

Toronto 2005

By Brandon Wee

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30th TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2005

As the Toronto International Film Festival (8-17 September 2005) delights in what some insiders claim is a position second to Cannes, it would make sense to examine the substance of this claim. Industry broadsheets are increasingly enamoured of Toronto, which despite not having an official marketplace, has managed to achieve the desired status as a time-sensitive breeding ground for Hollywood to test market their latest titles.

Moreover, to be positioned in the wake of a major continental spectacle like Cannes may present difficulties, since festivals perceived as challenging the European leader are often hard pressed to pay tribute through their own selections. As it happens, this year's Cannes' official victors shown at Toronto were featherweights - a reminder that no jury is beyond bias and that 'prestigious' awards are sometimes concerned with conferring latent box office success than recognising intelligent merit. The overrated *L'Enfant* (2005) by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne for instance, is an impossibly condescending exercise in sympathy for the poor, involving an unemployed lad who lives off his teenage girlfriend, impregnates her, sells the newborn, regrets it, then makes disastrous amends before developing a conscience, as if such waywardness is an underprivileged *thing*.

The other big league titles arrived respectably dressed yet felt cold underneath. The semi-autobiographical *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), about a dispossessed daughter who rebels against her imperious father, is Wang Xiaoshuai's retrospect on the consequences of a 1960s Chinese government policy encouraging urban folks to relocate to rural regions to initiate industry, in part as a political defence mechanism against external threat. *The Forsaken Land* (2005), Vimukthi Jayasundara's minimalist interpretation of Sri Lanka's ongoing civil war, is expressed as anonymous expanses of hinterland inhabited by a mélange of despaired and oppressed characters, recalling more solemn renditions of Buddhadeb Dasgupta's recent films. More critically engaging was Michael Haneke's hammering of society's liberal intelligentsia in *Caché* (2005), marketed incorrectly as a voyeuristic thriller - although to be fair, it would be impossible to sell otherwise. As with *Funny Games* (1997), it involves a middle class family who appear to be the victims of violence.

For audiences not partial to American cinema, Toronto also figures a reliable, albeit expensive excursion to sample assorted trends in mainstream world cinema. In *Three Times* (2005), whose Chinese title actually means "The Best of Times," Hou Hsiao-hsien strings a triptych of short films set in 1966, 1911 and 2005 - titled *A Time For Love*, *A Time For Freedom*, and *A Time For Youth* respectively - with Chang Chen and Shu Qi as the leads in each. It's a gorgeous palette of light and shadow - cinema opportunistically idealised, where colour goes agreeably with composition, and where devotees might recognise each episode evoking the setting and mood of Hou's previous films. I have since fantasised Chang's and Shu's characters as inevitable reincarnations of themselves in each era: lovers who find, conciliate, then lose each other in the balmy twilights of Kaohsiung; in the opulent interiors of a turn-of-the-century Dadaocheng brothel; and in the neon-soaked *urbanitas* of Taipei.

In Majid Majidi's *The Willow Tree* (2005), Yusuf, blinded as a child, witnesses his life freefall after regaining his sight during middle age. A poignant accompaniment to *The Colour of Paradise* (1999), the philosophy of Majidi's latest film argues that what is invariably taken for granted is not just the privilege of sight, but also the rapture that accompanies the reversal of disability. A memorable sequence shows a breathless Yusuf (a trenchant Parvis Parastui) stalking a hospital corridor after recognising his recovery, unaware however that the seeds of discontent have been unwittingly sown. *Perpetual Motion* (2005), Ning Ying's study of four middle-aged women is played out like a caper with a conscience. A crafty socialite invites three colourful girlfriends to dinner, determined to expose her husband's mistress. Full of smart symbolism and churlish humour, Ning's latest film does not mince its words - it's after all text-driven - in denouncing the hegemonic view of women as sexless and disenfranchised beings.

Lemons also soured the screens. Another parent-child mural, Zhang Yang's autobiographical *Sunflower* (2004) positions its 30-year overview of a modernising China from the Cultural Revolution's onset as a

backdrop to a tense relationship between an overbearing father (a masterly Sun Haiying) and his son. Zhang's melodramatic detour (from 2001's challenging *Quitting*) is a river of maudlin currents, the most dangerous of which is the deluge of Confucian filial piety and generational discord that risks an essentialist reading of characters and situations as cultural archetypes.

Similarly, *A History of Violence* (2005) begs the question: Has David Cronenberg sold out? Delirious reviews have tossed about words like "masterpiece" and theorized on the theme of violence as if this were something groundbreaking when it is nothing more than mainstream studio bait: celebrity power, slick assembly, entertaining to a point, yet largely uninspiring. Viggo Mortensen charms as the reticent model dad who lets slip his unflattering past, but a contrived Ed Harris characterization and a baffling William Hurt cameo distort the film's cadence, erstwhile commendable.

Nevertheless, the highlight of the week was the completion of two different trilogies about the settling of scores. Park Chan-wook, for whom *OldBoy* (2004) and *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance* (2001) have engendered instant hero worship, presented the concluding chapter in his much hyped "vengeance trilogy." Unlike its forerunners, *Sympathy For Lady Vengeance* (2005) does not bubble over with testosterone and blood; its stock character is a woman who devises a ploy to exact revenge on a man after she is made a scapegoat for the sadistic murder of a child. Although the film's gentle build-up is pleasing, the heavy-handed final act renders its finale disappointing.

On the other hand, Nicolas Winding Refn's dual follow-up to *Pusher* (1996) - *With Blood on My Hands* *Pusher 2* (2004) and *I'm The Angel of Death-Pusher 3* (2004), is an engrossing 5-hour marathon of criminal mischief. In the 1996 original, Frank, a drug-peddling pawn is betrayed by his friend Tonny during a deal and winds up in debt to Milo, a drug lord.

Revisiting the latter characters nearly a decade on in *Pusher 2*, a just-released Tonny (Mads Mickelsen) finds his footing between raising his newborn and settling a debt with his unnerving gangster dad; in *Pusher 3*, an aging Milo (Zlatko Burić) learns that his fat cat status is being challenged by enterprising youths and is pressured to get his hands dirty at a time when his daughter needs them clean. Refn's accomplishment is best enjoyed in a single viewing.

References

AWARDS

People's Choice Award: *Tsotsi* (Gavin Hood; UK-South Africa 2005)

Discovery Award: *Look Both Ways* (Sarah Watt; Australia 2005)

FIPRESCI Prize: *Sa-Kwa* (Kang Yi-Kwan; South Korea 2005)

Citytv Award for Best Canadian First Feature (ex aequo): *Familia* (Louise Archambault, 2005) and *The Life and Hard Times of Guy Terrifico* (Michael Mabbott, 2005)

Toronto - City Award for Best Canadian Feature Film: *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2005)

Bravo! FACT Short Cuts Canada Award: *Big Girl* (Renuka Jeyapalan, 2005)

Honourable Mention: *There's a Flower in My Pedal* (Andrea Dorfman, 2005)

Author Information

Brandon WEE lives in Toronto. He has written for *Asia Pacific Arts* (Los Angeles), *Cineaste* (New York), *Cinema Scope* (Toronto), *Ricepaper* (Vancouver), and *Senses of Cinema* (Melbourne).