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CANNES 2001: Racing for Recognition; First Films Strive for Cannes' Camera d'Or

by Michael Giltz

(indieWIRE/ 05.14.01) -- A friend of a friend stood in the lobby of the Debussy as crowds streamed out of "Moulin Rouge" and told me excitedly that "La Libertad" ("Freedom") was really good. I later found out that the director had been standing right by him when he said this. Perhaps that explains his enthusiasm; the movie certainly didn't.

That's the way with Cannes. When it's a good year, everyone seems to be talking about the screenings you missed: the rapturous applause, the raves in the trades, the countless reporters who couldn't even get in. When it's a bad year, everyone is talking in Godot-like terms about the movies that haven't screened yet.

This year's talk about the Camera D'Or race, those films screening by first-time directors, is still about the movies to come. They may never arrive (at least artistically), but the first efforts that have already been shown demonstrate more of a debt to the past than the wave of the future.

"La Libertad" is a prime example. Its debt is owed to Satyajit Ray, who knew how to turn the smallest of incidents into gripping drama. Writer-director Lisandro Alonso, however, forgot the incident. He simply shows a day in the life of an Argentine peasant who makes his living chopping wood alone in a forest. We see the man chop down wood, sell it, buy some supplies, ask the store clerk if there are any girls around (there aren't), try and visit someone who isn't around and then go home and cook an armadillo.

Alonso steadfastly avoids even the slightest of plot lines -- no tree threatens to fall on our protagonist and even the armadillo is caught off-camera. Still, Alonso manages to frame his shots with enough intelligence to keep a dedicated viewer from losing complete interest.

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Far more promising -- and the frontrunner for the Camera D'Or after the first five days -- is "Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner" (Canada). A commanding drama by documentary filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, this nearly three-hour film tells the fable-like story about when evil comes to an Inuit village. Problems persist when Atanarjuat falls for the pretty girl promised to the mean-spirited Oki, son of the village leader. Atanarjuat gets his way, and the festering resentment of Oki leads to treachery by his two-faced sister and eventually murder.

Obviously, one thinks of Robert Flaherty, but Kunuk's involving tale stands on its own -- thanks to touches that embrace Inuit myths and the crystal clarity of the images captured by cinematographer Norman Cohn. It earned the emphatic, insistent applause of an audience that was convinced it had finally seen something worthwhile.

No enthusiasm could be found for "Chelsea Walls," Ethan Hawke's directorial debut. A jumble of storylines, it skips back and forth between current denizens of the Chelsea Hotel, with an all-star cast featuring Kris Kristofferson as an alcoholic writer, Miranda Richardson as his current flame, Vincent D'Onofrio as a shy painter who tries to date Uma Thurman, and Robert Sean Leonard and Steve Zahn as struggling musicians.

Shot on DV by Tom Richmond in association with Richard Rutowski, the movie embraces its muddy, rough origins. And the music that dominates throughout is far more interesting than any of the stories. Hawke's debt is to the Beatniks and it remains unpaid. His investors are another story: the trades reported the rights to France were sold for \$350,000, which was more than the entire budget.

"Fah Talai Jone" ("Tears of the Black Tiger") was snapped up by Miramax and it's easy to see why. This fillip on Thai westerns (who knew?) has a wonderfully kitschy look thanks to a colorful production design by Ake Aimchuen and a tinted print that provides a surreal touch. Indeed, the look of the film is the only consistent draw. Perhaps Miramax can speed the storyline up with its fabled scissors. For now, writer-director Wisit Sasanatieng's film uncomfortably straddles the line between homage and satire.

More serious and more effective is the black-humored Bosnian Competition entry "No Man's Land" by director Danis Tanovic. Like most of the overtly political films at the festival, this one is heavy-handed in the extreme, but the main story is compelling enough to overcome its forced style. Two soldiers on opposite sides of the '93 Bosnian conflict are trapped in No Man's Land. Their stand-off seems unending, with only a UN Captain willing to intervene (despite orders to the contrary). A third soldier, thought dead, is actually trapped on top of a land

mine -- if it ne moves, ne dies. The international media latches on to this story, adding to the absurd atmosphere that hopes to mock not simply this particular war, but all wars. The film definitely has its supporters.

"CQ," however, does not. A mildly sweet debut from Roman Coppola, he is not -- as yet -- prepared to follow in his sister's footsteps. Coppola's sister, of course, is Sofia, who scored strong critical reviews and a solid art-house hit with her debut feature "The Virgin Suicides." (It even had a great soundtrack courtesy of Air.) Roman takes the more obvious route of creating an homage to classics like "8 1/2" and "La Dolce Vita" in telling his tale of a "Barbarella"-style movie shoot in '60s Paris. The cast is formidable, including Gerard Depardieu and Jeremy Davies. But the comparisons to those masterpieces are not favorable and, indeed, Roman quietly mocks his own pretensions. But not enough.

Equally toothless is "Amour D'enfance" ("Childhood Loves"), the uninvolved story of Paul, a man who returns to the family farm when his father is dying. Paul also hooks up with some boring old friends he'd left behind long ago and for good reason. Finally, his former girlfriend is out of town, but her little sister is looking better and better as the days drag on. Director Yves Caumon doesn't have much to work with, but he pulls an exceptional performance from Lauryl Brossier as Odile, the little sister. Her scenes -- flushing with embarrassment when Paul says he knows she had a crush on him -- are sparked with life. Caumon either has a way with female actresses or simply has a good eye for talent, but his next movie will be worth watching if only for that reason. And certainly so will Brossier's.

The more highly anticipated movies in the Camera d'Or race have yet to screen: "Lovely Rita," Jessica Hausner's intimate look at an awkward high school girl who's ready to explore her burgeoning sexuality from Austria, and Fine Line's elaborate comedy "Human Nature" directed by Michel Gondry, and written by Charlie Kaufman, that stars Tim Robbins and Patricia Arquette as scientists who wrestle with how to handle the wild child played by Rhys Ifans.

Finally, the wild card in all of this is "Shrek," the DreamWorks animated flick that played to very strong applause at the Lumiere and received across-the-board raves from the trades. ("Variety" had only minor quibbles to make about the dull third act.) A distinctive looking, highly commercial effort, it tells of an ogre who must rescue a fairy princess in order to get a little peace and quiet.

Certainly, animation has enjoyed a creative flowering in the last two decades and Cannes should reflect that. But instead of "Beauty and the Beast," "Toy Story," "Chicken Run," or even "South Park: Bigger, Longer, & Uncut," they settled on "Shrek." That's in character for Cannes, which last featured

on Shrek. That's in character for Cannes, which last featured such lesser-animated movies like "The Fantastic Planet" and Disney's woeful "Peter Pan."

While the best animated movies are flavored with witty asides, "Shrek" is nothing but pop-cultural riffs. Some day, perhaps, the scene where Shrek uses wrestling moves to trounce his opponents to the tune of Joan Jett's "Bad Reputation" will seem like a witty spoof on "A Knight's Tale." In fact, it's just an example of this movie's dull heart. But given the strong crowd response and the stellar reviews, the two directors (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson) may conceivably find their fairy tale includes a Camera d'Or for the happy ending.

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