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CANNES 2001: Directors Fortnight Out of the Shadows; Albania's "Slogans" Stands Out

by Michael Giltz

(indieWIRE/ 05.17.01) -- Ah, sibling rivalry. Now in its 33rd year, the **Directors Fortnight** -- or **Quinzaine des Realisateurs** -- is a thoroughly separate event from the main competition at the 54th **Cannes Film Festival**. Founded in 1968 by revolting filmmakers, among them **Francois Truffaut** and **Jean-Luc Godard** (screening this year in the official competition!), the non-competitive sidebar remains always the kid brother, often put down by its older, stronger sibling. The Fortnight isn't mentioned on the main festival web page or in the main festival catalog (all it can offer is a modest booklet). That second-class status also extends to the trades, which don't review the Directors Fortnight movies as thoroughly. The end result? It's harder to get a bead on which of its movies are catching the fancy of fest goers.

But some trends are clear: the Directors Fortnight is usually more successful at offering popular opening and closing night movies and this year is no exception. The opener -- "**MarthaäMartha**" by young French director **Sandrine Veysset** -- has enjoyed respectable reviews for its depiction of a none-too-fit young mother (**Valerie Donzelli**) who may or may not hurt herself and her child. While generally not considered as strong as her debut "**Y aura-t-il de la neige a Noel?**" ("Will It Snow For Christmas?"), it still has some strong female performances and the benefit of being very French indeed.

The closer -- **Amos Kollek's "Queenie in Love"** -- hasn't been widely seen yet. But this auteur, who films regularly in New York, is deeply admired in France. I watched in astonishment last year as his trifling, bland romantic comedy "**Fast Food, Fast Women**" received rapturous applause when it screened in the main competition. Since "Queenie" is apparently in a similar vein, there's every reason to expect a similar reaction. (Cannes is nothing if not loyal to its directors.)

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Sandwiched between those two are some promising entries. But first, on to the American movies:

Ethan Hawke's "Chelsea Walls" was roundly dismissed, though **Robert Sean Leonard's** charming singing voice does lead one to fancifully hope he and **Ewan McGregor** will record a duet.

Faring better was **Arliss Howard's** debut **"Big Bad Love."** Based on the short stories of Mississippi writer **Larry Brown**, it stars Howard as a bitter Vietnam vet who's been rejected by his wife (real-life spouse **Debra Winger**) and by agents uninterested in his fiction. Shambling and overlong (which hasn't generally been a problem this festival, where many movies have clocked in well under two hours), "Big Bad Love" develops some well-earned power once real tragedy strikes. It even earned some comparisons in the trades to **Ed Harris's "Pollock."**

Even stronger feelings emerged for **"The Deep End,"** a well-known quantity since it has appeared elsewhere. **Tilda Swinton** stars as the ideal mom if you're planning to come out as a queer and a killer. When the lover of her gay teen son washes up on the beach, she takes care of it. Even blackmail from a stranger (**Goran Visnjic**) is a mere bump in the road for this tigress.

The U.S. also featured prominently in two French documentaries. **"La Traversee"** ("The Crossing"), by French director **Sebastien Lifshitz** ("**Come Undone**"), is a modest, politely received look at a young man convinced by a filmmaker friend to go to the U.S. and try and track down the American G.I. father he's never met. Much less successful is **Solveig Anspach** and **Cindy Babski's** woeful work **"Made in the USA."** This would-be **"Thin Blue Line"** awkwardly attempts to convince us that convicted killer **Odell Barnes** is innocent. In doing so, it also tries to condemn the American system of justice and indeed America itself.

"Made in the USA" begins with a description of the crime and Barnes's execution. Desperate for images -- since Odell remains mostly off-screen -- they pan from a clock to a prison wall while a voiceover solemnly describes what is happening inside the prison. Other random shots of the streets of the small Texas town repeat throughout. Virtually no one they speak to is articulate or interesting -- not the prosecutors, not the defense, not friends or family members. The evidence in Barnes' favor isn't terribly convincing either -- even for an adamant anti-capital punishment person like myself. Worse, by the end of this tiring film, you don't even CARE whether Barnes suffered a miscarriage of justice; you feel like you're suffering through one yourself.

Little better was **"I Nostri Anni"** ("The Years of Our Lives"),

which a festival director proudly said was accepted as much for its visual look as for its "political potential." That should have been warning enough -- and this black and white story of old Italian men remembering their days fighting in the resistance during World War II only confirmed it. Made on a shoestring and it shows: the flashback scenes of actors running through the woods and clutching their guns are especially unconvincing.

Also disappointing was **"Hush!"** from Japanese director **Hashiguchi Ryosuke**. His earlier drama about gay youths -- 1996's **"Like Grains of Sand"** -- was convincing, if earnest. This follow-up tells what should be a lighthearted story: two young gay men in Tokyo (one out to his family and coworkers; the other closeted) are approached by a female friend who wants them to help her have a baby. Ryosuke maintains a deft touch for the first 10 minutes or so, but it takes him forever to set up the basic premise of the film. Worse, he reverts to heavy-handed drama with uninvolved subplots about the death of a relative and a coworker of one of the gay men who becomes obsessed with marrying him. The light tone returns briefly towards the end, but it's too late. Even gay audiences won't have much patience for this one.

Certain to do much better at the box office is the sentimental if effective **"Pauline et Paulette,"** by Belgian **Lieven Debrauwer**. This gentle drama shows what happens to the mentally challenged Pauline when one of her sisters dies. The will stipulates that all the money goes to the care of Pauline unless one of the other sisters takes her in. Paulette does, only as a stop gap measure of course, and some laughter and tears and hugging ultimately ensue. Well-acted, it's the sort of film that might be unbearable in English but seems easier to swallow in a foreign tongue.

Two other films received more mixed reactions. **Christine Jeff's** highly anticipated **"Rain"** is a New Zealand entry (and thus probably feels overshadowed by the hoopla for that other NZ-based production **"The Lord of the Rings."**) Set in 1972, it tells of a disaffected teenage girl who sets out to seduce the photographer boyfriend of her mother. It was generally relegated to the category of "promising," though some trades pegged it to gain a limited arthouse release. Even fainter praise greeted **Khaled Ghorbal's "Fatma,"** a look at the lives of women in Tunisia. Like the inexplicably praised main competition film **"Safar e Gandejar"** ("Kandahar"), it seemed admired more for its politics than its filmmaking.

But one Cinderella story did emerge from the Directors Fortnight: **"Slogans,"** the first Albanian film to appear at Cannes, was rightly described by a presenter as a "miracle" that popped up at the last minute. Tightly directed by **Gjergj Xhuvani**, it deftly mines the humor and pathos of a young schoolteacher who arrives in a tiny mountain town in the late '70s

One of their main tasks -- even more important than teaching, it seems -- is organizing the students into groups, taking them into the hills and spelling out revolutionary slogans with heavy rocks they must then paint white. Teachers out of favor with the local politicians naturally get longer slogans, meaning more backbreaking work for their kids.

What's most admirable is the movie's refusal to exaggerate: we see the pettiness of people in power, but they're not made to be buffoons or overly evil. Even more painfully, we see the heartbreaking compromising of the teacher (and everyone around him) just to get by. That makes the bleak, unhopeful ending -- which simply reflects the reality that life goes on -- all the more powerful.

To top it off, "Slogans" even had one of the best-reviewed parties of the entire festival, thanks to Albanian punch, stuffed vine leaves and other specialties. Sometimes, dreams really do come true.

[Michael Giltz writes regularly for the New York Post, The Advocate, and other publications.]