

The Woodard File

By Josef Woodard, February 6, 2007

Sound Rules

What's the best analogy/cliché for the potent and ever underrated role of **music in film**: the **secret weapon of the medium**, the **elephant in the room**, the **hidden lifeorce**? All of the above?

Film composers, who actually have a huge influence on the sensory end result of a movie — and thus on mass consciousness — **don't get enough respect**, both in their work, or outside it, where serious music fans view the practice as inherently tainted and a study in compromise. Of course it is that, the necessarily compromise-driven tail end of a collaborative process, just as nerves are fraying and deadlines flaying.

Hollywood film scoring seems to be in a funk at the moment, too often **wallowing in generic clichés and fighting for respect** in an era when songs and music supervisors are edging their way deeper into the soundtrack game. Again, it ain't the composers' fault, which was one of the recurring motifs at Saturday's composer panel discussion at the Lobero, "**Scoring the Film.**"



Composers — or more specifically, directors — should take cues from sources in the international community. The most heartening news from the 2007 Oscar front was that the great and endlessly interesting composer [Ennio Morricone](#) (pictured) is getting a Lifetime Achievement award, only the second time a composer has been given one (the other being the very worthy [Alex North](#)).

And at the Lobero panel, the real star, in terms of having a current, hot — and Oscar-nominated — score in theaters now was Mexican composer [Javier Navarrete](#), whose score for *Pan's Labyrinth* is unusually lush and sophisticated. Another composer onstage whose current work was memorable largely for avoiding clichés and blending personal and indigenous music, was [Alex Heffes](#), the Brit behind the music in *The Last King of Scotland*.

Also on the panel was one a veteran Hollywood composer with a signature voice, [Mark Isham](#) (pictured), who is now called on to do Mark Isham scores. So are others, as [John Debney](#) jokingly explained, pointing at Isham, "I've been asked by directors to imitate this guy."

Isham, who himself slipped into film music without really trying, in the late '80s, noted that the gig is as much social as it is musical. A composer might do his finest work, but its editing room floor-bound if the director, or the producer, or any power broker's wife isn't impressed. "You could be [Stravinsky](#), but if you can't get along with [Spielberg](#), you're out of a gig," he said. Somebody joked, "Did Stravinsky work with Spielberg?" "No," Isham retorted, "that's why [John \(Williams\)](#) got the job."

Two younger composers come from the school of rock, and have made an impressive name for themselves off to the left of convention, thanks to forgiving and supportive directors. [David Kitay](#) has scored [Terry Zwigoff's](#) films (*Ghost World*, *Art School Confidential*), and [Cliff Mansell](#) hooked up



with [Darren Aronofsky](#) (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Fountain*).

Before that Mansell was in a funk, between roles in life, after having played in the punk band [Pop Will Eat Itself](#) and getting “drunk in every city in the world,” he told us. “I was a million dollars shy of being a millionaire.” Voila, a film composer career was born.

Debney himself has been at it for many years, but is now most distinguished for his wonderful score for [Mel Gibson](#)'s *The Passion of the Christ*. “We ended up butting heads a lot,” he says of his work with Gibson, who operated as an impassioned, indie outsider on the project. “But at the end of the day, it was very satisfying.” He summed up the gig as well as anyone on the panel: “It is program music. Our job is to tell stories through music.”

Reviews of *Hounddog*, *Offside*, *Paprika*, and *The Glamorous Life of Sachiko Hanai*



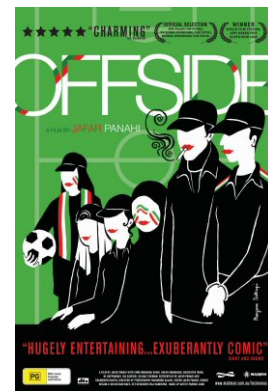
One of the most buzzed-about films at Sundance last month was writer-director [Deborah Kampmeier](#)'s *Hounddog*, controversial largely because of a rape scene involving the then 12-year-old [Dakota Fanning](#). Buzzes tend to lose their volume more quickly in today's fast-paced world (it seems like Sundance was months ago now, doesn't it?), but still, when *Hounddog* screened at SBIFF this weekend, it became a much-buzzed film in this festival, as well.

