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New York

New York Film Festival, September 23 - October 9, 1994

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Like the universe at large, film festivals often find it reassuring to start up with a big bang. The recent 32nd edition of the New York Film Festival opened with the explosive *Pulp Fiction*, fresh from its success at Cannes, continuing the virtual deification of writer-director Quentin Tarantino among the hip media establishment, and poising him for entry into a wider marketplace. For more on the Tarantino phenomenon, please see my column in the previous issue of this magazine.

Fiction was one of six Miramax films at the Festival (the others included *Strawberry and Chocolate*, *Red, Exotica* and *Bullets Over Broadway*), prompting some wags to refer to the event as Bob and Harvey Weinstein's private show case of fall releases. Samuel Goldwyn weighed in with *To Live and Ladybird*, *Ladybird*, Fine Line Features with *Hoop Dreams* and *Caro Diario*, Sony Classics with *Amateur*, and *Ed Wood* was culled from Hollywood major Touchstone.

New York is neither an exhaustive nor a competitive festival. For that, you would need to go to Toronto or Montreal or to Cannes. The very fact that it is selective (about 30 films this year), awards no prizes, and is associated with Lincoln Center, imbues New York with a certain elitist cachet. Merely to be selected is supposed to be honor enough, and can give a film a big boost in its commercial release. Films with distributors, like those mentioned above, incorporate the prestige of the Festival in their marketing, and often schedule commercial runs soon after their Lin-coln Center debuts. This year, as usual, the majority of films did not have definite distribution deals going into the Festival, and hoped to use the venue as a springboard for release.

The eclectic mix this year came from 16 countries and all parts of the cinematic spectrum: narrative, experimental and documentary, indie low budget, European co-production and major Hollywood release, features and shorts, as well as a video sidebar. Here, in no particular order, are some of my personal highlights.

Hoop Dreams is a refreshingly candid, cogent and incisive sports documentary, a sober alternative to the overworked platitudes and manipulations of Hollywood sports inspirational such as *Rocky* or *Rudy*. Following the on - and off - court struggle of two black teenagers from inner city Chicago as they reach for the holy grail - NBA stardom, or at least economic betterment and a college education through athletic achievement - the film never loses sight of the wider social context surrounding the basketball industry: the disappointments and inequities,

the invidious structure of white overseer (coach, recruiter) feeding off the talents and aspirations of a black underclass. As Arthur Agee and William Gates progress from the hood to a lily white suburban Catholic school (a basketball powerhouse which graduated Isiah Thomas) and hence to college, we are aware of the sacrifices they and their families make, the difficulties of growing up black and working class, the reversals of fortune inherent in ghetto life, and the long shot they are playing - only a fraction of a percent of high school basketball players ever make it to the pros.

Still, *Dreams* does not come off as a dark polemic, despite its cautionary subtext. It is first and foremost about sports, and captures the thrill of the game, the glory of victory, the agony of defeat, and the enthusiasm of the fans, for whom basketball is tantamount to a secular religion, with the call and response and capacity for emotional release usually found in church, especially the black church. A documentary running nearly three hours, *Dreams* has an irresistible narrative momentum which would grace any film. It is, in fact, the first documentary ever chosen to close the Festival.

An obvious labor of love for filmmakers Steve James, Fred Marx and Peter Gilbert, members of the socially minded, Chicago based collective Kartemquin Films, *Dreams* was seven years in the making - five years shooting some 250 hours of footage tracking Agee and Gates, two years in editing and post production. What was originally intended as a 30 minute short has acquired its own extended *raison d'être*. And it is a gem. *Hoop Dreams* is that rare amalgam, a documentary with the well drawn characters and compelling plot of a narrative feature, and a grittily intelligent effort that is also a stand up and cheer crowd pleaser.

Less stand up and cheer than hunker down and chortle, Tim Burton's latest, *Ed Wood*, is a tribute to the man voted worst filmmaker of all time, whose lurid, tacky, inept, so-bad-they-are-good efforts (*Glen or Glenda?*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*) have become cult classics. A notorious alcoholic and cross dresser, with a penchant for angora sweaters and ladies underwear, Wood was also a cockeyed optimist, a horror schlockmeister determined to make it in Hollywood despite a perennial lack of interest or respect from the studios. As played by Johnny Depp, Wood is a curious mixture of the bizarre and the naive, a gee whiz Andy Hardy type with pencil thin mustache (a la John Waters), pronounced overbite and idiot grin, weirdly ensconced in a wrong side of the LA tracks milieu of

transvestites, crystal ball hucksters, vampiric television hostesses and hulking professional wrestlers, who compose not only Wood's entourage but also his motley crews and casts. Of particular note is Martin Landau's uncanny, hyperreal portrayal of the aging, emaciated, down and out Bela Lugosi, a morphine addict at the end of his tether who has been forgotten and left to rot on the fringes of Tinseltown. And let us not forget Bill Murray as Bunny Breckinridge, the poor little rich boy pining for a sex change, or Vincent D'Onofrio's cameo as Orson Welles, who in a chance meeting in a bar gives Wood some much needed encouragement.

