

Cinematic reflections on meaning and choice

John P. Ferré

The Montreal World Film Festival takes great pride in being a venue for young film directors trying to make a name for themselves. So, unlike the larger and more commercial festivals in Toronto or Cannes that attract a constellation of household-name movie stars, Montreal keeps its focus squarely on film directors and their art-house productions, this year making film lovers happy with a smorgasbord of 430 films from 80 countries.

The 2010 festival, which ran from August 26 through September 6, did attract David Arquette, who flew in for a day to promote the premier of *The Land of the Astronauts*, a movie about an alcoholic composer whose life is in free fall. And Gérard Depardieu talked about his acting career and outlook before a sell-out crowd in the historic Cinéma Impérial on the festival's closing day. But those were noticeable exceptions. Far more typically, film premiers were followed by question-and-answer sessions with directors, actors, and screen writers at the theater and later by a public press conference.

This year's Ecumenical Jury, charged with recognizing a film of artistic merit that explores 'the ethical, social, and spiritual values that make life human,' judged 20 films in world competition. I worked with three Roman Catholics (cinematographer Jean-Yves Fischbach from France, communications consultant Louise Fleischmann from Canada, and Jesuit film critic Richard Leonard from Australia) and two other Protestants (film

critic Daniel Grivel from Switzerland and WACC Deputy General Secretary Lavinia Mohr from Canada, who served as president of the jury).

Roman Catholic members of the jury are appointed by SIGNIS, the World Catholic Association for Communication (www.signis.net). Protestant members of the jury are appointed by INTERFILM, the World Council of Churches affiliate that highlights connections between church and cinema (www.inter-film.org). The Ecumenical Jury was unanimous in its choice of films for the Prize as well as for the Special Mention.

The 20 films from 12 countries on three continents that we watched were as varied in theme as they were in place of origin. They dealt with grief, dignity, love, sexuality, justice, honesty, poverty, trust, and rejection. Relationships were at the center of all of them, sometimes couples, sometimes communities, but most often families. Most of these films showed mothers and fathers and their children coming to terms with tragedy, poverty, injustice, deceit, or betrayal. Often the problems they faced were caused by forces beyond their control; sometimes they brought problems on themselves by the choices they made.

The Prize of the Ecumenical Jury went to *Adem* (Oxygen), the debut feature film by 29-year-old Belgian director Hans Van Nuffel that asks viewers to consider how they should spend the time they have to live. *Adem* focuses on two young men, Tom (Stef Aerts) and Xavier (Wouter Hendrickx), who suffer with cystic fibrosis and will likely not live past their 20s without a lung transplant. Much of the movie takes place in a Belgian hospital, where Tom and Xavier stay for increasing periods of time as their condition deteriorates.

Neither Tom nor Xavier feels self-pity, but each chooses to live differently. The younger Tom is reckless. He is the rebel who steals, manufactures methamphetamine, and smokes. His hospital neighbour Xavier, by contrast, lives the life of an athlete and has a long-term relationship with a woman who also has cystic fibrosis who wants to have a child by Xavier. Tom and Xavier become friends, at times uneasily, as their breathing grows shallower and as their need for risky lung replacement surgery grows. The film ends unsentimentally and without easy resolution, but it demands an answer to the question, what makes life worth living?

No doubt the film's adroit handling of what

RECENT ECUMENICAL PRIZE WINNERS TO WATCH

Several winners of the Ecumenical Prize at the Montreal World Film Festival from the last decade are readily available as DVDs. They are well worth renting.

Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets
(France-Morocco, 2000)

A band of kids bond in order to survive in the harsh streets of Casablanca.

Abandoned (Hungary, 2001)

A child left in an orphanage learns how to overcome despair.

The Last Train (Uruguay-Spain-Argentina, 2002)
Elderly train enthusiasts steal an antique locomotive engine bound for Hollywood in this film about love and dignity.

The Syrian Bride (Israel-France-Germany, 2004)
International friction and bureaucracy threaten to separate a Druze bride from her family forever.

Ben X (Belgium-Netherlands, 2007)

Bullied because of his mild autism, Ben escapes into virtual reality where he finds offline help for his suffering.

it's like to live with a degenerative, terminal disease has everything to do with the fact that Van Nuffel, who both wrote and directed *Adem*, has cystic fibrosis himself. 'I know my future is uncertain,' Van Nuffel told *The Montreal Gazette*. 'So I have decided that it's best just to live with it and try to move on.' Van Nuffel's observation serves as an understated synopsis of his film.

The Ecumenical Jury gave a Special Mention to *Das Lied in Mir* (The Day I was not Born), a film by another debut director, Florian Cossen of Germany. *Das Lied in Mir* focuses on Maria (Jessica Schwartz), a 31-year-old German who hears a lullaby sung in Spanish while she is waiting for a connecting flight in Buenos Aires. Although she

doesn't speak Spanish herself, she recognizes the lullaby and begins to sing along softly. Delayed in Buenos Aires because her passport is stolen, Maria is joined by her father, who confesses that he adopted her when she was three years old after her birth parents disappeared during the brutal rule of Argentine President Jorge Rafael Videla.

But the father's confession is a half truth. After Maria locates her aunt, she learns that her father did not adopt her – he forged documents in order to steal her from her extended family and her home country. The rest of the film is a poignant drama with Maria situated between her aunt, who wants Maria's father brought to justice in a court of law, and her father, who has shown love to Maria throughout her life. *Das Lied in Mir* highlights the importance of honesty, memory, identity, justice, and respect for persons to the uneasy process of reconciliation.

The Montreal film festival is definitely a public festival. *The Montreal Gazette* reported attendance as well over 400,000 with a broad range of age and education. The public chose the artwork for this year's festival poster, and the public voted on its favourite movie, *Pájaros de Papel* (Paper Birds), Emilio Aragón's touching Spanish drama about vaudeville performers set in the era of Francoist repression after the Spanish Civil War.

Montreal is fortunate to have its world film festival. Few international buyers may go there to make international deals and more movies from the province of Quebec opened in Toronto than in Montreal, but it is a huge festival both in terms of films and of viewers. Most of the films, however high their quality, will never become available commercially, so the festival is the only place where they can be seen.

Movie lovers everywhere understand that films, as cinematic reflections on human experience and imagination, have the capacity to stimulate discussion about art, perspective, and representation as well as character, motivation, and choice. In the words of the instructions to the Ecumenical Jury, the best films 'raise audience consciousness of the transcendent dimensions of life' and 'dramatize human values and contribute to human progress.' These are the films that make for memories in Montreal. ■

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