With the shock factor having worn off somewhat — for those abreast of the situation, it was possible to watch

the film and appreciate its finer points, of which there are many. Said rape scene is anything but graphic or exploitative, and is an emotional fulcrum point in a loss-of-innocence tale of stunningly empathetic power. The film also takes on the racial divide in the South, including [Elvis Presley](#)'s shameless larceny of Black music, and a few Biblical/Faulknerian dance thematic steps, and is a glowingly glorious thing to look at. Clearly, *Hounddog* is the strongest American film in the festival, full of wise and courageous turns, including bracingly good acting work from Fanning, vulnerability space queen [Robin Wright Penn](#), and also [David Morse](#) (in a twisted role, akin to his *Dancer in the Dark* role).

One of the sweetest and most deceptively slow films of the festival program, Iranian director [Jafar Panahi](#)'s *Offside*, reconfirms the notion that Iranian cinema occupies a special place in the international scene. We've been down that road before at SBIFF, whose Iranian entries over many years have been impressive, and disarmingly touching filmic intrigues. Much of the action, such as it is, in *Offside* takes place just outside the action of a soccer match, a qualifying game before the 2006 World Cup, as several young women are being detained in a holding area — soccer stadiums being off-limits to female fans. Ensuing dialogue between the detainees and the young soldiers guarding them brushes past aspects of Iranian life (much like the film *Ten* also told Iran's story, all from the minimalist context of a car interior).

A most remarkable thin happens in *Offside*: just as we settle taking the film as a slow, metaphorical and microcosmic film, it literally picks up speed and density as the game itself galvanizes national pride and a sense of solidarity. Suddenly, looking back over the film, we can see its slow-brewing ingenuity and inspired structure, securing its place in our memories. It's another jewel from a member of the cinematic axis of artistic inspiration.





at the Lobero.

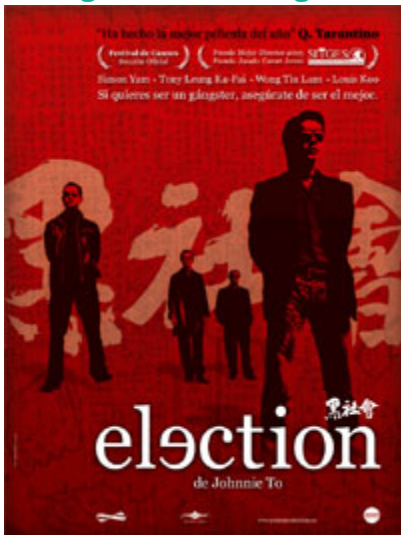
Surely, there are plenty of examples of solid down-the-middle filmmaking in Japan at the moment, but what we got in the Japanese contingent at the festival was more of a field trip to extremes. In the one corner, there is the wild dream-meets-reality-meets-animation hyperspace of director [Satoshi Kon's](#) *Paprika*, in which a premise about a dream-catching machine and vaguely post-Godzilla/Apocalyptic angst pave the way for some deliciously brain-twisting animated imagery.

In another corner (in the late night, edgy-film cul de sac of the festival program, to be specific), there was the cheeky "pink film" (i.e. arty softporn) *The Glamorous Life of Sachiko Hanai*, directed by [Mitsuru Meike](#). Our protagonist prostitute's gig is interrupted by a bullet to the temple, but that turns her into a super intellectual and magically empowered entity. She also seems to enjoy her work more than ever.