Perhaps the quirkiest mogul in Hollywoodland, yet supremely bankable, Burton has given shape to a number of macabre, gothic projects that probe the creepy underside of imagination : *Beetlejuice*, *Batman*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. In making common cause with Wood, Burton once again foregrounds his oddball underdog persona. Shot in black and white to recreate Wood's low budget, haphazard productions, *Ed Wood* is painstakingly and expensively flawless in its homage. If there is some irony in expending so much money and craft to chronicle a director who jerryrigged his films from bubble gum, baling wire, stock footage and stolen monster props, the irony gets lost, or at least subsumed, in Burton's obvious admiration for Wood's sincerity, commitment and perverse optimism. The yawning chasm between Wood's dreams and the tawdry realization of his efforts could hardly be wider; his capacity for denial must have been truly gargantuan. This accounts for the ironic humour of *Ed Wood*. But what we are left with, finally, is Burton bonding with Wood, a fellow creative grotesque, over the difficulty of finding fulfillment and understanding in an all too cruel world.

Also a showbiz subject, Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway* is a comedy of manners set in the New York theater district of the 1920s, as a gangster decides to bankroll a Broadway production provided that his moll gets a choice role for which she is eminently unsuited. Considering Allen's status as the iconic New York auteur, *Bullets* is, amazingly enough, his first appearance in the Festival. Perhaps to make up for lost time, or to soothe Woody's savage beast, they have cranked out a new event to house it - the Centerpiece - which means that it was screened (guess what ?) in the middle of the Festival.

Timing would seem to be everything. Unfortunately, *Bullets* comes at a time in Allen's career (middle ? late middle ?) when he has already dotted his i's and crossed his t's several times over. The thrill of discovery, so apparent in the films like *Play It Again, Sam*, *Annie Hall*, and *Zelig*, is gone. Like his *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, released earlier

this year, *Bullets* is perfectly crafted and perfectly boring.

There is the usual shtick of life vs. art, life as art, success vs. integrity. In the role that Allen would normally play himself, John Cusack stars as the struggling, nebbishy playwright full of his holy mission in the theater, who must learn to compromise if he wants to play with the big boys. A fine actor in other contexts, Cusack is either miscast or misdirected. Perhaps the script just contains too few surprises. Cusack's role is a hollow center, a one note job of wide eyed bewilderment and crushed innocence. And there are other Types : Jack Warden as the Vulgar Producer, Jim Broadbent as the beefy and ever expanding English Thespian, Jennifer Tilly as the shrieking Moll with Flatbush accent, Rob Reiner as the staunch but humorless Artist with Integrity. The only saving graces are Dianne Wiest and Chazz Palminteri. Wiest is hilarious as a self obsessed Diva, superbly manipulative and affected, trailing boas, ostrich feathers and befuddled conquests in her wake. It is a Type, but what fun she has with it ! Best of all is Palminteri as Cheech, gunsels and bodyguard to the Moll, who unexpectedly reveals a native talent for drama and becomes so engrossed in making the play perfect that he is willing to kill for it. Cheech is the prime mover of the film, the one character who seems to grow., and probably the only reason to give *Bullets* any serious attention.

Krzysztof Kieslowski is a darling of the Lincoln Center set, with five films previously selected for the Festival, including the 1991 opening night for his *Double Life of Veronique*, *Red* is the culmination of his *Trois Couleurs* trilogy, following *Blue* and *White* in a symbolic recapitulation of the French flag and the themes of liberty, equality and fraternity. The consummate pan-European director, Kieslowski's locations, as well as his funding, span the continent. A Pole transplanted to France, he is also the quintessential brooding Catholic existentialist, with an underlying pessimism and a moody evocation of identity awash amid the conflicting streams of love, redemption, responsibility, guilt, fate and mortality. Under his personal rubric of an encompassing religious determinism, sorrow eventually yields to transcendence:

Kieslowski has announced that *Red* is not only the end of *Trois Couleurs* but also his last film, period. While this might lend a particular urgency, permit me to doubt it. He still has too much to say to artificially truncate his career, with a rare facility for confronting moral issues through compelling narrative. In *Blue*, a recently bereaved widow strives to regain her footing, come to terms with freedom, and complete the work of her late composer husband - a symphony to United Europe. In *White*, a Polish hairdresser living in Paris loses wife and livelihood, returning to Warsaw to reclaim his pride and economic self sufficiency.



