

Toronto 2004

By Ben Viccari

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CANADIAN FEATURES AT THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2004

Again I looked for interesting Canadian productions at Toronto's International Film Festival 2004. This year, sad to relate, I found only few that warranted even faint praise. At the top of my list was the Festival's gala opener, *Being Julia*, produced by Robert Lantos - his second venture with Hungarian director István Szabó and like the first, *Sunshine*, *Being Julia* is set outside Canada. It's an adaptation of an almost forgotten Somerset Maugham novel, the story of Julia Lambert, an ageing but not yet fading diva of the London stage in the 1930s. I found *Being Julia* absorbing, amusing and with an extraordinary sense of location and period.

Clean, directed by France's Olivier Assayas, is a Canadian film in the sense that the character of Albrecht as played by Nick Nolte typifies the kind of Canadian who would support peacekeeping, environmental responsibility and a second chance for transgressors.

Having survived education at a Jesuit college in England, I got a real kick and some good laughs out of *Saint Ralph*, about a boy who runs in the Boston Marathon. This first feature for director Michael McGowan has provided us with a "feel good" movie that never lapses into sticky sentimentality and never attempts to rise above its station. *Saint Ralph* is an effortless success.

Four Canadian comedies that lost their way were *Male Fantasy*, *Jimmywork*, and the highly-touted couple, *Phil the Alien* and *Childstar*. One of the best however is *Wilby Wonderful*, an excellent comedy by Daniel McIvor.

An odd thought: Canadian comedians as both writers and performers have long made it in the United States. How strange that homemade comedy films are so unfunny? And the writers of *Male Fantasy*, *Phil the Alien* and *Childstar* should please note that there's only one Woody Allen, and he writes his own scripts. And was *Ill-Fated* really a comedy? You could have fooled me! This entry in the trailer park genre takes place in the British Columbia interior where the dialogue vies with Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese to see how many times the f-word can be packed into a single sentence.

I regret not having seen Vadim Jean's comedy *Jiminy Glick in La La Wood*, partly shot during last year's Toronto film festival, with Martin Short, an expert comedian, portraying backwoods film critic.

Greater clarity was evident in the two Canadian documentaries which deal with the necessity to contain mankind's penchant for self-destruction. *Shake Hands With the Devil* is 90 min long. Director Raymont takes his title from Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire's recent book on his return to Rwanda ten years after his traumatic experiences there as head of the tiny UN peacekeeping mission. He was forced to stand by while 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred in a genocidal fury by Hutu extremists.

Scared Sacred, written and directed by documentarist Velcrow Ripper which won the Festival's Special Jury Award deals, like *Notre Musique* and *Shake Hands With the Devil*, with cataclysmic events, and whether hope lies within even the darkest moments of history. On the eve of the millennium, Ripper set out on a journey which took him five years to complete. His object: to find whether humanity can transform the "scared" into its anagram. And to Ripper "sacred" does not signify any particular religious belief but the expression of mankind's ability to suffer tragedy and emerge with the will to reaffirm a belief in regeneration of spirit and an actively support this belief all the more credit to this country that it has been made by a Canadian.

Author Information

Ben Viccari is a Toronto writer, editor and television commentator. He was a founding director of the resuscitated Toronto Film Society in 1948. Before coming to Canada, Ben Viccari was a story analyst with the Rank Organization and has retained an enduring passion for film.