Sexual writhings aside, art and gonzo humor sneak in the cracks. Among its more memorably outlandish touches is a certain loaded prop, a coveted clone of George Bush's finger, which is put in service both as a potential trigger finger for nukular Armageddon and a marital aid. Say whaaaaaaa? Suffice to say, it played well around midnight

The Rest of Woodard's Reviews from SBIFF '007

Living La Vida Gangster



Generally, the programming agenda at SBIFF is divided into areas of Hollywood concern and otherwise, between the American/Oscar time contingent and the "international film" aspect of the festival title. But the line between those worlds isn't as hard and fast as it might seem. Take, for example, Thursday night's double-header, *Election* and *Triad Election*, fine examples in the Hong Kong gangster film genre. That very genre is presently being celebrated, if one step removed, in the current hooplah and Oscar buzz over Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*, a remake of the Hong Kong flick *Internal Affairs*. Scorsese, infamous cinephile, knows something exciting is up in Hong Kong, and *The Departed* is as much an homage to that culture as it is an all-American roughhouse etude.

Director Johnnie To earned a Golden Palm for *Election*, and his sequel is just as gripping an example of the Hong Kong crime cinema touch: tough and stylish, by turns, these movies at once makes us empathize with their sleazy suave Godfathers and Godsons, thugs and acrobats. But we don't cry much when they

meet untimely, unsavory ends. If echoes of *The Godfather* franchise abound in the films, there is something distinctly Eastern about their perspectives, both in terms of filmic cadences and style, and certain lines of

dialogue, as when, before a snitch meets his end, the killer advises him to "wise up in your next life."

Hand-held camera and close-up examinations of violence were themes common to two otherwise disparate films seen on



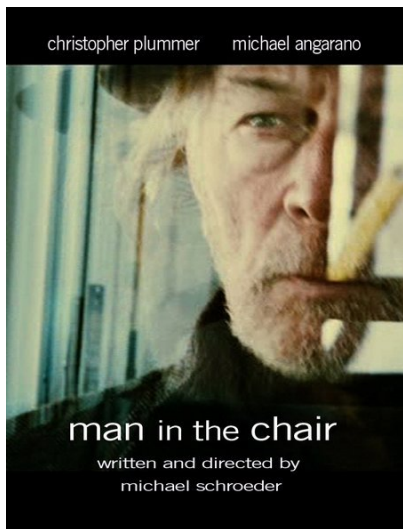
Thursday, director Andrea Arnold's intense and personal Scottish film *Red Road*, and Polish director Slawomir Fabicki's *Retrieval*. Themes of voyeurism and untold past sins course beneath the surface of the hypnotic *Red Road*, about a female cop in a rough neighborhood in Glasgow, who becomes obsessed with a keen interest in a certain lowlife, for reasons we only later discover. Included in her process is one of the most tersely erotic scenes in any of the festival films (so far), but even that comes lined with ulterior motives. *Retrieval* takes on the savagery and innocence blended into the person of one strong but confused and sensitive young man, pressed into service of thuggery while caring for his Ukrainian wife. Storyline and sensory rattling aside, the film creates a seamless bond of form and content, in a naturalistic style common in Eastern European film.

And then, in yet another corner of the cinematic universe, Pavel Lunguin's film *The Island* is a disarmingly involving study of a half-crazed monk on a remote island in Russia. For reasons we learn in the pre-credit prologue, Anatoly is something of a slovenly mystic and healer, which draws the sick of body and mind, and also the scorn and also the heartened appeals of his more "normal" brothers at the monastery.

Who woulda think that Russian monks would make for such involving cinema? Yet another lesson learned at the festival.

Josef's previous film festival blogs:

Cinematic Self-Love



Film-about-film themes and in-jokes somehow just go down easier when you're mentally lost in the thicket of a film festival. Two films screened on Wednesday at SBIFF '007—the Hollywood *Man in the Chair* and the Dutch film *Waiter*—bore out that theory, giving the film-obsessed among us something to chuckle knowingly about, even though the films themselves are flawed and nothing too special.