Clara Rockmore in *Theremin - An Electronic Odyssey* by Steve M. Martin.

Red renews this concern for loss and transcendence. Set in Geneva, it follows a student/model (Irene Jacob, star of *Veronique*) and a retired judge (Jean-Louis Trintignant). They meet when she accidentally runs down his dog. At first, there seems little to bring them together. He is forbiddingly austere, taciturn and remote, a man who has bitterly renounced the world. She is young, vital and committed, but with a core of sadness. Their unlikely relationship of conscience begins in a series of challenges and provocations, then proceeds from pain and confusion to a deep intimacy and an acceptance of responsibility, the one for the other. Their progress in forging a common ground is beautifully rendered, and is one of the enduring pleasures of this hymn to fraternity.

Hal Hartley is a moralist of a different stripe. In films such as *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust*, and *Simple Men*, he posits a universe of the young, rootless and disaffected, almost too clever for their own good, who play out their search for love and meaning against a post Godardian backdrop of clean, white rooms and similar minimalist

locales, zinging each other with other jejune conundrums, rock and roll detritus and the hip anomie of post collegiate slackers. Hartley's characters are still defining the rules of the game, but they are trying to find their place in the world without losing too much face.

Amateur, his most accomplished work to date and his first appearance in the Festival, conflates a number of unlikely characters, each of whom is being given a second chance in life. French actress Isabelle Huppert plays an ex-nun who believes she is a nymphomaniac. Accepting the dictates of divine providence - a vision of the Virgin Mary - she contributes stories to a hard core porno magazine. Martin Donovan, a Hartley axiom, plays an amnesiac set adrift on the streets of New York. He cannot remember that he was once an evil porno magnate who enslaved and prostituted his wife (Elina Lowensohn). Hartley mines this tabula rasa device to good comic effect as he juggles the themes of sex, money and religion. Ostensibly an action film with plenty of guns and chase scenes (every Hartley effort seems to climax with a slapstick sequence of people running

in and out doors, barely missing each other), *Amateur* is really concerned with the possibilities of rebirth and redemption. The "amateur" of the title could be Hartley himself or any one of his characters, striving to escape themselves and reach out anew towards fruition and a state of grace.

Cuban filmmaker Tomas Gutierrez Alea, best known for *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968, 1972 U.S. due to government censorship), has returned with a compassionate, tenderly humorous love story that challenges the prevailing social intolerance on his native island. Co-directed by Juan Carlos Tabío, *Strawberry and Chocolate* brings together uptight sociology student David (Vladimir Cruz), a somewhat naive, twenty something, fully indoctrinated Party member who hews to the straight and narrow, and Diego (Jorge Perrugoria), a flamboyant, irreverent, cosmopolitan, openly gay man in his forties immersed in literature and the arts.

Two such polar opposites could hardly be envisioned. David is like chocolate (dense, dark, somber), Diego like strawberry (light, fresh, effervescent) - the flavors they choose at Copelia, Havana's famous out door ice-cream parlor. Diego flirts shamelessly, really camping it up, and entices David with the offer of a rare book. David will have none of this seduction; he is just getting over his girlfriend's rejection, and anyway, he's heterosexual. But at the urging of a fellow student and Party whip, he does cultivate Diego in an attempt to investigate and expose this deviant, subversive element.

Without detailing the myriad, wacky plot complications, suffice it to say that they do become *simpatico*. David is introduced to the pleasures of Maria Callas, English Breakfast tea, contraband whiskey and Diego's next door neighbor Nancy. Diego runs afoul of the government in his attempt to mount an art exhibition, and is forced to leave the country. But not before they are able to acknowledge their new found friendship and the value they have discovered in each other's difference. *Strawberry and Chocolate* is not merely a gay film. Charming and heartfelt, it makes a valiant plea for understanding and freedom of choice in the context of a rigid, doctrinaire Communism.

