

Montreal 2007

By Ron Holloway

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31st MONTREAL WORLD FILM FESTIVAL

Nic Balthazar's *Ben X* (Belgium-Netherlands) was the clear winner at the 31st Montreal World Film Festival (23 August to 3 September 2007). Besides sharing the Grand Prize of the Americas with Claude Miller's *Un secret* (France), it received the Ecumenical Prize and was voted the Audience Award. Not bad for a critic-turned-director making his debut feature. The story of a mildly autistic lad who is constantly put upon by a couple bullies at a technical school, the youth retreats into his own world and finds some refuge in video games on his computer. Before writing and directing this screen version of his own bestselling novel, penned to increase literacy among Belgian youths, Nic Balthazar had also developed *Ben X* into a successful play.

Another audience favourite was awarded the runner-up Special Jury Grand Prize. In Ayelet Menahemi's *Noodle* (Israel) a six-year-old Chinese boy gets left behind when his mother, an illegal alien, gets picked up on the street and deported. Left holding the bag is a middle-aged, twice-widowed El Al flight attendant, who had employed the boy's mother as her cleaning woman. Feeling guilty, the more so because she is without a child of her own, the woman's concern leads to a highly improbable but effective solution. To return the boy to his mother, she packs him secretly into her own onboard baggage on a flight to the Far East!

Family tales, mostly on the morbid side, were also featured attractions in the competition. In Latif Lahlou's written-and-directed *Samir fi adayaa* (*Samira's Garden*, Morocco), a woman in the prime of life is burdened with an impotent husband. Her sexual desires and forced isolation lead to an affair with the nephew of her husband, a young virile male who has been placed in her care as governess. When the relationship is discovered, the woman finds herself more isolated than before. Although for my taste more a critique of Arabic Muslim customs than a refined work of cinematic art, *Samira's Garden* was awarded Best Screenplay and the FIPRESCI (International Critics) Prize.

In Emile Gaudreault's self-styled comedy, *Comment survivre à ma mère* (*Surviving My Mother*, Canada), a negligent mother, who has just gotten rid of her own ailing mother, decides it's time to get to know her 21-year-old daughter better. But the more she digs into her daughter's life, the more her own world gets turned upside down. For who would have guessed that the nympho web-cruising daughter is carrying on a torrid affair with the local priest! *Surviving My Mother* was voted the Most Popular Canadian Film by the audience.

In Jacob Berger's *1 Journée* (*1 Day*, Switzerland) we follow events as seen by individual members of a family - father, mother, young son - throughout the course of a single day. And as fate would have it, each person in the film views events differently and in such a way that the audience too gets drawn into the reflective process. The husband-father believes he might have run someone over while driving in a morning rain. The wife-mother discovers that she has been betrayed by her husband in the course of the afternoon. Later in the day, the 8-year-old son forms a warming relationship with the young girl in the neighbouring apartment, whose mother in turn has been visited that morning by his father. Although the point of *1 Day* is never quite clear, the overlaps do indeed intrigue. Jacob Berger, who collaborated on the screenplay, was awarded Best Director.

And in Volker Einrauch's *Der andere Junge* (*The Other Boy*, Germany) two neighbouring Hamburg couples, the best of friends, don't realize that their adolescent sons are anything but that. When one is driven by the sadistic behaviour of the other to kill his tormentor in blind rage, his parents are drawn into the tragic affair. Andrea Sawatzki, in the role of the afflicted and helpless mother trying to cover up the crime, was deservedly awarded Best Actress. Volker Einrauch is a cult director to keep an eye on. With a dozen feature films to his credit, made most ly for television, the unexpected twists and turns in his crime-oriented tales is what make them both amusing and engrossing in a Raymond Chandler vein. *The Other Boy*, directed as

usual in close collaboration with screenwriter Lothar Kurzawa, is a crime tale that doesn't let the cat out of the bag until the last scene.

Hollywood actor Jon Voigt was honoured with a special award for "exceptional contribution to cinematographic art." Although Voigt well deserved his award, it was arguably for the wrong film in his distinguished career. For he was honoured in conjunction with what was termed a "Mormonsploitation" film, Christopher Cain's *September Dawn*. Indeed, the film's release sparked controversy across the breadth of North America. In this fumbling historic epic cum romantic drama, Voigt plays a Mormon fanatic who triggered the Mountain Meadows Massacre in Utah in 1857, in which around 120 men, women, and children in an Arkansas wagon train on its way to California lost their lives. That the tragedy happened on 11 September 1857, exactly 150 years before the sixth anniversary of the 9/11/01 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, is somewhat beside the point. The big question was why *September Dawn* had to wait 20 months before its official release on August 24, the opening day of the Montreal World Film Festival.

