

Moscow 2001

By Ron Holloway

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MOSCOW INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2001

Politics notwithstanding, the 23rd Moscow International Film Festival (21-30 June 2001) was by far the best, programme-wise, in post-*perestroika* times. The festival catalogue, with a replica of the St. George Statuette Award on the cover, stretched over 235 pages. *Moving Pictures* was brought in to publish four festival issues in English and Russian on films and events, a move that in turn inspired Russian critics to print a daily bulletin -- titled "Manezh" -- in esoteric Russian and enigmatic English on the competition entries. The city's best venues, including two brand new multiplexes, were booked for festival screenings, most of which started on time and with the very film that was listed in the *What When Where Film Guide*. Young computer wizards, many with multiple language abilities, replaced a fading phalanx of old-timers at the registration desks. Cafes and restaurants now encircle the Red Square and the Manezh, the festival headquarters in the Exhibition Hall next to the Kremlin Wall, before which street theatre troupes performed nightly.

But it was the eclectic taste of programming director Kirill Razlogov that proved to be the elixir the Moscow festival badly needed to rebound into the inner circle of key international film festivals. A globetrotting critic with respected credentials as a film historian, Razlogov speaks fluent English, knows Russian film history inside out, and even had the foresight to send his daughter to study at the University of California in Berkeley immediately after the fall of communism. Ask him whether he prefers the independent scene at Telluride (he's their scout for Russian cinema) over Cannes or Venice, and he'll parry the question by responding that Pusan is the one genuine showcase of Oriental cinema.

But when Razlogov was asked to explain why there was no Russian film selected for the competition, he responded that Artur Aristakysyan's *Mesto na zemle* (*A Place on Earth*) had already premiered at the Directors Fortnight at Cannes. The Moscow festival may have its rules and traditions, but in the past films from the sidebar sections at Cannes have regularly surfaced in the competition at Moscow. On the other hand, Sergei Bodrov's *The Quickie*, a German-French-Italian-Swiss psycho-thriller shot in English in Los Angeles, did qualify as a Russian entry of sorts -- after all, Vladimir Mashkov, the film's lead actor playing the mafia boss, did receive the festival's Best Actor award.

As for *A Place on Earth*, Aristakysyan had been working on his fiction-documentary (also known under its former title *Maria*) for the past five years, hampered over the last two years by a producer anxious to recut the film to his own liking. A film about the poor and homeless sharing their fate in a self-protective community under a charismatic leader in the very heart of today's Moscow, the focus is on six couples who maintain their dignity and stay together despite hunger, poverty, despair, and degradation -- until one day the police arrive to drive them out and forcefully divest a mother of her child. *A Place on Earth* may drive some from their seats, but it's not a film you will easily forget.

Despite the visible weakness in the competition, the balance of themes and styles among the 17 entries programmed at the Pushkinsky -- seven films from western Europe, five from the Far East, only three from ex-socialist filmlands, and a pair from the Americas -- proved more than satisfactory to a cinema-hungry public. The real crowd-pleasers, however, were found in the attractive sidebars: Special Screenings, Great Expectations, Eight and a Half Films, Museum of Cinema Presents, National Hits, New Europe, Dangerous Liaisons, Alternative Cinema, Family Business: Mohsen Makhmalbaf, The Korean Peninsula: North and South, Socialist Realism: Past and Present, Freedom Film Festival Presents, Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, and a Tribute to Roger Corman among the retrospectives -- altogether, enough fare to satisfy the cineaste's taste.

The St. George Statuette for Best Film was awarded to Henry Bean's *The Believer* (USA), a debut feature by an award-winning novelist and screenwriter. The story of a New York Jewish youth turned Neo-Nazi -- for any number of stated and unstated reasons -- this fragmented view of Jewish culture cannot be ignored on the issues raised: anti-Semitism as a possible Jewish ploy, probable Jewish infiltration of skinhead movements,

questionable Israeli blame for the Falangist massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon, and the age-old question (in any faith) of what does indeed constitute a "believer" in practice. Since *The Believer* had previously won the Grand Prize at Sundance, one can assume that Geoff Gilmore abstained from voting this time around.