China, of course, has its own legacy of Communism, and its tumultuous history since the revolution has provoked reexamination by an entire generation of filmmakers: Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* and Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (selected for the Festival in 1992). Zhang returns this year with *To Live*, a sweeping chronicle of one family's changing fortunes from the 1940s through the 1970s, incorporating the upheaval of the Civil War, the brute procrusteanism of the Great Leap Forward, the mass insanity of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Other Fifth Generation films have employed a similar epic scope. *Concubine*, for example, traced the lives of two actors over the same period, with stylistic bravado and operatic flourishes seemingly intended for a Western art house audience. Zhang has something else in mind in *To Live*. Told with utter forthrightness and simplicity, it is immediately accessible to the Chinese public at large. Concentrating on daily household routine and emotional bonds within the family, Zhang seeks a human scale for the suffering of the recent past. It is melodrama in the best sense, not vulgar or tearjerky but measured, sensitive and heartbreakingly affective. *To Live* is not just a film of the people but *for* the people; Zhang has made a special effort to reach out to them with homespun directness. How ironic, then, that the film has been banned in China and Zhang subjected to government sanction.

He was obviously too direct for the mugwumps in Beijing. The trenchant subtext of this film - that merely "to live" through the worst excesses of Maoism was a singular accomplishment - must have piqued their Party pride. Zhang's emphasis on family might also be construed as subversive, since family, a mainstay of traditional Chinese society, was one of the first institutions targeted by doctrinaire Communists in their march towards collectivization.

Ge You puts in an exceptional performance as the father (it won him Best Actor at Cannes this year), a man who gambles away his family fortune, becomes an itinerant puppeteer, and then returns home in the aftermath of revolution to face the exigencies of the new regime. Gong Li, a frequent Zhang collaborator, is similarly superb as the long suffering wife and mother. I would relish the opportunity to discuss this wonderful film at greater length, but frankly, I am running of space.

And so, on to the honorable mentions. Aside from *Hoop Dreams*, there were a number of valuable documentaries in the Festival. Terry Zwiggoff's *Crumb* focuses on underground comix artist Robert Crumb, whose *Keep On Truckin'*, *Mr. Natural*, *Fritz The Cat*, and album cover art for *Cheap Thrills* (Big Brother and the Holding Company, with Janis Joplin) were icons of 60s counterculture. His subsequent career as outrageous social satirist and painfully honest misanthrope is given due attention. But the film is not just about one artist's life, loves and perverse obsessions. Aptly titled, *Crumb* is really the biography of the disturbingly eccentric family that produced Robert, and spends a lot of time with his brothers: misfit loners and artists *manqué*, who shared and helped mold their famous sibling's skewed vision.

Steven Martin's *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey* is a feature length biography of Leon Theremin, the Russian genius who invented the world's first electronic



Robert Crumb in the documentary *Crumb* by Terry Zwigoff.

musical instrument in 1920. A quaint piece of futuristic cabinetry, the Theremin is played, amazingly enough, without being touched: it emits a hauntingly whooshy sound when your hands interrupt a surrounding electronic field. With practice, the sound can be controlled as to pitch, volume and duration. Theremin concerts, orchestras and virtuosos were once all the rage. The instrument was also used on Hollywood thriller soundtracks for its eerie, spooky effect, and by the Beach Boys (*Good Vibrations*). Theremin's own story is as weird as his invention. Part of New York's avant garde high society, he was spirited back to Russia in 1938 by the secret police to work in their espionage labs. In an unusual bit of detective work, Martin locates him, after all these years, in his Moscow apartment.

Based on the writings of the late artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz (whose work I reviewed in 1989 in issue #9 of this magazine), Steve McLean's *Postcards From America* confronts prejudice, homophobic violence and the Disease in a fierce, poetic flurry of words and images. Not quite an outright biography, *Postcards* fictionalizes David into an emblem for all gay men. His particular experience of childhood abuse, years as a teen hustler in Times Square, and

random anonymous sex on the road acquires particular resonance in this bold, angry gay odyssey.

Marcel Ophuls' inspired, ironic, uncompromising brand of political filmmaking has been seen at the Festival four times before, starting in 1971 with his documentary on the Holocaust and French collaboration, *The Sorrow and the Pity*. This year, Ophuls brings *The Troubles We've Seen*, focusing on the strange job of war correspondent - journalists who seek out violence and atrocity in the world's trouble spots and report back to us on TV, radio and in print. Set amidst the war in Bosnia, *Troubles* is over 3 1/2 hours long and still unfinished (a last segment is awaits). Ophuls populates it with a huge cast of characters - writers, cameraman, anchorpeople, network executives, politicians, combatants, victims - in an effort to question the nature of objectivity.

I do not have room to discuss Ken Loach's kitchen sink realism in *Lady Bird*, *Ladybird*, Nanni Moretti's pixillated meanderings in *Caro Diario*, André Techiné's coming of age saga in *Wild Reeds*, or Stan Lai's contemporary mythmaking in *The Red Lotus Society*. They will have to wait for another article. Or better still, another festival.

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