Back on 22 January 2006, John Anderson of the New York Times penned a thumbnail sketch of *September Dawn* from a Los Angeles editing room, predicting that "there will be fresh debate when it finally reaches the public" - meaning that the Church of Latter Day Saints may have to dust off its historical records. The debate began when *September Dawn* opened the FFM and promptly went into release. The cascade of pro and contra reviews (mostly contra) were so plentiful that Wikipedia opened an individual website on the film, listing 35 nation-wide commentaries (at this writing) on both the production and the historical event that triggered it. In the meanwhile, the Mormon Church has taken pains to memorialize the victims of the tragedy. LDS historians, too, are collaborating on a book about the Mountain Meadows Massacre, to be published shortly by the Oxford University Press. It will cover the role that Bishop John D. Lee played in perpetrating the crime, for which he was tried and executed 20 years after the fact. Mormon Bishop Jacob Samuelson, Jon Voigt's fictional character in the film, is based on the real-life John D. Lee.

When I asked festival director Serge Losique whether he had anticipated the uproar over the film, he responded that "film festivals are there to promote dialogue, not to boycott the art of the cinema." Further, Losique underscored how Montreal audiences still remember Jon Voigt's stellar appearances in John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978). In fact, during the press conference for *September Dawn*. Voigt was asked by a fan when he would shoot another film with Dustin Hoffman like *Midnight Cowboy*. Queried about his own view on *September Dawn*, Jon Voigt summarized the film's message as "courageous and universal - it tackles the problem of intolerance in our society."

Another FFM tribute honoured French actress Sophie Marceau. Her presence - along with that of French directors Claude Lelouch and Claude Miller - can be reckoned a windfall for the Montreal festival. A quarter-century ago, Sophie Marceau, the attractive daughter of a French truck driver, took the nation by storm when, at the tender age of 14, she appeared in Claude Pinoteau's *La Boum* (*The Party*, 1980). Since then, Marceau has starred in over 30 films and was once tapped to serve as the figurative model for the French national emblem. The FFM tribute also honoured Sophie Marceau as a film director. Directed, partially written, and starring Sophie Marceau, *La disparue de Deauville* (*Trivial*, France, 2007), a thriller set in a luxury hotel in Deauville, marks her second try at directing a film. She plays a double role in this caper about a hotel owner who has mysteriously disappeared.

As warming as the reception for Sophie Marceau and her actor husband Christophe Lambert was, nothing in the course of the festival matched the standing ovation given to Claude Lelouch. The occasion was the Montreal premiere of his *Roman der Gare* (*Crossing Tracks*), starring Fanny Ardant as a wily pulp mystery writer who schemes to get rid of her discontented ghost-writer before he spills the beans. As for Claude Miller's presence at the FFM, he walked away on closing night with a share of the Grand Prize of the Americas for a film that he had just introduced as an official entry in the competition. *Un Secret*, a Shoah tale set during and after the Second World War, delves into a family secret that gradually unravels to reveal adultery and a subsequent cover-up.

The FFM tribute to Fernand Dansereau marked the second occasion this year that the veteran Canadian filmmaker has been honoured by his peers. Previously awarded the prestigious Prix de Québec, Fernand Dansereau was one of the pioneers of the "direct cinema" documentary movement at the National Film Board of Canada. His credits stretch over 50 films in 50 years in the multiple capacity of director, producer,

screenwriter, cinematographer, editor, and production manager. The Montreal festival honoured Dansereau as a feature film director with a screening of *La brunante* (*Twilight*), the fiction story of a woman in her seventies who decides to commit suicide before burdening her children with an oncoming Alzheimer affliction. But before departing this world, Madeleine - played with tact and insight by Monique Mercure, the *grande dame* of Québécoise cinema - revisits favourite places of her youth on the Gaspé peninsula, together with a young woman who is also facing a similar life crisis. *Twilight* was a festival highlight.

