's a signature event for me at Toronto, it's this one. Programmed by Colin Geddes, *Midnight Madness* is always sold out, always jammed with fans who get in line hours before the movies and wildly cheer their approval of darn near everything. If I had a horror or sci-fi or exploitation flick of some sort, there's nowhere I'd rather premiere it than right here. Mind you, the audience can be so enthusiastic (they want to enjoy themselves) that you can be convinced you've made *Star Wars* when in fact your film will barely play to fanboys. It's *Comic-Con* minus the desire to weed out the bad -- hey, they're Canadians and want to be polite!

This year's opening night movie is *Fubar II*, a buddy comedy with Terry and Dean, Western Canada's answer to *Beavis and Butthead* or *Garth and Wayne* or *Dumb and Dumber* or whatever your particular touchstone is for lovable losers. Actors David Lawrence (Terry) and Paul Spence (Dean, the one with the moustache) chat about their movie on the red carpet. They do like to curse, so expect some expletives. NSFW.

And here's the director Michael Dowse explaining the ways Terry and Dean are different from Garth and Wayne. Like his stars, Dowse loves a good four letter word, so NSFW. He was also bobbing and weaving, so my camerawork is pretty darn manic. Where's that Steadicam operator got to?

To Rielle Hunter

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DAY TWO




Oh, what a rookie mistake. I decide to see *Black Swan* first thing instead of two or three other movies, not realizing they won't be screening again. Oh well. It's a transitional year for the fest and everything is very confusing. The press headquarters switched. We're now more in the downtown near the CN Tower, rather than the slightly funkier area of years past. On the plus side, 90% of the press screenings are in one multiplex, the Scotiabank Theatre. On the downside, 90% of the screenings are in one multiplex and it can get to be a madhouse with people lining up here, there and everywhere to get into their movies. One line against the wall, another against another wall, another in a Disney-like snake of a line by the prominent Scotia 1, which contains 550 seats and is the biggest one available.

If I had any complaint about Toronto in the past, it was the lack of a central area where everyone could depend on bumping into each other and share info. I was going to a lot of movies, but felt like I was doing it alone. That's much different this year and should increase even more when the Bell Lightbox -- the festival's REAL new center -- opens on Sunday. Why it didn't open at the beginning of the fest is a mystery to me. Surely they intended to be ready?



BLACK SWAN -- ** 1/2 out of ****

More people have probably seen movies about the world of ballet than have ever actually gone to a ballet. And the storyline is often the same: young rising star displaces the (relatively) aging prima ballerina of the past. Throw in a dalliance with a magnetic choreographer along with bruised feet and bodies and backstage drama and you've got your film. *Black Swan* follows this pattern to a t, with one vital difference. It's shot like a suspense or horror film and our heroine is having a mental breakdown of sorts while she desperately tries to prepare for the lead role in *Swan Lake*. Natalie Portman is the dancer, a virginal young woman who is perfect as the tentative, scared but lovely White Swan. But her choreographer/director also wants her to embody the sensual, even dangerous Black Swan and this is simply beyond her. One peek at Portman's bedroom, which is filled with stuffed animals and looks like the room of a 13 year old, and you know she's got a long way to go. Mila Kunis is the rival who can embody danger with ease (she has a lot of fun) and Winona Ryder is the displaced star who bitterly taunts her replacement. It's all so conventional in plot, but director Darren Aronofsky keeps us off balance by wondering exactly how nutty Portman is getting. Did she really make love to Kunis or was that a dream? How edgy can a child who still lives with her mother and has never had sex actually be? When her director (a ripe Vincent Cassel) gives her a homework assignment of touching herself, of living a little, we just know she's gonna get an incomplete. Great for dance lovers who have watched *The Red Shoes* a thousand times, *Black Swan* is enjoyably over-the-top in the midst of its deadly serious exploration of artists who push themselves to succeed. It's so nutty you can't help respecting it. But if you're not longing to join (or at least attend) the ABT, this may seem overheated melodrama. And it is, it is. Melodrama made with care and acted to the hilt.



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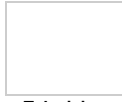




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JACK GOES BOATING ** out of ****

Actor Philip Seymour Hoffman has been a big supporter of playwright Bob Gludini so it's logical for Hoffman to make his feature directorial debut with this small ensemble work in which he co-starred alongside John Ortiz and Daphne Rubin-Vega. (Amy Ryan has replaced Beth Cole as Hoffman's timid love interest. Hoffman knows the material inside and out and he and Gludini have successfully rethought the story in cinematic terms, employing visuals that push the story along as well as copious amounts of music beyond the prominent importance of "Rivers Of Babylon" by the Melodians. And yet, some plays are meant to stay plays. The dialogue here sometimes has the rhythm derived from live theater, a heightened awareness of language that just doesn't work in the movies. Combine that with set pieces (a disastrous dinner party) that work well on stage but feel forced on film and you have a show that contains four good actors and solid story but probably only has a tenth of the punch it delivered in the theater. When Jack goes boating, it's a lot more magical to see he and his date mime it in some clever manner on stage than it is to just see them on a boat in Central Park. Sometimes reality is not a story's best friend.

