

53rd Sydney Film Festival--Part 1

Not deep enough

Richard Phillips
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This is the first of a series of articles on the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, held June 9-25.

The promotional tagline for this year's Sydney Film Festival, which screened 74 features, 40 documentaries and 64 shorts, was "Go Deeper" and, according to a festival press release, "Sydneyiders dived in with gusto". Sales and revenue targets exceeded predictions and there was a reported 26.5 percent growth in non-subscriber tickets.

These increases are welcome and indicate that new layers are being attracted to the 17-day event, which has a declining subscriber base of mainly older patrons and in the last four consecutive years experienced deficits, including a record \$241,000 shortfall last year.

Notwithstanding the festival's slogan, the artistic and intellectual depth of the 33 features and documentaries seen by this writer was limited. Although the festival provided some sense of the world, with a large number of features about the Middle East and a few valuable movies, many of the problems highlighted in previous WSWs coverage of the festival are still present.

Overall, the program is still dominated by faddish or sensationalist work, along with an increasing number of mainstream movies from the major studios already guaranteed wide release in Australian multiplex cinemas. In fact, more than 20 of the 74 features shown will be in local cinemas this year. Most of these, however, are bland or unchallenging works.

Festival organisers have yet to explain why it's necessary to screen lightweight works such as, *Friends With Money*, Jennifer Aniston's latest role, *Little Miss Sunshine*, a comedy road movie about a dysfunctional family starring Steve Carell (*The 40 Year-Old Virgin*) and Toni Collette (*Japanese Story*), and similar fare at the festival. This troubling trend no doubt reflects the increasing pressure that the major studios, film distributors and cinema chains bring to bear on the event.

At the same time movies from the most oppressed countries, where filmmakers are confronted with enormous practical difficulties, are rarely shown. For example, in the eight years that this writer has been reviewing the Sydney Film Festival there has not been a single Sri Lankan movie screened.

Sri Lanka only produces a small number of features each year and its filmmakers confront financial problems and increasing

government censorship. Despite these difficulties a new generation of younger directors—Vimukthi Jayasundera, Asoka Handagama, Prasanna Vithanage and Sudath Mahadiwulvewa—have recently made dramas about the 20-year civil war by the Sri Lankan military against the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and its impact on social life.

Last year senior military chiefs publicly denounced these directors, claiming that their movies aided terrorism. Handagama and Mahadiwulvewa were bluntly informed that they should be making "pro-army films" and would "have to face the consequences if the war breaks out again". Handagama's latest film, *Letter of Fire*, which is not an antiwar movie, was banned this year.

That none of this country's movies have been shown at the Sydney festival in almost a decade is inexcusable.

The festival opened with the Australian premier of *Ten Canoes*, the latest film by director Rolf de Heer. The movie is set in Arnhem Land in far north Australia and prior to European settlement. De Heer's film was one of several local features screened that will be released around the country in the next few months.

Ten Canoes is an honest and visually lyrical film and one that attempts to establish an objective framework for any discussion on ancient Aboriginal culture. It will be reviewed in later festival coverage along with an interview with its South Australian based director.

Highlights from this year's festival include US documentary *Winter Soldier* and Alain Tasma's *October 17, 1961*.

Winter Soldiers documents a three-day conference in February 1971 when over 120 young veterans of the then raging Vietnam War met in Detroit, Michigan to testify about the atrocities they had witnessed or carried out whilst in Vietnam. Those watching this valuable documentary will clearly connect the horrors carried out by the US military at this time and what is occurring in Iraq today. The film should also provoke more thoughtful viewers to ask how and why the mass movement that helped end the Vietnam War, failed to prevent a new eruption of US militarism.

October 17, 1961, which unfortunately was given inadequate pre-publicity by festival organisers, is a powerful drama set in

Paris during the long and bloody struggle against French colonial rule of Algeria. It dramatises events leading up to, and including, a police massacre of 20,000 protesting Algerians organised by the FLN (National Liberation Front) that occurred on the title's date. The film carefully, and with great objectivity and passion, examines this infamous and largely unknown event. More than 10,000 Algerians living in Paris were arrested during the demonstration and according to some estimates the police murdered up to 200 people. Many of those wounded or killed were thrown into the Seine.