After the screening of *Man in the Chair*, writer-director Michael Schroeder talked about how he had been plugging along as a B-film director, making eight forgettable films in eight years, and wanting to finally make something he was personally attached to and proud of. He should be proud, even if the film doesn't quite hit artistic "money." The script is fairly larded up with quips and quotations, from Nietzsche to Hunter S. Thompson, but it contains plenty of both indie "feel good" moments and old Hollywood nostalgia. ("The glitter stops at La Brea" is but one true and metaphorical statement).

At one point, a veteran gaffer dresses down a big shot producer: "I've seen the celluloid abortions you call movies," to which the producer replies, "Those abortions have won me some brass dolls." They're speaking English, by way of Damon Runyon and timeless glib Hollywoodese. It's also a hoot to hear a scraggly Christopher Plummer spewing gutter wisdom and potty mouth lingo, a la Alan Arkin in *Little Miss Sunshine*. Everyone's favorite character actor M. Emmett Walsh dishes out a rolling bellyful of character, too.

With the clever and drolly funny *Waiter*, Dutch director Alex van Warmerdam throws his hat into the genre of screenwriter as pliable God, with obvious comparisons to *Barton Fink*, *Stranger than Fiction* and *Adaptation*, and also with those films' shortcomings of implausibility after the charm of the conceit wears off. Characters—particularly our hapless waiter protagonist—bemoan their fate at the hands of fickle a writer's imagination and seek to alter destiny. *Waiter* is a cleanly-made and left-of-center film, though, with two of the funnier scenes yet seen in this festival: In one, the simple ultra-fastidiousness of a bizarre bow and arrow salesman's wrapping job, and another Dadaistic scene in which our waiter abruptly starts chanting "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa," (spoiler alert), the result of the screenwriter has fallen asleep on the job and is resting on the "a" key.



Also Seen Dept.: The Korean film *The King and the Clown* is your not-so basic tragicomic tale of jesters at the mercy of royalty in 16th-century Korea, and is a blockbuster success in its native country. The film is also a remarkably beautiful film to look at, from the costumes to the glow of virtually every neatly-composed shot. In this tale, the king is a sadistic buffoon, while his jesters are innately wise, even as they skewer the corruption and cruelty of the man in charge. Hmm, sounds kind of like George Bush and John Stewart, the foolish king and the profound jester.

Reviews of Films from Around the World

It's clear by now that **SBIFF** has come to embrace its identity as a multiple-identity affair. Hollywood folks come up to gab, be seen, and grease the wheels of Oscar buzzdom, to the delight of the star-stricken in all of us.

But every year, it also becomes more apparent that the real meat and soul of this festival is in the actual "film" part of the equation, as a vital art form and also as a line of "other" consciousness. For 10 days, we get big screen access — direct or otherwise — to other perspectives and stories from outside the usual U.S./Euro-centric system.

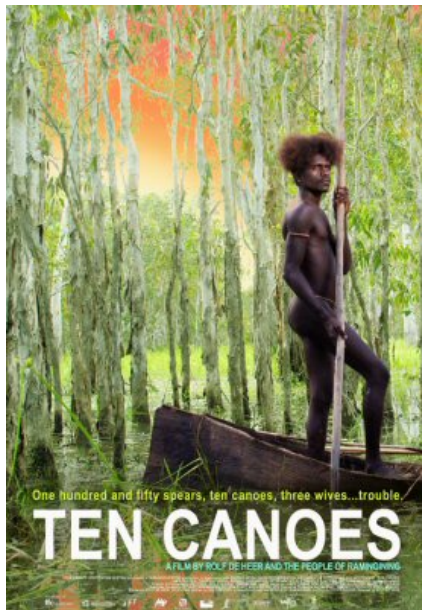
Three examples of that alternative viewpoint screened on Tuesday, halfway through the 10-day fest.