(By the way, the song on the trailer is "White Winter Hymnals" is by Fleet Foxes. Yeah, **you need to get the CD.**)

THE ILLUSIONIST *** 1/2 out of ****


I just loved the animated film *The Triplets of Belleville* by director Sylvain Chomet. (Didn't everyone?) His follow-up is both a delight and a reminder of what a narrow terrain most animated films cover. It's based on an unproduced screenplay by Jacques Tati, the last of the (essentially) silent movie clowns. I call him a silent clown in the tradition of Chaplin and Keaton, but Tati was also brilliant about the use of sound in his films, even though dialogue was at a minimum. I wondered early on in this film what soundscapes he might have created for this film. It's set in the early 60s, when a middle-aged magician is touring the fading vaudeville circuit and rock and roll and old age are nipping at his heels. Somehow he is adopted by a young girl (a teenager really on the cusp of adulthood) who almost believes he really can work magic. They head off to the big city, where his job prospects get bleaker and bleaker (at one point he is performing in a department store window) and she experiences first love. It's a gentle, simple tale and the charm comes in the small details, like the smoke from the train that undulates up and out in the most pleasing manner. Or the Scottish man who dragoons the magician into performing in his small pub on a small island and is either constantly drunk or just drunk on life or both. Ideally, you just get lost in a movie but of course it's inevitable that at times I can't help thinking about where it's headed and what I might say about it. At the halfway point, I was pleased but not wowed by *The Illusionist*, which seemed a worthy if slighter follow-up. And then as it approached its bittersweet finale (that's no spoiler: the entire film is bittersweet), suddenly I found myself deeply moved and touched and even lifted up. I'm not quite sure why or how it happened but it did. That doesn't happen often at any movie, much less animated ones where pop culture references are usually the stock in trade. Remember that five minute scene early on in *Up*, where we see an entire marriage take place in a montage that moved darn near everyone to tears? Well, *The Illusionist* is quieter and less devastating, but it's emotions are no less real. One of the best of the year.

NEVER LET ME GO ** out of **** Did I miss the Carey Mulligan backlash? She's barely become a star

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and people are jokingly tired of her pixie-ish charm? Too soon, I say. She holds this quiet, unaffected drama nicely. But neither she nor Keira Knightley nor Spider-man to-be Andrew Garfield can make this come alive. Based on the equally muted novel by Kazuo Ishiguro (who specializes in muted, actually), it tells a very odd story about young people in an alternate past who are cloned and raised strictly to provide organ donations so that others can live to be 100 or more and be very healthy. Ethics be damned: no one on the outside wants to go back to the days of cancer and heart failure and Alzheimer's. But the really curious thing about the film -- and the book -- is how little this high concept comes into play. The scenes of the three friends as young kids could take place in any hothouse environment like a boarding school, where jealousies can take root and odd little rituals or privileges seem so very important. Even later, we're always aware that the issues facing them -- frustrated romance, the lack of time as life slips away - face us all. But the awkwardly raised and yet avoided situation (cloned people doomed to die at a young adult age after their third or fourth donation. Little of the book (which Time magazine dubbed the novel of the decade) comes through. They miss the boat on Knightley's character, who is far more duplicitous and manipulative than comes across in the film. And the overriding tone of the book comes from the narrator (Mulligan) and her constant jumping back and forth in time, discussing issues in the light of what happened today and last week and of course she must mention the event two years ago. A further problem is that the younger version of Garfield's character is played by an actor who doesn't really resemble him in the least, which is an odd choice, especially for a movie about clones. Whether you've read the book or are simply a fan of Mulligan, whether you love sci-fi and how it can tackle current and timeless issues in a fresh manner or just like well-crafted adult dramas, there's something in *Never Let Me Go* that is sure to dissatisfy you.

IT'S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY ** out of ****

Actually, it's not; it's kind of a sad story. In this case, it's the sad story of a writing/directing team -- Anna Bowden and Ryan Fleck -- who started off strong and now seem lost. They broke through with *Half Nelson*, a very conventional story about a drug-addicted school teacher enlivened mightily by an astonishing performance by Ryan Gosling. It was one of the my favorite films of the year. That was followed by *Sugar*, a more daring script about Dominican baseball players who come to the minor league system hoping to break into the big time. I'm a big baseball fan, so I was primed to love the film, which was fresh when it stuck with observing the culture shock of these often poor young men who often don't speak English and are suddenly plopped down in the middle of the heartland. Too bad it veered into Hollywood territory and had to cast actors who could also play ball, limiting their pool mightily. Still, it wasn't your average bear. Now comes *It's Kind Of A Funny Story*, which feels conventional and even anonymous on every level. A suicidally depressed teen (handsome Keir Gilchrist) checks himself into the psych ward of a hospital and must stay there for a week to be evaluated. The ward is packed with lovable eccentrics who either learn a life lesson from our hero or teach him one, especially Zach Galifianakis. Will our hero lure his bed-bound roommate out into the ward? Will he strike up a friendship/romance with the only other teen around, who is happily both female and cute (a fine Emma Roberts)? Duh. Yes, the movie acknowledges such a rosy view on life at the finale but that doesn't absolve it. Gilchrist may have talent, but here he's just a pleasant presence, hardly the life force that might shake things up nor even a troubled, wounded soul that needs repairing. We are never convinced for a moment that this verbal, likable, high-achieving kid would actually harm himself. That rather undercuts the entire film, don't you think?

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hi, what a schedule:) The Black Swan looks like a LOT of fun:)

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The Black Swan is very nutty. Those saying it will be an Oscar contender are wrong I think, except perhaps for Natalie Portman. Otherwise, I think it's too out there to appeal to the Oscar crowd. This of course is entirely separate from its quality, which I need a second viewing to suss out. But I think I'll remain admiring but mixed.

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