

Toronto International Film Festival 2011—Part 4

The permanent, painful search for truth

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15 October 2011

This is the latest in a series of articles on the recent Toronto International Film Festival. [Part 1][Part 2][Part 3] [Part 4] [Part 5]

Films that present the world artistically

Art that opens up unseen angles and corners of the world creates a rare and jarring experience for the spectator. It strikes at the deeply personal, at the inner chord of being, allowing for the imagining of all sorts of possibilities—including the infinite forms of objective beauty.

The Wim Wenders documentary *Pina*, about Pina Bausch (1940-2009), the legendary German dancer and choreographer, both disturbs and excites the senses. The German filmmaker (*Buena Vista Social Club*, 1999; *Land of Plenty*, 2004), whose career spans some four decades, had a 20-year friendship with Bausch. When Bausch died suddenly during the preparations for filming, Wenders shifted his project from a film with Pina to a film about Pina.

Bausch was the artistic director of the Tanztheater Wuppertal, which she founded in 1973. She had a formidable international reputation as an innovator of modern dance. Wenders made his film in 3-D, so that “I could enter dance’s realm and language.” In speaking about Bausch’s influence on him as an artist, Wenders said, “Pina had trained her eyes to what the soul can teach us through the body.”

Featuring choreography that was jointly selected by Wenders and Bausch—“Café Müller,” “Le Sacre du printemps,” “Vollmond,” and “Kontakthof” [Le Sacre du printemps <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXVvVQuMvgA> Vollmond <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBw76ilYyfs> Kontakthof with older dancers <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aorfl4CtmnU>—the film follows Bausch’s dancers from performances on stage to locations in the city and surroundings of Wuppertal, the center of Bausch’s creative output for 35 years.

Images and sounds of her life are interspersed with danced personal recollections from members of her ensemble. One of the most unusual and arresting aspects is the intergenerational nature of the group, with older dancers bringing a depth and presence that more than compensate for their diminishing physical skills. It is a refreshing acknowledgement of “wisdom through the ages.”

Pina is not only the first European 3-D movie, but also the first 3-D art

film. Wenders chose this format because, “by incorporating the dimension of space, I could dare (and not just presumingly), to bring Pina’s Tanztheater in an adequate form to the screen.”

The result is a model of how to convey an artistic contribution. Its haunting quality is a reminder that Bausch and her generation in Germany lived in the shadow of fascism, while her relentless artistic excursions and explorations embodied the search for an alternative truth.

At Bausch’s memorial in 2009, Wenders put it another way, contending that she allowed us “to share her look and open our eyes for ourselves and the hidden language inside us.”

For Bausch, the process meant that “[W]e show something personal, but it is not private. It reveals a piece of what we all have in common. To find that requires great patience and a willingness to look over and over again.... This is a permanent, also a painful search, a struggle.”

Pina reveals the intimate workings of an artist who reproduced the world and returned it more comprehensibly to her audience.

Post-World War II Britain is the setting for Terence Davies’s *The Deep Blue Sea*, a refashioning of British playwright Terence Rattigan’s 1952 work. Born in 1945, at the close of the Second World War, Davies is preoccupied, as his web site affirms, with “the influence of memory on everyday life,” and especially, one might add, with working over his memory of the postwar years.

Visually luxurious, Davies’s new film is skillful in its examination of the emotional impact of the war and its aftermath on the lives of its characters. The veteran filmmaker has produced a small but elegantly composed body of work that includes his 2000 rendition of Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* and the socially observant 2008 documentary, *Of Time and the City*, about growing up in his native Liverpool.

In *The Deep Blue Sea*, Rachel Weisz stars as Hester Collyer, the unhappy wife of a stuffy judge (Simon Russell Beale). After a chance meeting with an RAF pilot, Freddie (Tom Hiddleston), she is soon prepared to throw wealth and social taboos overboard to be the unlawful wife of a man who has been emotionally battered by the war. The film opens with Hester’s suicide attempt in the flat she shares with Freddie. In voice-over she states: “This time I really do want to die.”

Strong evocations of a psychically pummeled society dominate the film. Flashbacks of Hester and her husband huddled in a crowded tube station during the German bombardment of London point to a principal source of the dysfunction. All three central characters are emotionally handicapped: the wealthy judge is repressed and does not want to grant Hester her

freedom; the cultured Hester is cloying and dependent on Freddie, who in turn is irresponsible and unavailable. Dark and atmospheric, the cinematography further serves to locate the unrequited love triangle in the realm of social discontents, traumas and torments.

The film makes one of its strongest points at the very end when an abandoned Hester looks out at the street from her drawing room window and watches the early morning “busy hum” of humanity. The filmmaker, unlike most of his contemporaries, has a sense of dramatic and social proportion. Personal tragedies are not reduced to insignificance, life cannot help but be painful in certain circumstances, but Davies places them in perspective. Life for the rest of humanity, and for Hester too, goes on.

Exposés

Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory is the final installment in a trilogy of documentaries directed by American filmmakers Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. Their films have followed the case of the “West Memphis 3,” about three men who were framed up as teenagers for the 1993 murders of three eight-year-old boys in West Memphis, Arkansas.