The fourth FFM tribute was awarded to Spanish producer Andrés Vicente Gómez. Herein lies a story. The tale of a festival war that badly crippled the FFM - until just recently, when Vicente Gómez was elected president of the influential International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF). Of course, the primary reason why Andrés Vicente Gómez was present in Montreal was to honour his exceptional contribution to cinematographic art. At Serge Losique's request, he presented four memorable films from his producer's portfolio: Carlos Saura's *Oh, Carmela!* (1990), Fernando Truéba's *Belle Epoque* (1992), Álex de Iglesia's *El día de la bestia* (*The Day of the Beast*, 1995), Santiago Segura's *Torrente, el brazo tonto de la ley* (*Torrente, the Silly Arm of the Law*, 1998).

He crowned this with one of the key films in the competition: Ray Loriga's *Teresa: el cuerpo de Cristo* (*Teresa: The Body of Christ*, Spain, 2006), awarded the Prize for Best Artistic Contribution at Montreal. Indeed, *Teresa: The Body of Christ*, the story of St. Teresa of Avila, is a role cut to the intellectual talents of actress Paz Vega. Under Ray Loriga's direction, the saint is depicted not only as a remarkable woman who founded the Discalced Carmelite Order to offset the excesses of a corrupt 16th-century Spain. Further, her mystic writings set her apart as a forerunner in Spanish lyric poetry.

This said, the films produced by Andrés Vicente Gómez obviously helped the festival enormously. But the Spanish producer was also present at Montreal in a manifest show of FIAPF support for Serge Losique. Back in 2003, Montreal had unfortunately been stripped of its A-festival recognition by Bertrand Mollier, at that time FIAPF's contentious Director General, who has since left the organization. Montreal fought back, and won, what was termed in some circles as a festival war. That is, if a witless rhubarb over the question of convenient festival dates can be called a war.

The rhubarb began when the Venice festival under director Moritz de Hadeln favoured dates that would cover the first week of September - dates, however, that the Montreal festival had occupied for the past quarter century. At the same time, the Toronto festival under Piers Handling favoured earlier dates in September to avoid conflict with those of the New York Film Festival, at that time scheduled in mid-September. Although a Toronto overlap with Montreal was theoretically possible, it was not at all probable. But Toronto had a wild card in the deck. If Montreal could be nudged aside, then Telefilm Canada might support Toronto's growing film market with extra funding. As a lucrative umbrella organization, Telefilm supports Canadian film festivals with subtitling, booking costs, guest appearances, and related marketing patronage.

Montreal, by contrast, had regularly booked its dates with an eye on Labour Day - a Canadian as well as American holiday - as the festival's closing night. Furthermore, since Montreal dovetailed with the Telluride Film Festival in the Colorado Rockies by sharing the same Labour Day weekend, films and directors were easily interchangeable, to say nothing of sharing print and travel costs. The fly in the ointment was the ever changing dates of the Montreal festival. Since Labour Day always fell on the first Monday of September, the Montreal dates consequently shifted back and forth in the month of August and regularly overlapped with those of Venice. And so the festival war came to pass.

In 2003, during the Cannes film festival, Moritz de Hadeln complained to FIAPF that Montreal was trespassing on calendar dates reserved to Venice. He argued that the Montreal dates of that year, scheduled from August 27 to September 7, usurped those of Venice, scheduled from August 28 to September 8. What de Hadeln forgot to mention was that Venice was traditionally recognized as a "September festival" - just as Cannes was down in the FIAPF books as a customary "May festival." To muddy the waters even more, de Hadeln argued that since both Venice and Montreal were listed on the official festival calendar as "Competitive Feature Film Festivals" (aka "A-Category Competition Festivals"), the question was whether or not Serge Losique could arbitrarily "manipulate" his festival dates without receiving the permission of FIAPF.

The upshot? Moritz de Hadeln caught the ear of Bertrand Mollier, FIAPF's newly appointed Secretary

General. And Mollier responded by casting his lot with Venice. Mollier not only honoured Venice's protest, but he also went so far as to cancel Montreal's membership in FIAPF. The FIAPF decision had repercussions in Canada. Telefilm Canada cancelled its monetary support of the Montreal World Film Festival. The blow hit hard. For the next three festivals, the FFM had to limp along on its own, relying primarily on a faithful audience and some funding from Montreal and Quebec film officials

In 2005, however, the situation went from bad to worse. That's when Moritz de Hadeln was ousted as Venice festival director, only to accept a nebulous offer from an entertainment conglomerate to found and organize a brand new Montreal International Film Festival. Now, with two film festivals in Montreal - the FFM in August-September and the MIFF in mid-October - the home audience had to decide between the two at the ticket office. The FFM thrived. The MIFF turned out to be a bust. Not only did the Montreal audience remain faithful to the FFM, but key representatives of national film offices the world over also remained loyal to Serge Losique.

