

# Ljubljana 2003

By Ron Holloway

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## LJUBLJANA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2003

It was a festival of superlatives - the 14<sup>th</sup> Ljubljana International Film Festival, scheduled 7-21 November 2003. Under the aegis of Jelka Stergel, one of the first festival directors to introduce "beam subtitling" to accommodate audiences with computerized Slovenian subtitles, the Ljubljana audience has mushroomed to an attendance of over 40,000 at six venues over the two-week stretch. Over the years, LIFFE (the festival's nickname), together with the Slovenian Film Archive, has played an important role in sparking a national film revival. Indeed, young Slovenian directors - Jan Cvitkovic (*Bread and Milk*), Hana A. W. Slak (*Blind Spot*), Maya Weiss (*Guardian of the Frontier*), Janez Burger (*Idle Running*), Damjan Kozole (*Spare Parts*), Igor Sterk (*Express, Express*), Andrej Kosak (*The Outsider*), Saso Podgorsek (*Sweet Dreams*), Metod Povec (*Carmen*), Janez Lapajne (*Rustling Landscapes*), Vojko Anzeljc (*The Last Supper*), Martin Srebotnjak (*Ode to the Poet*), among others - are currently the talk of several European film festivals.

LIFFE offers its public a broad range of films by independent directors. Competing for the Kingfisher Award were 18 films with strong award credentials from other festivals: Andrei Zvyagintsev's *Vozvrashchenie* (*The Return*, Russia), Dagur Kari's *Noi Albinoi* (Iceland), Jamshed Usmanov's *Angel on the Right* (Tajikistan/France/ Italy/ Switzerland), Piotr Trzaskalski's *Edi* (Poland), Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (New Zealand/Germany), Santiago Loza's *Extrano* (*Strange*, Argentina), Carlos Sorin's *Historias minimas* (*Minimal Stories*, Argentina/ Spain), Julie Bertucelli's *Depuis qu' Otar est parti* (*Since Otar Left*, France/ Belgium), Sedigh Barmak's *Osama* (Afghanistan/ Japan/ Ireland), *Schultze Gets the Blues* (Germany), and Metod Povec's *Pod njenim oknom* (*Beneath Her Window*, Slovenia).

Not surprisingly, however, Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return* was awarded the Kingfisher, for the film certifies to the core the festival's traditional stance on supporting independent cinema. The story of two lads who are called from the streets of a provincial town by their mother to meet their long-lost father, *The Return* is remarkable for the acting performances of the boys, one of whom died shortly after the shooting was completed at the lakeside location site. The film, too, ends on a tragic note when the father places more and more difficult chores on the shoulders of the boys while taking them on a journey to an isolated island in the middle of a lake far from civilization. Zvyagintsev, who personally was on hand to receive the award, had this to say about a theme that has puzzled many an onlooker: "To a great extent the intent of my film is a mythological view of human life, and this is what I would like audiences to keep in mind before they see the film."

A Special Mention was given to Metod Povec's *Beneath Her Window*. The story of a 30-year-old woman who is awaking to a sad truth - that her life up to now has been pretty much a waste of time, a succession of missed chances, and a bundle of misguided relationships - the film features a strong acting performance by Polona Juh as Dusa. Caught in a web of commitments and obligations, Dusa has trouble enough with a dominating mother, but when her father returns home unexpectedly from a long trip abroad with a reptile in his suitcase, that's the last straw. Next, she breaks off her affair with an arrogant married lover and faces down a stalker who has been hanging around "beneath her window" in the middle of the night. Judging from the audience response at Ljubljana, *Beneath Her Window* should enjoy a good run in the local cinemas.

One of the hits of the current festival season, Michael Schorr's *Schultze Gets the Blues* won the runner-up Special Prize for Best Director in the Controcorrente (Upstream) competition at the Venice festival. A few weeks later, it opened the Hoder Filmtage to a friendly press and an enthusiastic audience. The same happened at the Ljubljana International Film Festival in Slovenia, where it was one of the front-runners for the Kingfisher Award. Next came the Gijon International Festival for Young People in Spain, where *Schultze* and Schorr finished off the year with twin awards for Best Film and Best Director. Not bad for a documentary director making his feature film debut.

Schultze (Horst Krause), a miner in eastern Germany, is given his early retirement papers. So what does a middle-aged single do with his time - outside of looking after his aged mother, fish from the trestle of

a railway bridge, spend his time in a bar with two buddies in the same sinking boat, and practice on his accordion for the dance polkas at the Miners' Club. One evening, however, he hears on the radio a Cajun tune from the Louisiana bayous - and he can't get the melody out of his mind. It changes his entire life. Upon the sudden death of his mother, his friends dig into the club's financial reserves and send Schultze off to the Deep South to compete in an accordion contest. No one gives a thought that Schultze can't speak a word of English, nor does he have the faintest idea where Louisiana is!

But that's when the fun really begins. With only his accordion as a travelling companion, he wanders from a cheap motel to a family restaurant to a nightclub bar to a country jamboree to that accordion contest he's supposed to compete in - of course, it turns out to be a bust. Unable to drive a car, Schultze hits on the idea of buying a dinky shrimpboat, and this becomes his home as he cruises through the bayous and ends up on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way he meets a fiddler at a Cajun jamboree, who plays that same polka tune he had heard on the radio. More encounters open up an entire new world for him: Czech folk musicians on the road, a friendly tête-à-tête with the coastguard police, a family on a houseboat, and at every turn in the road plain folks just like himself, who can hardly understand the lingo of some of their own neighbours anyway. A film packed with wit, humour, comedy, and one absurd twist after another, *Schultze Gets the Blues* features a tour-de-force performance by Horst Krause as Schultze, one of German cinema's best deadpan actors, who well deserves recognition for this role when the next Lolos roll around.

## 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.