While *Winter Soldier* will be available in Australia on DVD later this year, no cinema chain or DVD distributor has indicated a local release of Tasma's extraordinary movie. Both films were reviewed in detail last year by the WSWS (see "US atrocities in Vietnam documented" and "Valuable films from France").

It was not possible because of programming clashes to watch many of the Asian films screened this year and I deliberately avoided two of the latest offerings from Hong Kong—*Fearless*, a martial arts flick starring Jet Li, and *Perhaps Love*, an eclectic musical directed by Peter Ho-Sun Chan. There were, however, two Chinese features—*Grain in Ear* and *Dam Street*—that were worthwhile.

Grain in Ear, written and directed Zhang Lu, explores the difficulties confronting a young Korean single mother living near a railway-shunting yard and on the outskirts of a Chinese industrial city.

The beautiful but poverty-stricken woman, whose husband is in jail, is struggling to earn a living selling Korean pickles (kimchi) to local workers and raise her young son. She lives next to a group of Korean prostitutes and is sexually preyed upon by a series of local characters, including a lonely Korean married man, a neighbour and the police. In a moment of utter despair, she decides to poison a batch of pickles that she has been asked to supply to a local wedding.

This is Zhang Lu's second feature and apparently based on a true story. There are over two million Korean's living in mostly appalling conditions in China and the film provides one of the few insights into difficulties facing this oppressed minority.

Apart from a lengthy concluding shot, the camera is largely static throughout, there is little or no musical soundtrack and the actors' expressions are generally deadpan. In some ways the movie almost feels like performance art, but its minimalist style is effective and generates its own artistic and emotional tension.

Grain in Ear's final minutes are mesmerising as the camera follows the young mother who confronted with a terrible tragedy decides to flee her bare one-room home, across railway land and into adjoining fields. This conclusion, however, gives no suggestion that she can escape her miserable existence.

Dam Street by director Li Yu is a more traditionalist work but not without its moments. The movie explores the ostracism of a

pregnant teenage girl—Xiaoyun (Liu Yi)—in rural Sichuan province in early 1980s China. The 16-year-old girl and her boyfriend are expelled from high school and then separated from each other. Xiaoyun, with the help of her older sister who is a nurse, has a son but told that the baby died during birth. The child is secretly adopted out.

The film moves forward ten years and Xiaoyun, who has been trained as a Sichuan opera singer and has some potential, works in a lowbrow entertainment troupe. While few know about her past, she is still ostracised by many in the local town. Without revealing the movie's plot, which to some extent is not unexpected, she is eventually reunited with her son. While *Dam Street* is not a groundbreaking work, it explores subject matter not usually dealt in China's deeply restrictive political and cultural climate.

Li Yu's first drama, *Fish and Elephant*, which was produced and distributed independently of government censorship and distribution bodies, is apparently a sensitive story about a lesbian relationship and the first film from mainland China on this subject matter.

Other festival highlights include several films from or about the Middle East, one or two worthwhile features from Latin America and a Jean-Pierre Melville (1917-73) retrospective. Although the retrospective did not include all Melville's work it provided an overview of this independent post-war French director and why his influence, both good and bad, has been so extensive.

Almost half the films at the festival were documentaries but overall, the collection was patchy. One of the more memorable was *Beyond Hatred*, by French director Olivier Meyrou. A prizewinner at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, the ninety-minute film examines the difficult but enlightened response of the Chenu family to the brutal bashing murder of Francois, their 29-year-old homosexual son, by skinheads in 2002. An interview with Meyrou, who attended the festival, will be in future coverage.

Included in the other documentaries that will be reviewed is *The Archive Project*, an examination of the Communist Party of Australia's film unit and secret police spying operations against it.

To be continued



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