

55th Sydney Film Festival—Part 1

A few intelligent movies, but lost in an increasingly industry-oriented event

Serious work

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This year's Sydney Film Festival from June 4-22 screened 55 documentaries, 117 feature films, and 45 short films, one of the largest programs mounted by the 55-year-old event. It also inaugurated a new "best film" competition, with a \$60,000 prize made possible by grants from the Hunter Hall investment company and the New South Wales state government.

While commercialisation of the event continues apace—a trend obviously not confined to Sydney—this year's festival included dozens of mainstream features already slated for local multiplex screenings. In fact, some were in suburban theatres even before the festival had concluded.

The most blatant example of this unhealthy trend was the promotion of *Kung Fu Panda*, Hollywood's latest computer animation blockbuster. The multi-million dollar production—which has grossed almost \$900 million since its release in June—was premiered at the "Kids' Film" stream of the festival. Dreamworks CEO Jeffery Katzenberg, co-director John Stevenson and Jack Black, the movie's "voice star", flew into Sydney for the red-carpet event.

Katzenberg was asked by one journalist whether Hollywood was simply retelling the same stories "over and over again". All great stories had "something in common," he replied. "In *Kung Fu Panda*, for example, we have an ordinary guy doing extraordinary things—but nobody has done that before with a panda." This sort of banality unfortunately dominates much of contemporary film production.

Festival organisers obviously have the right to screen whatever they choose, but *Kung Fu Panda* hardly needs

the endorsement of Sydney festival patrons, who come to watch movies generally not available in Australian cinemas. By contrast, the festival screened only one film from the Balkans and one from Africa, another indication of the degree to which the giant entertainment corporations dominate, and artistically homogenise, film production.

The festival's annual Ian McPherson Lecture generally deals with artistic and historical issues in cinema. This year, however, the lecture was delivered by Bob Pisano, a former US studio boss and national executive director of the Screen Actors Guild. Pisano is currently president and chief operating officer of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)—the US movie industry front group.

Not surprisingly, Pisano's speech had nothing to do with artistic issues. Instead, it dealt with Hollywood's current principal concern—how to stop movie pirating. Pisano was also a featured speaker, along with local film academics and producers, at a festival workshop entitled "Positioning Australian screen content in the US marketplace". Organisers later boasted that this year's festival saw a 65 percent increase in industry attendees. However, overall attendances—i.e., of ordinary patrons—were only marginally higher than last year's, with just 1,000 additional admissions. These figures, moreover, will probably decline if festival programmers continue allowing the major studios to use the annual event as a vehicle to promote their latest blockbusters.

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Despite these problems, the festival provides one of the few opportunities in Sydney to view the work of serious filmmakers—those animated not by the profit motive but the desire to make sensitive and intelligent artistic work. Whilst there are some encouraging signs, the festival had its fair share of weak, distorted and unconvincing work—social reality almost appears accidentally in some films, and often with large doses of pessimism.

Of the 12 competition films, the best included *Happy-Go-Lucky*, written and directed by Mike Leigh, *Tokyo Sonata*, directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa, *Hunger* by visual artist and first-time director Steve McQueen, *Three Blind Mice*, Mathew Newtown's debut feature, and *Rain of the Children*, by New Zealand director Vincent Ward. *Hunger*, which took out the competition prize, deals with Provisional Irish Republican Army member Bobby Sands, who starved himself to death in Belfast's Maze prison in 1981.

The festival also screened eight movies about the so-called “war on terror” in its “Apocalypse Again” stream. These included *Stop-Loss*, *Redacted* and *Grace is Gone*, and documentaries, *Taxi to the Dark Side*, *Standard Operating Procedure*, *No End in Sight*, and *CSNY: Déjà vu*. Most of these have been previously commented on by other WSWS writers (see links below).

Notwithstanding the undoubted sincerity of those involved in the better features in this collection, none attained the artistic depth and emotional density of movies like *Apocalypse Now* and several others produced in the 1970s about the Vietnam War. *Battle for Haditha*, one of the best films made in the past two years about the Iraq war, and starring several former US soldiers, unfortunately was not included.

The festival's “World Views” stream screened over 60 movies. Those we saw, and will write about in subsequent comments, included *The Pope's Toilet* by Uruguayan filmmakers César Charlone and Enrique Fernández and Israeli multi-award winning Eran Kolirin's *The Band's Visit*. Both were honest although generally lightweight portrayals of life in their respective countries. Less successful were Claude Chabrol's *Girl Cut in Two*, Ralph Ziman's *Jeruzalema*,

Stanislaw Mucha's *Hope* and Lance Hammer's *Ballast*.

A Deborah Kerr retrospective formed an important part of the festival. Kerr, who was born in 1921 and died last October, was one of the great actresses of the post-WWII period. The eight-movie retrospective contained only a limited selection of her work, but included several movies currently not available on DVD or rarely screened. Apart from the somewhat overrated *From Here to Eternity*, Kerr's work is unknown to many younger filmmakers and cineastes.

Some of the better documentaries at the festival were Matt Norman's *Salute*, an inspiring tribute to an Australian sportsman who joined two African-American athletes at the 1968 Olympics to protest attacks on democratic rights in the US, and young Canadian director Yung Chang's *Up the Yangtze*. Other noteworthy efforts included Kelrick Martin's *Bad Morro*, Annie Goldson's *An Island Calling* and Brian Hill's *The Not Dead*, from Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, respectively.

Future articles will examine several of these movies, along with some Australian features screened at the festival—*The Square*, *Ten Empty*, *Playing for Charlie* and *Unfinished Sky*. The recently introduced 40 percent tax offset for investment in local features and the establishment of Screen Australia, a new funding body, will no doubt boost the number of local features. While the new financing arrangements anticipate an increase in the number of larger local budget features, up from 23 to 35 per year, the artistic quality and emotional depth of most of the Australian dramas we saw at the festival, however, left much to be desired.

To be continued



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