Rakhshan Bani Etemad's *Zir-e poost-e shahr* (*Under the Skin of the City*, Iran), in my opinion the best film seen in the competition, was awarded the runner-up Special Jury Prize. Of the many talented Iranian women directors, Bani Etemad stands out for her commitment to contemporary social problems viewed from a feminine perspective. In *Under the Skin of the City* the setting is the eve of parliamentary elections with the focus on a working-class mother who senses the aura of change while struggling to hold her family together. The daughter runs away from home to become a street prostitute, the son signs over the family house to a conman, savings are lost when a bank closes down, and a racketeer offers fast money for the transport of a truckload of drugs out of the city. "What am I supposed to vote for?" asks the still undaunted woman into the camera of an enquiring television journalist.

India was represented in the competition by Jayaraj's *Shantham* (*Calmness*), a laudable entry from Kerala about a senseless killing that challenges the strength and courage of the mothers involved. China competed with Jin Chen's *Chrysanthemum Tea* (also known as *Love Story by Tea*), a melodrama shot partially in the Gobi Desert, and Yonfan's *Youyuan jingmeng* (*Peony Pavilion*), a Hong Kong production set in the 1930s about the rise to fame of Gu Jing-qiu, a legendary virtuoso of the Peking Opera, played by Japanese actress Rie Miyazawa -- she was deservedly awarded Best Actress. Last, but not least, was Kim Ki Duk's *Real Fiction*, the South Korean competition entry and one of the most discussed films at last year's Pusan festival. Conceived as a cameraman's *tour-de-force*, Kim employed eight 35mm cameras, ten digital camcorders, and two 35mm steadicams to capture the drama of a street-artist harassed by passing thugs.

Just as impressive was the retrospective "The Korean Peninsula: North and South" -- five feature films from North Korea and four from South Korea (plus the aforementioned competition entry). From communist North Korea came Kim Kil-in's *Hong kil dong*, 1986), Li Gwan-am's *Saranji dazi* (*Affection -- Permeated Land*) (1999), Li Chju-ho's *Dall ios o hanulkazi* (*Racing to Crown*, 2000), Kim Chung-song's *Sara innun rjonhondur* (*Souls Protest*, 2000), and Rim Chkan-born's *Purn zudan uesto* (*On the Green Carpet*, 2001) -- all light propaganda fare along Socialist Realism lines. By contrast, the North Korean slate of new productions ran the gamut of innovative styles and themes: Park Je-hyun's *Dan juk yun soo* (*The Legend of Ginko*), Sang Soo-im's *Nunmul* (*Tears*), Song Neung-han's *Segimal* (*The End of the Century*), and Kyun Dong-yeo's *Min in* (*La Belle*). Will North Korean films surface this November at the Pusan festival? An intriguing possibility, to say the least.

Several Muscovites expressed disappointed over "Family Business: Mohsen Makhmalbaf" -- the Iranian retrospective honouring all the members of this extraordinary filmmaking family. For some unexplained reason, not a single Makhmalbaf arrived to accompany the six films in the programme, although visas had apparently been issued on the Russian side.

References

AWARDS

International Competition

St. George Statuette (Grand Prix): Henry Bean's *The Believer* (USA)

Special Jury Prize: Rakhshan Bani Etemad's *Zir-e poost-e shahr* (*Under the Skin of the City*, Iran)

Best Director: Ettore Scola, *Concorrenza Steale* (*Unfair Competition*, Italy)

Best Actress: Rie Miyazawa, *Youyuan jingmeng* (*Peony Pavilion*, China-Hongkong)

Best Actor: Vladimir Mashkov, *The Quickie* (USA-Germany-France)

Special Prizes: composer Eduard Artemyev, actor Jack Nicholson

International Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize

Peter Timar's *Vakvaganyok* (*Blind Guys*, Hungary)

Special Mention: Yonfan's *Youyuan jingmeng* (*Peony Pavilion*, China-Hongkong)

Russian Critics Prize

Erik de Bruyn's *Wilde Mossels* (*Wild Mussels*, Netherlands)

Russian Federation of Film Clubs Award

Henry Bean's *The Believer* (USA)

Audience Award

Reza Bagher's *Vingar av glas* (*Wings of Glass*, Sweden)

Best Debut Film (Kodak Prize)

Sergei Bodrov Jr's *Sestry* (*Sisters*, Russia)

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.