The men—Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley Jr.—spent nearly two decades in prison after being witchhunted by a corrupt judicial system. Echols faced a death sentence. The filmmakers recap the case and provide affecting interviews with the three men. The efforts of Berlinger and Sinofsky helped publicize the case. Celebrities like Eddie Vedder and Johnny Depp lent their support.

Purgatory was completed before the August 2011 deal the men reached with prosecutors that allowed them to assert their innocence, while acknowledging that the prosecutors have enough evidence to convict them—a “deeply disturbing but very happy conclusion,” according to Berlinger. The three were sentenced to time served and released.

Upon his release from prison, Echols stated: “Each and every day I was the beneficiary of acts of kindness and humanity from people of all walks of life, of all ages, nationalities, religions and political persuasions.... I have now spent half my life on death row. It is a torturous environment that no human being should have to endure, and it needed to end. I am innocent, as are Jason and Jessie, but I made this decision because I did not want to spend another day of my life behind those bars. I want to live and to fight for our innocence.... I am not alone as there are tens of thousands of men and women in this country who have been wrongfully convicted, forced into a false confession, sentenced to death or a lifetime in prison. I am hopeful that one day they too will be able to stand with their friends and family to declare their innocence.”

Pink Ribbons, Inc., based on the book *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy*, by Samantha King, is a Canadian documentary by Léa Pool that asserts that breast cancer is the “poster child of corporate cause-related marketing campaigns.”

The film’s approach is summed up in the movie by liberal writer Barbara Ehrenreich, author of the article *Welcome to Cancerland*: “We used to march in the streets; now you’re supposed to run for the cure, or walk for a cure, or jump for a cure, or whatever it is...the effect of the

whole pink ribbon [emblem for breast cancer] culture was to drain and deflect the kind of militancy we had as women who were appalled to have a disease that is epidemic and yet that we don’t even know the cause of.”

Corporate philanthropy involving breast cancer is a legitimate topic. *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* is effective in pointing out that scores of companies market harmful products through “pink-washing.” For example, Ford Motor Company sponsors breast cancer research as it helps pollute the environment and poisons its workforce. But the crucial issue of environmental contamination gets lost in a grab bag of emotions, facts and political agendas. Generally, the prescriptions promoted by the film’s talking heads involve putting pressure on government and companies to be more accountable to women.

Interestingly, the film questions where the billions of dollars raised by breast cancer foundations, such as Susan G. Komen for the Cure, are going. *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* contends that treatment options have not fundamentally changed in 40 years “when the ‘War Against Cancer’ was declared: surgery, radiation and chemotherapy—an approach [breast cancer expert and activist] Dr. Susan Love refers to as ‘slash, burn and poison.’”

In an interview, Pool makes some important points, noting that only 15 percent of breast cancer funding goes to prevention and only 5 percent to research directed toward discovering environmental causes. Pool also mentions the lack of coordination in global research that impedes discovering solutions.

Many *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* commentators display a condescending attitude towards the tens of thousands of women and their families who every year walk, run, jump, etc., for a breast cancer cure. (One of the film’s main talking heads used the expression the “tyranny of cheerfulness.”)

Despite the fact that cancer is a colossal *social* issue, “capitalism” was hardly alluded to in the film. Nor was there any mention of the assault on existing environmental regulations in the name of “easing the burden on business,” and the ongoing devastation of health care for the majority of the population.

Cop as protagonist

Veteran Hong Kong director Johnnie To’s new movie *Life Without Principle*, as its title suggests, sees greed and corruption as the main social ingredients in a world where chaotic financial markets promote high-stakes gambling and criminality. An honest cop who is not engaged in any legal or illegal form of rampant materialism, who is satisfied with living within his means, is the movie’s central figure. The thickly plotted film is afflicted with attention deficit disorder, the director apparently finding the market-obsessed environment in Hong Kong somewhat overwhelming. Its solution is to tip moralistically towards a law-and-order view.

Rampart from Israeli-born director Oren Moverman (*The Messenger*, 2009) is the story of a police officer (played by Woody Harrelson) who employs vigilante-style justice in the late 1990s, at a time when scandal in the Los Angeles Police Department’s Rampart division saw more than 70 cops charged with acts of unprovoked brutality and other heinous crimes. The movie is not an actual account of what happened at Rampart, and the

film's producer, Lawrence Inglee, claims it does not take a position on the LAPD. Furthermore, crime fiction writer James Ellroy, who co-wrote the script with Moverman, describes himself as an unrepentant supporter of the LAPD. Consequently, even as a corrupt cop, Harrelson's character is a combination of charismatic he-man, sage and avenging angel.

"It's an exploration of what it means to be a police officer in a troubled urban environment," stated Inglee. What about a troubled urban environment that is abused and tortured by the police department? According to Ellroy, a severely overrated writer: "This is a radically different take on what happened in 1999. This is a good portrayal of a clean, hard-charging police department with the requisite number of bad cops to flesh out any Ellroy story." Shame on you, Woody Harrelson and all the actors—Sigourney Weaver, Steve Buscemi and Robin Wright—who are affiliated with this project!

To be continued



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