



## festivals

### CANNES 2002: Keeping The Faith At Directors Fortnight

by Michael Giltz

(indieWIRE/ 05.24.02) -- New religions are popping up at the 55th **Cannes Film Festival**: the Church of Scientology mounted an exhibit to **L. Ron Hubbard** in a small art store just off the Croisette.

But the old gods still hold sway. As usual, some harrumphed that the main competition bowed to old standbys like **David Cronenberg**, **Manoel De Oliveira**, **Allen** and **Olivier Assayas** out of blind faith. (Even if the movies aren't good, at least you know what to expect.)

The **Directors Fortnight**, Cannes' version of **Slamdance**, was intended to reject the old guard and champion brash new talent. But it too takes comfort in the familiar. Hence the reappearance of favorites like **Catherine Breillat**, **Shane Meadows**, **Lisa Cholodenko** and **Lynne Ramsay**. Directors Fortnight kept the faith and, some of the time, its prayers were answered.

But not by the sacrilegious Breillat, the French provocateur who co-opened the program with "**Sex is Comedy**." The other co-opener was "**Matir Moina**" (The Clay Bird), the Fortnight's first-ever film from Bangladesh.

By and large, being asked to open or close any program at Cannes is a dubious honor since those films are almost always disappointments. But these two split the curse. "'**Matir Moina**," about the tug between religion and politics in the just-forming country of Bangladesh, got a polite response. "**Sex is Comedy**," however, was roundly dismissed. It's based on the filming of Breillat's terrific drama "**Fat Girl**," a movie highlighted by a riveting seduction scene. **Anne Parillaud**

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stars as a director struggling to capture that moment on film, which is complicated by the fact that she's sleeping with The Actor (**Gregoire Colin**, who is quite naked and deservedly so) and that he and The Actress can't stand each other. The Actress is **Roxane Mesquida** who played the same role in "Fat Girl" and who admitted in interviews she couldn't stand her then co-star, **Libero De Rienzo**. It all sounds juicier and funnier than the end result. Apparently Breillat needs to be angry to be entertaining. When she's amused, we're simply bored.

Another highly anticipated film came from director **Lisa Cholodenko**, who scored strongly with her debut feature, "High Art." The follow-up, "Laurel Canyon," is a far more potentially commercial prospect: **Christian Bale** plays an uptight psychiatrist who suddenly finds he and his fiancée sharing digs with his free-spirited, pot-smoking, Rock&Roll producing mama (the marvelous **Frances McDormand**). McDormand is a sheer delight playing, as several critics pointed out, the very sort of person her protective mom in "Almost Famous" was deathly afraid would corrupt her son. But Cholodenko never takes a step we don't anticipate ten minutes in advance. (Okay, except for that threesome between mom, her rock singer boyfriend and her son's mousy fiancée.) Most chalked it up to the sophomore slump and confidently await her next project.

Then the faithful were rewarded. Director Shane Meadows had been championed as a talent with his **Bob Hoskins** boxing flick "TwentyFourSeven" and the follow-up, "A Room for Romeo Brass." If proving you have talent means breaking out of the festival circuit towards a wider art house audience (and it usually should), then Meadows surely triumphed with "Once Upon a Time in the Midlands," a genial charmer about a Scottish thief (**Robert Carlyle**) who returns home to claim his woman after a job goes wrong. It's an unexpected cross between **Ken Loach** and **Sergio Leone**, but Meadows pulls it off.

But the highlight of the Fortnight was **Lynne Ramsay's** triumph, "Morvern Callar." Ramsay trumps her coolly proficient debut, "Ratcatcher," and **Samantha Morton's** lead performance is sure to get end-of-the-year attention from the critics. Morton plays a young woman whose boyfriend kills himself on Christmas Eve. It proves a marvelous opportunity for the oddball Morvern to rethink her life. Ramsay won't have to rethink hers: this blackly comic drama is a triumph guaranteed to give her cachet and, if she needs them, bigger budgets down the road.

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Suicide is also the focus of the debut by Mexican director **Carlos Reygadas**. His "**Japon**" (Japan) has been trimmed since its debut in Rotterdam and is the stronger for it. Disarmingly simple, it follows a middle-aged man who heads to a remote village where he plans to kill himself. The Man (a weathered, appealing **Alejandro Ferretis**) is directed to the barn of a very old peasant named Ascen (**Magdalena Flores**). She senses his despair and reaches out as best she can. "Japon" is bold in its design, employing scenes completely devoid of sound and a grand climax with a swirling shot of Reygadas boldly stretching out for minutes. The film also features one of the most awkward sex scenes imaginable. (Flores certainly trumps **Kathy Bates** in "About Schmidt" for offering the most unexpected nudity.)

Also a holdover from another festival, this time **Sundance**, was "**Only the Strong Survive**," **Roger Friedman's** labor of love about soul singers. **Sam Moore**, **Rufus Thomas** and his daughter **Carla**, **Wilson Pickett**, **Mary Wilson** and the rest are all in fine voice, as evidenced by the too-brief concert footage. This amiable, celebratory documentary, helmed ultimately by **Chris Hegedus** and **D.A. Pennebaker**, seemed right at home in France, which has a long history of recognizing the genius of soul singers and jazz musicians long before Americans do. Indeed, the afternoon crowd I saw it with cheered the film three times: once at the finale, again halfway during the credits (simply because they hadn't clapped for a few minutes, I guess) and then again at the end.

