

Berlin 1999

By Ron Holloway

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WHEN THE INTERNATIONAL JURY chose to ignore John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (UK) for Golden Bear honours in favour of giving the Grand Prix to Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (USA), you can guess what happened next: audiences jammed Berlin venues to see *Shakespeare in Love* immediately after the festival closed, to be followed a few weeks later with the Academy Award victory. By an odd coincidence, Berlinale history had repeated itself - for thirty years ago, back in 1969, the international jury had bypassed John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (USA) for the Golden Bear, only to suffer a bit of embarrassment when both director and film went on to win Academy Awards. At least this time around, Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, the screenwriters on *Shakespeare in Love*, were awarded a Silver Bear for "Single Artistic Achievement" - an acclamation that is puzzling, distinguished though it may sound.

Not even this odd decision by a fickle jury, however, could minimize the fact that the 49th Berlinale went down in the books as one of the best in recent memory. Almost daily, the competition offered something worthy or unusual. Robert Altman's *Cookie's Fortune* (USA) featured the legendary Patricia Neal in the title role about the mysterious death of an ageing eccentric widow in a Faulknerian tale set in the south. Meryl Streep received an Oscar Nomination for her role as the cancer-ridden mother in another of Carl Franklin's poignant "family" films, *One True Thing* (USA). Bertrand Tavernier's *Ça commence aujourd'hui* (*It All Starts Today*, France, FIPRESCI Prize), set in an industrial town in northern France, featured remarkably agile and disarming performances by non-professional kids in this heart-rending story of a schoolteacher who breaks the rules to serve humanity in spite of the consequences. And Thomas Vincent's *Karnaval* (Belgium-France-Switzerland), a fine first feature film, explores a casual love affair between a young woman (Sylvie Testud) and an Arab lad (Amar Ben Abdallah) against the background of a traditional six-week carnival in the port city of Dunkirk that fills the screen from start to finish.

Discoveries in the Berlinale competition? One of them was definitely Soren Kragh-Jacobsen's *Mifunes sidste sang - Dogme 3* (*Mifune's Last Song - Dogma 3*, Denmark-Sweden), the third Danish film produced in accordance with the Dogma 95 Manifesto. Its attraction was not so much the ambivalent Dogma attributes (will there be a Dogma 4 with the rules broken again by attaching the director's name to it?) as the deft splicing of familiar thematic elements from Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (USA, 1989) with the manic performance by Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune in Akira Kurosawa's classic *Shichibnin no Samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, Japan, 1954). *Mifune's Last Song* was awarded the Grand Prize of the Jury.

Another discovery was Adolf Dresen's *Nachtgestalten* (*Night Shapes*, Germany), a tightly narrated portrait of outcasts and losers existing on the edge of Berlin society on the very eve of the city's new destiny as the German capital. Little doubt, more will be heard from Dresen, a major directorial talent whose roots are in eastern Germany. Yet another discovery was Yesim Ustaoglu's *Journey to the Sun* (Turkey - Netherlands - Germany), awarded both the Blue Angel and Peace Film Prizes. Ustaoglu pulls no punches in describing the range of prejudice facing a young Turk in Istanbul who befriends a Kurd coming from the same general area in eastern Anatolia. But she also touches a sensitive nerve when she has the Turk return back to the village of his dead Kurd friend - only to find it wiped from the face of the earth to make way for a highly questionable dam project.

The major attractions in the International Forum of Young Cinema? The lucky holders of a ticket for the world premiere of Aki Kaurismäki's *Juha* (Finland) at the Delphi Palast, sat in awe as this remarkable "silent film" with live orchestral music and intermittent "effects" (e.g., the closing of a door) from the soundtrack added new dimensions to the traditional melodrama. Pyotr Luzik's *Okraina* (*Outskirts*, Russia) also returned to a pre-Socialist Realism tradition of Russian cinema to narrate, in powerful images, a modern-day uprising in the provinces against corruption and bureaucracy in the capital. On the documentary side, two German entries were standouts: Barbara and Winfried Junge's *Brigitte und Marcel - Golzower Lebenswege* (*Brigitte and Marcel - Golzow Lifelines*) adds to the "longest documentary project" in history (1961-1998) by weighing the poignant destiny of the one child in first-grade classroom, who died later as a young adult, through the

"lifeline" of her son Marcel. And Volker Koepp's *Herr Zwilling und Frau Zuckermann*, filmed in the border-city of Czernowitz (today part of the Ukraine), traces a lingering but rapidly disappearing Jewish culture through the reminiscences of elderly friends born early in this century.

Last year, Berlin festival directors Moritz de Hadeln (Main Program) and Ulrich Gregor (Forum) booked 45 films from nine Asian countries, while this time only 30 entries from eleven countries were programmed, as follows: Israel (9), Japan (8), China (8), India (4), Iran (3), Kazakhstan (2), Korea (2), Turkey (1), Philippines (1), Vietnam (1), and Azerbaijan (1). Since Berlin ranks as a premiere showcase for discovering talented Asian directors, is Asian cinema perhaps on the decline? Hardly. As if to underscore that point, the Forum promoted Kim Ji-Woon's *Choyongghan kajok* (*The Quiet Family*, Korea), a combination of black comedy and horror thriller, on the front cover of its festival catalogue.