Last year, for the FFM's 30th anniversary, funding from both Montreal and Quebec coffers increased, although not enough to celebrate an anniversary in style. This year, according to the Danièle Cauchard, FFM's vice-president and programming director, the festival was nearly back on course with more local, national, and international support. The FIAPF stamp of approval came when Andrés Vicente Gómez embraced Serge Losique on national television at the opening night gala. Danièle Cauchard crowned this occasion at the festival press conference with a blistering attack on Telefilm Canada for still withholding needed funding support. Her blast drew spontaneous applause from critics and media professionals.

This contretemps forced Telefilm Canada to issue the following news release: "Telefilm Canada is pleased to have recently provided financing for subtitling at the World Film Festival, in order to allow Quebec audiences to have access to films in both official languages. It is regrettable that during the opening of an international event, a festival director would choose to make unfortunate comments; the focus should instead be on celebrating cinema. Since April 2007, Telefilm has been working closely with the FFM to conclude a viable agreement regarding its funding for 2007-2008."

References

AWARDS

Feature Films

Grand Prize of the Americas (ex-aequo)

Ben X (Belgium-Netherlands), dir Nic Balthazar

Un Secret (*A Secret*, France), dir Claude Miller

Special Jury Grand Prize

Noodle (Israel), dir Ayelet Menahemi

Best Director

1 Journée (*1 Day*, Switzerland), dir Jacob Berger

Best Artistic Contribution

Teresa: el cuerpo de Cristo (*Teresa: The Body of Christ*, Spain), dir Ray Loriga

Best Actress

Andrea Sawatzki, *Der andere Junge* (*The Other Boy*, Germany), dir Volker Einrauch

Best Actor (ex-aequo)

Filipe Duarte and Tomás Almeida, *A outra margem* (*The Other Side*, Portugal-Brazil), dir Luís Filipe Rocha

Best Screenplay

Latif Lahlou, *Samira fi adayaa* (*Samira's Garden*, Morocco), dir Latif Lahlou

Innovation Award

D75-Tartina City (Chad-France-Morocco), dir Issa Serge Coelo

Short Films

1st Prize

Songes d'une femme de ménage (Cleaning Lady's Dreams, Belgium), dir Banu Akseki

Jury Award

L.H.O. (Germany), dir Jan Zabeil

Zenith Awards - First Films World Competition

Golden Zenith

La caja (The Wooden Box, Spain), dir Juan Carlos Falcón

Silver Zenith

Malos hábitos (Bad Habits, Mexico), dir Simon Bross

Bronze Zenith

Dong sun (Bamboo Shoots, China), dir Jian Yi

Special Mention

Chelovek-veter (Wind-Man, Russia), dir Khuat Akhmetov

Other Awards

Audience Award - Most Popular Film of Festival

Ben X (Belgium-Netherlands), dir Nic Balthazar

Audience Award - Most Popular Canadian Film

Comment survivre à ma mère (Surviving My Mother), dir Emile Gaudreault

Glauber Rocha Award - Best Latin American Film

Partes Usadas (Used Parts, Mexico), dir Aarón Fernández

Best Documentary Film

Nach der Musik (A Father's Music, Germany), dir Igor Heitzmann

Best Canadian Short Film

La Lili à Gilles (Gilles' Lili), dir David Uloth

FIPRESCI (International Film Critics) Prize

Feature film

Samira fi adayaa (Samira's Garden, Morocco), dir Latif Lahlou

Short film

Bonne nuit Malik (Good Night Malik, France), dir Bruno Danan

Ecumenical Prize

Ben X (Belgium-Netherlands), dir Nic Balthazar

Special Awards - Exceptional Contribution to Cinematographic Art

Fernand Dansereau (Canada), director, producer, writer, editor, cinematographer

Andrés Vicente Gómez (Spain), producer, writer

Sophie Marceau (France), actress, director

Jon Voigt (USA), actor

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.