

Sydney Film Festival

Artistic variety and substance sacrificed to commercial considerations

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This is the first in a series of articles by WSWS correspondents on the recent Sydney Film Festival. Forthcoming articles will review some of the more significant films screened during the two-week event.

The Sydney Film Festival (June 9-23) this year was a decidedly mixed affair. While the annual Festival provides the only real opportunity in Australia's largest city to view some of the better films being made in the world today, the event was not up to previous standards, suffering from a series of cost-cutting measures and programming changes.

Prior to the event, organisers warned that financial problems were threatening the festival's ongoing viability. The subscriber base was shrinking, running costs had drastically increased and it was not attracting the younger audiences needed for long-term survival. Major restructuring had to be undertaken and new sponsorship arrangements made, management said, to boost income and reverse 10-year accumulative losses or the festival might be forced to shut within two or three years.

This year's festival therefore saw a drastic cut in the overall number of films (features, documentaries and shorts)—from 210 the previous year to only 130—and a sharp reduction in the number of sessions subscribers could attend, down from 146 to 38. Subscribers wanting to watch films screened outside the State Theatre venue had to buy separate session tickets.

Naturally these measures were unpopular with long-time patrons. The audience jeered festival director Gayle Lake when she attempted to explain the new ticketing arrangements at the first session.

Lake, whose background is in film marketing and distribution, told the media that “people don't like change” but the restructure was a “basic reality of the bottom line”. She warned of additional changes in the coming year. Writing in the official guide, festival president Russell Stendell attempted to justify the reduction in the number of films screened by claiming that patrons had told management the event had grown so large it had become “overwhelming” and difficult to follow.

Organising an authoritative film festival and one with international stature is, of course, a demanding job. Rising costs and the relatively small number of filmmakers producing works that go beyond the market-driven and thoroughly conformist demands of the giant entertainment corporations are just some of the difficulties organisers face.

Financial problems may force reductions in the number of films screened but such measures should not automatically undermine the

artistic integrity of the event. The real test is whether organisers have selected films and staged forums that showcase serious, probing and unique artistic works, films that honestly attempt to go beyond the current stifling social and intellectual climate.

Unfortunately a large number of the films screened failed to reach this benchmark. Many appeared to have been selected for commercial reasons or their ability to draw in larger audiences, rather than serious artistic content.

The festival opened, for example, with *Better than Sex*, an Australian romantic comedy and closed with Steve Frears' *High Fidelity* and another Australian comedy, *My Mother Frank*, by first-time director Mark Lamprell. These films did not create any controversy or debate.

This approach, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was just what was needed. The criteria for an opening film, its film critic Sandra Hall wrote, were that it “should entertain, get people talking at the party afterwards and—for a bonus point—be Australian.”

“Australian audiences,” Hall continued, “are in the mood for something homegrown as long as it is well made. A light touch is another essential.” Although festival management's approach may not have been this crude, the comment, appearing in a newspaper that is one of the event's leading sponsors, indicates some of the pressures at work.

Although most of the films were from English-speaking countries—Australia, Canada, Britain and the United States—Gayle Lake claimed that the event featured the strongest collection of Asian films in Sydney in recent years. But with no feature films from Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore or Sri Lanka, her assertion was simply baseless.

Previous festivals have screened films from a broad range of Asian countries, including in 1998 a special selection of Vietnamese films. This year there was only one feature from Iran—home of some of the most artistically audacious filmmakers in the world today—two from India and two from Japan and China, respectively. There were no features from Africa, Russia or Italy.

Festivals provide the only avenue for many filmmakers, particularly those attempting to make films independent of the giant production and distribution corporations, to screen their films. Every director welcomes the opportunity for discerning audiences to discuss and debate their work. This is crucially important for filmmakers from the under-developed nations and for those whose movies are banned in their own countries.

Unfortunately ground-breaking films released in the last two years

from Iran, Taiwan and China such as Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple*, Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Chang Tso-Chi's *Darkness and Light* or Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise* have never been publicly screened in Sydney. And while travel to Australia from Asia is a relatively simple and inexpensive affair, no Asian directors attended this year's festival.

The Filmspeak Forums held at the festival mainly centred on the economics of filmmaking and included discussion on copyright, marketing and other business issues. One forum entitled "Bridging the Gap Between Audiences and Filmmakers", discussed how Australian filmmakers could attract larger audiences through niche marketing and other promotional techniques. Another entitled "Auteurs Must Die" planned to discuss a proposal that Australian directors should submit draft film ideas to "market viable" testing before being provided with funds.