True, some of the Berlinale entries listed as Asian productions or co-productions didn't seem very Oriental at all. Tony Bui's *Three Seasons* (Vietnam-USA, Competition), with cult actor Harvey Keitel as a soldier returning to Vietnam to look for the daughter he fathered, is aimed at the American audience. Amos Kollek's *Fiona* (Israel-USA, Panorama), the sequel to his award winning Sue with Anna Thompson again in the title lead, was shot on the streets of New York by an Israeli director who lives in Manhattan. And Nickolas Perry's *Speedway Junky* (Israel-USA, Panorama), a Las Vegas tale by an American director making his debut, just happened to be co-produced by Golan-Globus's LA-based Magic Entertainment.

Thomas Arslan's *Dealer* (Germany, Forum, FIPRESCI Prize), although a "Berlin film" to the core, might qualify at least as an Asian cinematic statement. The second film in a planned trilogy by a director with a distinct Bressonian touch, it offers some valuable critical insights into Turkish culture in Berlin by sketching the daily routine of a young "Berliner Turk" who can think of nothing better to do with his life than to deal in drugs. By the same token, Ann Hui's *Qian yan wan yu* (*Ordinary Heroes*, Hongkong-China) effectively straddled the fence between the two cultures. It documents in a favourable humanistic light the fate of "boat people," fishermen who were forced to live on boats in the harbour for irrational political reasons in Hongkong of the early 1990s.

The best Asian films, if not the most authentic, in the International Forum of Young Cinema? From the point of view of a three-member jury - I Myung Hee (Korea), Dang Nhat Minh (Vietnam), and Malee Bunyasrisavad (Thailand) - these were Li Ying's *2 H* (Japan) and Mani Ratnam's *Dil se* (*From the Heart*, India). The pair were singled out for the prestigious Netpac (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) Prize, an award founded by an alliance of festival organizers and film critics whose aim is to support Asian film. Indeed, both films did emanate from the roots of the Asian experience.

Using documentary footage and experimental techniques, *2 H* explores the complex relationship between two Chinese expatriates in Tokyo, one a former Kuomintang general now in his nineties and about to die and the other an avant garde artist desperate to fulfill his destiny in exile. *From the Heart*, a Bombay production shot in Hindi, also explores contrasting outlooks on life and contradictory viewpoints on political commitment. When a broadcasting executive tours India to interview the common man on the occasion of the country's 50th anniversary of independence, he meets and falls in love with a young girl who as an ardent revolutionary has joined a suicide mission to disrupt the Republic Day Parade.

The Forum also spotlighted new cinema from South India with a trio of productions made in Kerala, also seen in the "Malayalam Cinema Now" showcase at the Trivandrum International Film Festival last April. The most striking, image-wise, was Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair's *Kaliyattam* (*The Play of God*), an Othello theme transposed to an opulent village setting. By contrast, Ambazhathil Karanakuran Lohithadas's *Bhoothakkannadi* (*The Magnifying Glass*) offers a bitter statement on life through the eyes and experiences of a watchmaker. And Suma Josson's *Jammadinam* (*The Day of Birth*), set in a maturity ward and directed by a woman, focuses on a mother daughter relationship in the course of a night. All three films lean on symbol and metaphor to sketch sad, melancholic, rather depressing portraits of the human condition.

References

Awards

Golden Bear: *The Thin Red Line* (USA), director Terrence Malick

Silver Bear, Grand Prize of the Jury: *Mifunes sidste sang* (*Mifune's Last Song*, Denmark), director Soren Kragh Jacobsen

Silver Bear, Best Actress: Juliane Köhler and Maria Schrader, *Aimée & Jaguar* (Germany), director Max Färberböck

Silver Bear, Best Actor: Michael Gwisdek, *Nachgestalten* (*Night Shapes*, Germany), director Andreas Dresen

Silver Bear, Best Director: Stephen Frears, *The Hi-Lo Country* (USA)

Silver Bear, Outstanding Single Achievement: Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, screenwriters, *Shakespeare in Love* (UK), director John Madden

Silver Bear, Jury Prize, Outstanding Artistic Achievement: *eXistenZ* (Canada-UK), director David Cronenberg

Blue Angel Prize, Best European Film on Contemporary Issue: Gunese Yolculuk (*Journey to the Sun*, Turkey), director Yesim Ustaoglu

Alfred Bauer Prize, Best First Film: *Karnaval* (France-Belgium-Switzerland), director Thomas Vincent

Golden Bear, Short Film: *Faraon* (Pharaoh, Russia), director Sergei Ovcharov, and *Masks* (Poland-Germany), director Piotr Karwas

Silver Bear, Short Film: *Desserts* (UK), director Jeff Stark

FIPRESCI (International Critics) Prize:

Competition: *Ça commence aujourd'hui* (*It All Starts Today*, France), director Bertrand Tavernier

Forum: *Dealer* (Germany), director Thomas Arslan

Panorama: *Ah, Haru* (*Wait and See*, Japan), director Shinji Somai

Ecumenical Jury: *Ça commence aujourd'hui* (*It All Starts Today*, France), director Bertrand Tavernier

Peace Film Prize: *Gunese Yolculuk* (*Journey to the Sun*, Turkey), director Yesim Ustaoglu

Wolfgang Staudte Prize - Forum: *The Cruise* (USA), director Bennett Miller

Don Quixote Prize (International Federation of Film Societies): *Okraina* (*Outskirts*, Russia), director Pyotr Luzik

Prize of Guild of German Art Houses: *Cookie's Fortune* (USA), director Robert Altman

Netpac Prize - Promotion of Asian Cinema - Forum: *2 H* (Japan), director Li Ying; *Dil Se* (*From the Heart*, India), director Mani Ratnam

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.