

51st Sydney Film Festival--Part 1

Some positive signals

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This is the first in a series of articles on the 51st Sydney Film Festival, held June 11-26, 2004.

After several years of financial difficulties, this year's Sydney Film Festival saw a marked upturn in attendances—34 sessions were sold out compared to eight the previous year, with a 38 percent increase in overall ticket sales.

Beyond these raw figures, important as they are for the financial health of the festival, the annual event was extended by several days to a full two weeks to screen over 280 movies. While the program included its fair share of commercial products and so-called independent movies—works with little to say but selected because they could guarantee large audiences—a number of features, many by first-time filmmakers, genuinely grappled with the plight of ordinary people. These are healthy signs that some filmmakers have been deeply affected by contemporary events and are trying to use their artistic skills to enlighten and change the world.

Reflecting widespread concern about the eruption of US militarism and the undermining of democratic rights, the festival also screened a number of documentaries examining these themes. They included *Control Room*, about the Al Jazeera network and the US-led invasion of Iraq (see: “Rather timid considering the circumstances”), and *Anthem*, an Australian documentary examining the Howard government's participation in the US-led attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq and its callous treatment of refugees. While these documentaries and others, to be examined in future articles, were not entirely successful, they were serious and humane. Another important component of the festival was a comprehensive retrospective of influential post-WWII Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, which will be discussed in a later review.

Some of the best features watched by this writer during the festival event were, *Blind Flight* (John Furse [United

Kingdom]), *Days of Santiago* (Josué Méndez [Peru]) and *Uniform* (Diao Yinan [China]), all first films by their directors. *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon-Ho [South Korea]) and *Silent Waters* (Sabiha Sumar [Pakistan]), which have already been reviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, were among other thoughtful works that were screened and deserve wider distribution. The strength of these films rests in their sincere and compassionate attempts to explore the social and material circumstances shaping the lives and personalities of their protagonists.

Uniform, written and directed by Diao Yinan, tells the story of Wang Xiaojiana, a young man in a decaying Chinese industrial city. Wang works in his family's small tailoring shop but, like other young people in the city, his future is grim. When his ageing father is hospitalised, the family is forced into debt and Wang tries to secure a job at a local state-owned factory.

The factory, however, is downsizing, and Wang is mistaken for management and physically attacked by a group of protesting dismissed employees. Management and police then accuse him of being the ringleader of the angry workers. Wang later wins some money in a card game with some small time gangsters, but they mug him and take back their money.

One evening, after heavy rain drenches his clothes, Wang starts wearing a police shirt that has been left for repair at the tailor shop, but never picked up. Wang not only discovers that he is now treated with respect but the uniform gives him the ability to collect bribes from passing motorists and small businesses. He is also able to win the heart of Zheng Sasha, a local girl, who is leading a double life as well. By day she works in a shop selling pirated CDs, by night as a bar girl in a sleazy club. Wang and Zheng become close friends, helping each other maintain their double identities. This strange relationship provides them with a temporary escape from the drudgery and loneliness of their lives, even as they start to fall foul

of police and local gangsters.

Uniform is a low budget production with long takes and minimal dialogue and editing. It has, however, an unusual authenticity and immediacy that perfectly captures the underlying social tensions and pace of life in the bleak city, as the Chinese bureaucracy slashes jobs in state-owned industries.

Days of Santiago, directed by Josué Méndez, is a portrait of the personal and social disorientation of a Peruvian soldier following his demobilisation and return to civilian life in the working class slums of Lima. Like many others of his generation, 23-year-old Santiago has been deeply disturbed by his experiences in the military. The years away from home have also destroyed his marriage, and his wife leaves him a few weeks after his return.

Santiago has no work, no money and little future but refuses to join his former military friends in various criminal activities. He becomes a taxi driver, hoping to accumulate some money, get an education and find a way out of the cycle of poverty that forced him into the army in the first place. But he has been so brutalised in the military, and the economic and cultural poverty at home has become so bad over the years, that he cannot adjust to civilian life. Relations within his family are strained to breaking point and spiral out of control when Santiago strikes up a relationship with his brother's wife. The young woman hopes Santiago will provide her with some escape from her violent husband.

Méndez, who was born in Lima and studied filmmaking at Yale University in the US, has created a dark and disturbing film. A strong performance by Pietro Sibille as Santiago, tight close-ups and a combination of black and white and colour photography, help to recreate the social disorientation and dysfunctional character of the former soldier's life. Like thousands of other economic conscripts in Peru and elsewhere, young men like Santiago are treated as cannon fodder, then thrown onto the scrap heap and a life of deep despair, when they are of no further use to the powers-that-be.

By contrast, the widely promoted *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, a drama starring Geoffrey Rush as the talented British actor/comedian, and *De-lovely*, a musical biography of composer Cole Porter (1891-1964) directed by Irwin Winkler, scripted by Jay Cocks (*Gangs of New York*) and starring Kevin Kline, were disappointing and failed to go beyond the obvious.

Porter, one of America's greatest songwriters, has been a source of inspiration for generations of jazz musicians,

popular singers and songwriters. *De-lovely*, which employed a "musical within a musical" technique, with the dying Porter, who became a semi-invalid after a bad horse-riding accident in 1937, directing a Broadway show of his own life, mainly focused on the composer's homosexuality and his difficult marriage to Linda Lee (Ashely Judd). It gave no real indication of the complex social and artistic influences that underlay Porter's remarkable talent.

Winkler's film also included cameos appearances by Robbie Williams, Alanis Morissette, Sheryl Crow, Elvis Costello and other pop stars singing some of Porter's classics. This will no doubt draw new audiences to the film, and to Porter's music, but the soul of his great works seems to have been lost in the process.

The Life and Death of Peter Sellers, directed by Stephen Hopkinson was even shallower. Sellers' comedic influences—his theatrical work at an early age, the war years and his membership of "The Goon Show", the hilarious satirical postwar British radio program—were virtually ignored. The film contained one Goon Show segment, but it gave no hint of the program's subversive humour and did not indicate the influence of figures like Spike Milligan, who wrote the show, and fellow Goon, Harry Secombe, on Sellers. Milligan (Edward Tudor-Pole), perhaps one of the most influential British comedians in the past 50 years, appears spasmodically throughout the film without any real dialogue.

The movie pays scant attention to Sellers' brilliant performances in early works such as *The Ladykillers*, *I'm All Right Jack*, *The Mouse That Roared* and other classics. Sellers' collaboration with Stanley Kubrick and James Mason in *Lolita* is not mentioned and his extraordinary acting in *Dr Strangelove* is reduced to a few moments. Like *De-lovely*, Hopkinson's film is preoccupied with the sexual activities and personal problems of its central characters.

Sellers was obviously a complex and difficult man, but the film, despite an energetic performance by Geoffrey Rush, failed to adequately recapture his artistry. Fortunately, Sellers' early radio and film work is available on CD and DVD for those who want to experience his comic genius.



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