If **Mary Wilson** looked well-preserved, her makeup artists had nothing on the talents of "**L'Imbalsamatore**" (The Embalmer). An offbeat Italian romantic drama by **Matteo Garrone**, its best achievement was creating a believable love triangle between a gay dwarf embalmer, his very tall and handsome assistant, and a beautiful woman. Points taken off for leaving the physical aspect of the two men's relationship unnecessarily vague; they won us over emotionally but then chickened out.

Italy was less well-represented with the tired drama "**Angela**." In it, a gangster's wife falls for her husband's handsome new right-hand man. When the law comes crashing down, she refuses to turn state's evidence just to keep her affair a secret. Very noble, until you remember she was intimately involved in a murderous, drug running gang and profited nicely from it. It's based on a true story, but the characters are so colorless you find it hard to believe.

"**Mon-Rak Transistor**" (A Transistor Love Story) from Thailand's **Pen-ek Ratanaruang** was more original. It starts out as a witty musical about a poor but cute melon farmer who



loves his girl and wants to be a pop star. The musical interludes are cleverly done and the leads (**Suppakorn Kitsuwat** and **Siriakorn Pukkavesa**) have charm to spare.

But the electricity runs low when the movie drops its light tone and all-out musical numbers for a dour middle half where everything goes wrong for our hero. (And why does he never, ever pick up the phone to call his long-suffering, true love?) It rallies towards the end, but the director will have to trust what is special about his projects next time around to truly break out.

Also quite conventional in the end was "**Chih-yen Yee**" (**Blue Gate Crossing**). A Taiwanese film about high school students in love, it features sexual confusion between a handsome swimmer and a pretty girl. The only surprise for anyone who knows anything about competitive swimmers is that the sexual confusion lies with his girlfriend, who finally admits to a lesbian crush on her best pal. Utterly familiar.

So was "**Bord de Mer**" (Seaside). Not that this French film about a small resort town during several seasons owes a debt to any genre in particular. It's just typical of a certain type of French film – not much happens and the sooner you accept that, the quicker you'll be able to enjoy whatever slight charms the movie has to offer. Debuting director **Julie Lopes-Curval** could always discover the appeal of a plot in the future; she already demonstrates a way with actors.

Even more familiar to festival-goers was "**Le Pays Du Chien Qui Chante**" (Land of the Singing Dog). A drama about a Japanese couple visiting a French village in the mountains, it was given a shrug by almost everyone. Director **Yann Dedet** has edited films for the likes of **Truffaut** and **Pialat**, but unfortunately his first film is the sort that only exists in the hothouse atmosphere of festivals.

I missed "**Abouna**" (Our Father), but this drama from Chad was about two brothers who go in search of their missing father. It gained little attention, but those who saw it had nice things to say.

The closing night film, "**Welcome to Collinwood**," starring **George Clooney**, is still to come of course, along with a handful of other movies. But for now, I'll remember the best two features that pulled together fragments of celluloid.

"**Voir Biba Breviarium**" was called in English "A Biba Reader." I foolishly hoped it was actually "A Bilbo Reader" and would contain scenes from **Peter Jackson's** upcoming "**The**

**Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers.**" No such luck, of course. But the next best thing happened: this ode to Hungarian intellectual **Istvan Bibó** proved very compelling. It pulls together scraps of footage from Hungary – young men wrestling, people canoeing, a group exercising and so on – along with private home movies of Bibó marrying and raising his family. This is combined with a British voiceover reading from Bibó's many published essays.

I find random footage of people in the past oddly compelling – it's like glimpsing through a hole in time. But Bibó's insights into anti-Semitism were a welcome respite from the general tenor of European media. And his comments on how nations give up personal freedoms in times of crisis certainly struck a nerve as well. One man in the audience quietly snored at the early screening (what was he expecting?). But for those who think they might care, "A Bibó Reader" will send them out to the local bookstore searching for a collection of his work.

Finally, the special midnight screening of "**Polissons et Galipettes**" proves there is nothing new under the sun and that anything, given enough time, will be of sober, scholarly interest. The film in question was a compilation of hardcore pornography from the silent era filmed for screening in bordellos. True, no pool boys or pizza deliverymen are involved, but everything else was quite familiar, to the sophisticated amusement of the largely French audience. Naughty nuns, school girls who need a spanking and so on were the familiar setups, with surprisingly explicit scenes to follow. It was hard to be jaded when one set piece involved a bored dog positively dragged into its erotic adventures with both women and a rather bold man. Though no directors were identified, some pieces were so well lit and shot it was believed that major talents were sometimes involved in the making of these shorts, most of which were created in the 1920s.

The capper was an amusing, animated short that was no less bawdy for being a cartoon. It ended with our hero finding solace with a very pleased cow. And no, the end credits had no disclaimer for the **ASPCA**.

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