

# Montreal 2006

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## 30<sup>th</sup> MONTREAL WORLD FILM FESTIVAL

Amidst speculations as to its presence and particularly its future, Montreal World Film Festival (24 Aug-4 Sept, 2006) opened the curtain with optimism and pride to celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Gone were the star-studded days, lavish parties and long queues in front of the theatres, but the aficionados were still there, rain or shine, and the program, true to its commitment, was diverse and explorative, with evident partiality to the lesser known cinemas.

Over two hundred features from at least 76 countries - from Haiti to Afghanistan with a good dose of French films - stirred up the curiosity of the public habitually fed on Hollywood products. The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural make-up of Montreal was evident in the diversity of the languages spoken in the corridors, especially in the way many people were trying to see a film from their own country that perhaps would cure their nostalgia in a dark room on a wide screen. The abundance of films from Iran, for instance, almost turned the corridors of the Quartier Latin multiplex into a social club and the Chinese, Indian or Latin American Montrealers were just as enthusiastic for the short voyage back home without emptying the purse.

Among the 22 films in competing for the Grand Prix of the Americas, US films were conspicuously absent. Canada was represented by one film, Stéphane Lapointe's *The Secret Life of Happy People*, which was also the closing film of the festival. Chinese filmmaker Dai Sijie's *The Chinese Botanist's Daughter*, set in the 1980s China was co-produced with France and Canada.

Notable Bengali filmmaker Goutam Ghose's latest film *Yatra (The Journey)* evoked the Mughal glories that inspired many splendid films depicting the *kotha*, where sophisticated dancers indulged with men of means. Set in two parallel time zones, the film graciously moved the spectator back and forth- from dream to reality - in a very subjective way. Despite its irreproachable qualities, however, *The Journey* failed to engage the audience; the casting was not appropriate and the pieces somehow did not connect.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf packed up his Makhmalbaf Film House in Tehran sometime ago to seek brighter futures where he can breathe the fresh air of freedom. However, this move has not been beneficial to his craft. His *Sex and Philosophy*, shot in Tajikistan did not deliver what was expected and *Shaere Zobale-ha, (Scream of the Ants)* which he shot in India - from Rajasthan to Varanasi - does not justify its existence.

A young couple from Iran (the man speaks English with a French accent and utters some French sentences now and then, which even surprises his wife, but not the audience who knows that it is a French co-production), travel to India to search for the Perfect Man. Now and then, there are tirades (and lectures) about Hinduism which are naive, as are the shots of the funeral rites beside the Ganges river. When I saw this film earlier in New Delhi with an Indian audience, I admired their patience for not having walked out after the first ten minutes.

A crowd pleaser was a film from Japan, *Naga Sango (A Long Walk)* by Eiji Okuda about a doomed friendship between an embittered old man and an equally embittered child abused by her imbalanced mother and her violent boyfriend. Evidently, it was not an easy role to play for a five year old girl and it is a mystery how the director extracted such performance from her. Her presence at the festival certainly heightened emotions and led to some cynical comments concerning the attention the film received.

From China, *Snow in the Wind* by Yang Yazhou was about cinema and life in a remote corner of northwest China. The talented director's previous film, *Loach is also a Fish* was also shown in the festival in the World Cinema section.

From Canada, Hunt Hoe's horror comedy, *First Bite*, starring David La Haye was shown in Out of Competition along with *Lonely Hearts* (US) by Todd Robinson starring John Travolta and Salma Hayek.

In the Focus on the World Cinema section *Iki genc kiz (Two Girls)* by Kutlug Ataman from Turkey (please see my review of Istanbul); from the Czech Republic Věra Chytilová's *Hezké chvíle bez záruky (Pleasant Moments)*; from the US, *Just Like the Son* by Morgan J. Freeman were some of the other noteworthy entries.

In the Documentaries section, Montrealer Phyllis Katrapani's poetic essay, *Within Reach*, in seven parts explored the relationship between people, objects and memory, and the artist. A house one moves into that carries the traces of a family friend who is no more; a little child who navigates her way in a big world by trial and error - incessantly trying to button her jacket; people who leave their home to search for a different life in a new country who carry objects from home as if memory is not reliable - a ring, an alumni book, few grains of earth from hometown; eyes that speak without words. With her previous *Ithaca* and *Home Within Reach* somehow completes the "home" trilogy, somewhat settling the accounts (interrogations) of the director or those others born in a country different from their parents' origins, who try to attribute a meaning to their special identity.

During this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the festival paid tribute to Quebec actor Rémy Girard with the screening of *The Decline of the American Empire* (Denys Arcand, 1986), *Kalamazoo* (Marc-André Forcier, 1988), *In the Belly of the Dragon* (Yves Simoneau, 1989) and *The Barbarian Invasions* (Denys Arcand, 2003); to French actress Bulle Ogier; Swiss actor Bruno Ganz and Kiyoshi Atsumi, the Japanese actor with "Tora-san" reputation.

Egyptian Shadi Abdel Salam's *Al-Mummia (The Night of Counting the Years, 1969)* was shown as a "re-discovered classic."

The closing night the defiant and no-less-than-triumphant Serge Losique, the eternal president of the festival announced the dates of the next year's festival. With the loss of the sponsorships from main governmental organizations - Telefilm Canada, Sodex, etc.- the last two years have been stressful. But as far as he was concerned, it was business as usual.

## References

### AWARDS

#### **The Grand Prix of the Americas ex aequo**

*Naga Sango (A Long Walk, Japan)*

dir Eiji Okuda

*O Maior Amor du monde (The Greatest Love of All, Brazil)*

dir Carlos Diegues

#### **Special Prize of the Jury**

*Snow in the Wind (China)*

dir Yang Yazhou

#### **Best Director**

Hans Petter Moland (Norway), for *Comrade Pederson*

#### **Best artistic contribution**

Guy Dufaux (France-Canada) for Dai Sijie's *The Chinese Botanist's Daughter*

#### **Best Actress**

Ni Ping (China) in *Snow in the Wind* by Yang Yazhou

#### **Best Actor**

Filip Peeters (Belgium-Spain) in *Hell in Tangier*

dir Frank van Mechelen

#### **Best Script**

*Warchild (Germany-Slovenia)*

dir Christian Wagner

**FIPRESCI and Ecumenical Jury**

*Naga Sango* (*A Long Walk*, Japan)

dir Eiji Okuda

**Most Popular Canadian Film and Public Prize**

Dai Sijie's *The Chinese Botanist's Daughter* (France-Canada)

**First Prize for Short Film**

*Revolution* (Belgium)

dir Xavier Diskeuve

**Jury prize for Short Film**

*Checkpoint*

dir. Ben Phelps

**Author Information**

Gönül DÖNMEZ-COLIN is an independent researcher and writer whose publications include *Women, Islam and Cinema*, *Cinemas of the Other: A personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia*, *Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (ed.); *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (Reaktion Books), and *Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema* (2014).