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### CANNES 2002: Camera d'Or Likely To Reward Poverty And Despair, Not Animated Horses

by Michael Giltz

(indieWIRE/05.21.02) – At the **Cannes Film Festival**, the Camera d'Or is celebrating its 25th year by focusing on 25 films that it believes herald a new crop of distinctive talent. The first winner back in 1978 was an American – **Robert M. Young** with the now forgotten "**Alambrista**." Who knows? It could happen again.

The two American candidates are **Peter Sollett's** debut "**Long Way Home**" and DreamWorks' "**Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron**." Spirit was roundly ignored by one and all as no Shrek (last year's surprise triumph of the fest). Indeed, the press screening at the grand Lumiere was one of the least-attended events so far.

But Sollett's drama was a last minute delight. This New York City-based story about a 17 year old would-be Romeo has marvelous performances from its young cast and especially the always despairing Mommy, an elderly Dominican grandmother who can't handle the pressures of modern life when that means one of her grandsons misses mass and the other one is masturbating in the bathroom. (She eyes the boy's off-camera erection with a withering stare and then says, "Oh, the shame." He's going to need a lot of therapy.) It has the revelatory feel of George Washington, but with a much more audience-pleasing storyline. It's a natural for the New York Film Festival or at least New Directors/New Films and it's just been picked up by Samuel Goldwyn and Fireworks.

The cineastes – who worry whenever a film is too entertaining – have thrown their support behind "**Japon**" (Japan), a Mexico-Spain co-production directed by **Carlos Reygadas**. At 129 minutes, it's one of the longer films at a festival notable for

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its wonderfully brief films (many have clocked in at around 90 minutes). Even so, it was reportedly cut by 17 minutes after previous festival screenings and thank goodness – "Japan" takes its own sweet time as it is.

A commercial non-starter, "Japan" shows a limping, middle-aged man descending to a remote village to off himself. He stays in the barn of an elderly peasant woman who senses his despair and reaches out in a simple way.

Reygadas takes bold stylistic chances, presenting some scenes with absolutely no sound and a whirling final shot that is dizzying and only partially successful. (He also risks the wrath of the ASPCA, since the shot of a pigeon's torn head that is still breathing is either a great special effect or, more likely, gives the lie to the claim that no animals were harmed during the making of the film.)

He also shoots one of the most quietly awkward, least sexy sex scenes imaginable. "Japan" is flawed but ambitious and achieves enough to let cineastes feel Reygadas has more to offer. It's the favorite of those few disturbed by "City of God"'s glossy sheen.

More ambitious – at least structurally – and much less successful is "**Carnages**" (Carnage), the first feature by the French short film auteur **Delphine Gleize**.

Her tale begins with a very sexy young bullfighter being gored by a half-blind beast. The parts of the bull travel all over Europe: the eyes go to a scientist who has been cheating on his pregnant wife (wait till he find out how many babies are in that enormous tummy of hers), the meat to a mother who is afraid her daughter will discover a shameful secret, the bone to a family with a beloved dog, the horns to a taxidermist (who I believed was living with his mother, whom another critic suggested was his wife), the ears to the bullfighter fighting for his life, and so on.

"**Carnage**" never reached emotional depth and once viewers figure out what all these different strands have in common there's little more to be gained.

"**Madame Sata**" prefers to take its chances on real melodrama. A Brazilian film, this one set in the '30s, it tells the story of one of the legends of Carnival. "Madame Sata" began as an uneducated street tough named Joao Francisco, brought vividly to life in a glowering, intense performance by Lazaro Ramos that is the film's strongest asset.

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Like a young **Robert De Niro** – if De Niro played a character who longed to sing sambas in girlish costumes after sleeping with his passionate male lovers – Ramos commands attention. Joao is highly volatile, even around friends like the female prostitute whose son he looks after and the fey male prostitute he pulls scams with.

If you know about the glamorous Madame Sata (who lived into her 70s), this movie doesn't really explain where she came from. If you know nothing about her and watch the film, the switch from a doomed petty thief into a star is rather hard shocking. But Ramos' electric presence forestalls any questions – you're simply too scared and thrilled by him to ask. If there were acting awards for Camera d'Or, he'd be highly touted.

So would **Severine Caneele**, who won Best Actress in '99 for her brilliant work in "**L'Humanite**" (Humanity). Some griped that this textile worker – an untrained amateur – didn't deserve to win over the professionals, a rather bizarre claim really. Even if it had been a fluke, Caneele's performance was compelling. But she proves it was no accident with "**Une Part du Ciel**" (A Piece of Sky).

"A Piece of Sky" ties together the struggles of female prisoners pushing to be compensated for their labor (led by Caneele) with female factory workers also struggling for fair practices. It's rather too polemical, even for the leftists that dominate Cannes, but Caneele's work is exceptional, proving her decision to make a second film – despite the brickbats she endured – was the right one.

Another film getting a ho-hum response is "**Bord de Mer**" (Seaside), a very thin slice of life in a tiny resort town where change comes at a snail's pace and so does the film. Less than nothing happens, though it would have been nice to figure out the purpose of the factory where workers sort small pebbles.

Also feeling rather lonely is "**Dix-sept fois Cecile Cassard**," (17 Times Cecile Cassard), in which a recently widowed woman manages to come alive again by watching gay men hustle for sex. Really.

Slightly more believable is "**Rana's Wedding**" which pairs a high-concept plot – young woman has just a few hours to find a man and marry him! – with the harsh realities of life in Israel. Happily, the movie is fairly balanced, with empathy for the Jews as well as its Palestinian protagonists, something that can't be said for the main competition entry "**Divine**

**Intervention.**" That won't be enough to make "Rana's Wedding" take the cake, however." **Intacto**" (Intact) – which imagines luck to be as tradable a commodity as gold – was also respected by some, but has no champions.

More movies must be judged, of course, including the well-marketed **"Too Young to Die"** (which has a well-placed banner at the late-night watering hole La Petite Majestic) and **"Tomorrow La Scala!"** But for now, the Camera d'Or looks set to cheer up the lower class teens of New York ("Long Way Home") or the despairing of Mexico ("Japan").

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