But perhaps the most alarming sign of the festival's orientation was that a Filmspeak Forum was devoted to an address by Des Clark, Australia's new chief censor. The Howard government has consistently sought to strengthen Australia's censorship laws and has passed legislation attempting to control Internet content. Members of the Lyons Foundation, a Christian fundamentalist lobby group within the government, have attempted to ban Adrian Lynes' film *Lolita*, and *Romance* by Catherine Breillat. Last year the National Gallery cancelled the *Sensation* art exhibition after consultations with senior government ministers.

Clark, who is a Liberal party hack and a close friend of Communications Minister Richard Alston, was appointed at the end of last year under conditions where the government was stacking the censor board with conservative elements. Yet festival organisers felt obliged to give him a platform.

The selection of documentary films provided another indicator of the generally conformist outlook of the festival's organisers. While some documentaries were informative and provocative—in particular Errol Morris' chilling *Mr Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr*, Frederick Wiseman's *Belfast, Maine* and Andy Nehl's *Buried Country*, which details the history of Aboriginal country music in Australia—most were disappointing.

Some perhaps could have been categorised as "sensational but safe". *The Other Hollywood*, on San Fernando's porn movie industry, *Grass*, about marijuana smoking in the US, and *The Filth and the Fury*, yet another exposure of the rise and fall of the British punk rock group the Sex Pistols, provided little that was new about their subject matter. *Orientations*, a documentary about Chris Doyle, a Hong Kong-based Australian cinematographer, mainly concentrated on his notorious lifestyle and excessive drinking rather than examining in depth his work or why he is regarded as a great artist by a number of Asian film directors.

Organisers widely promoted *The Diplomat*, Tom Zubrycki's documentary on Jose Ramos Horta, the East Timorese leader. Its screening was attended by a number of government officials, including the head of Australia's military intervention in East Timor, Major-General Peter Cosgrove. Horta and Zubrycki, who is regarded as one of Australia's leading documentary filmmakers, were brought on stage after the screening and given a five-minute standing ovation.

The Diplomat probed none of the historical and political roots of the oppression of the East Timorese people but focused entirely on Horta's manoeuvres with Portugal, Indonesia and Australia. The film, which made no reference to the corporate interests behind the Australian government's decision to intervene militarily in East Timor, will do

nothing to educate those genuinely concerned about the plight of the East Timorese people. It simply bolsters the public image of the East Timorese ruling elite and the Australian government.

Zubrycki once had a reputation for making films about workers' struggles and circulated amongst the left milieu. It is noteworthy that *The Diplomat* could easily have been made for the United Nations or even the Australia Defence Department.

Many of the feature films screened were lightweight works, selected presumably to draw in less sophisticated patrons but which did little to raise their artistic or critical sensibilities. Several works, however, were outstanding.

The Throne of Death (India), directed and written by Murali Nair, is a powerful political satire exposing the frame-up and execution of a peasant labourer in Kerala. Local Communist Party officials campaign for him to be put to death in the area's first electric chair, claiming electrification is a step forward for the region.

Volker Schlöndorff's *Legends of Rita* (Germany), previously reviewed by the WSWS, was a highlight of the festival, as was *The Clouds of May* (Turkey), a beautifully photographed work about making a film in rural Turkey. *Innocence* by Paul Cox, one of Australia's most thoughtful directors, deals with the extra marital affair of a 70-year-old woman. This gentle film drew out some of the emotional and personal difficulties created by falling in love at an advanced age.

Lady of the House (India) is a rich and detailed film about a middle-aged and shy widow whose house is used as a location for a feature film. The widow is overwhelmed by the glamour of filmmaking and drawn to the director. Her naïve hopes are dashed when the shoot ends and the crew leaves. *Cosy Dens*, a comedy set just prior to the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, was another worthwhile film, as was *Crane World* from Argentina about a middle-aged construction worker.

Subsequent articles will review these films. They were characterised by their sensitivity to the issues facing ordinary people, complex characterisations and a determination to produce works that compel their audiences to look more critically at life. Other articles will comment on *Dora Heita*, the latest film by veteran Japanese director Kon Ichikawa, based on a script by Akira Kurosawa; some classic films by the great German-born film stylist Max Ophuls (1902-1952); *The Colour of Paradise* by Majid Majidi from Iran; and two recent films from China, *Shower* and *Seventeen Years*.



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