Blessed by Fire

The rough but intriguing Argentinean film *Blessed by Fire* dealt with that country's brief but bloody skirmish with the mighty Brits over the Falkland Islands in 1982. In director **Tristan Bauer's** then-and-now chronological crosscut style, we move across the tale of a veteran's suicide attempt in Buenos Aires in present-day and the mud and blood and grimy reality of that standoff on the island back when. Time is compressed in the mind of a battle-scarred veteran, who can never forget the war, and the subtext of this film is that, even with a conflict forgotten or neglected even in their own country, let alone the world, the harsh reality of life on the front line is the same for all soldiers in the line of fire.



Ten Canoes



Speaking of altered time sensibilities, *Ten Canoes* — clearly one of the finest films of this festival — is a fascinating Australian film about Aboriginal life, seen as part of the Native American subseries in the festival, which also included the hypnotic *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (about Inuit life). Directed by **Rolf de Heer** and **Peter Djigirr**, *Ten Canoes* is a stylistic triumph, laid out in layered storytelling fashion, half truth and half myth, blessed with a sense of being submerged in another, more native way of being.

Golden Door

Another highlight of the festival so far is **Emanuele Crialesa's** *Golden Door*, Italy's Academy Award nominee, but without the familiar gloss common to many foreign film nominees. Like *Ten Canoes*, but in its own indigenous way, this feels like insider's cinema

— a tale of a rural Italian immigrant family's trek to America in the 19th century. It's a naturalistic rite of passage saga from old to new world, with a prolonged middle passage through the purgatory of Ellis Island. On another level, it is but one slice of the great American story, the one about a nation of immigrants still grappling with a sense of who belongs and who doesn't.



Revolutions, Favorites, and Alzheimers

12:08 East of Bucharest

Three Romanian men, from middle-aged to Santa Claus-ian, sit around talking on a charmingly cheap television set. The subject of this talk show: the town's response to the Bucharest revolution of 1989, on its anniversary sixteen years later. The men — and their caustic callers — dive into minutiae, accusations, character mauling, and sneak attack dry, high comedy. This is eastern European talk show culture at its humblest, and cinema at its most delightful quirky and absurd, with shades of the great old talk show satire *Fernwood Tonight* (with **Martin Mull** and **Fred Willard**) and **Eugene Ionesco**.

In short, director **Corneliu Porumboiu's** *12:08, East of Bucharest*, one of the oddball charmers of SBIFF '007, is a classic example of the idea that some of the high points of this festival sneak in through a side door, and from an unexpected niche of the world cinema scene. There are long stretches where it appears nothing is happening, but the provincial warmth and Eastern Euro-slacker humor are always humming beneath the surface. The film itself also has moments of disarming beauty, as in the sweet, symmetrical framing device of omniscient shots of the city's lights as they shut off at dawn and on again at dusk. It's a day in the life of a post-iron curtain city, and of a little corner of planet earth.

(*12:08, East of Bucharest* will screen again on, Thursday, February 1 at 4:30 p.m. and February 3 at 1:15 p.m.)

DarkBlueAlmostBlack

From Spain, we caught *DarkBlueAlmostBlack*, from newcomer director **Daniel Sanchez Arevalo**. (It's one of those films over which festival director **Roger Durling** violates his policy to avoid the "f" word—as in one of his "favorites.") It is charming and in ways entirely different and more in-your-face than *12:08*, wriggling its way towards an Almodovar-ish mixture of kinkiness and sentimentality. The film doesn't get to that exalted state, and maybe it's unfair to make the comparison, but Almodovar has raised a high bar in Spanish cinema and beyond. It's hard to stay out of his shadow when dealing with matters of the Spanish heart and groin.



(*DarkBlueAlmost Black* screens again January 30, at 4:30 p.m., January 31 at and February 2 at 4:30 p.m.)

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Away

Often in overall element or **Sarah** a education mostly calibrated



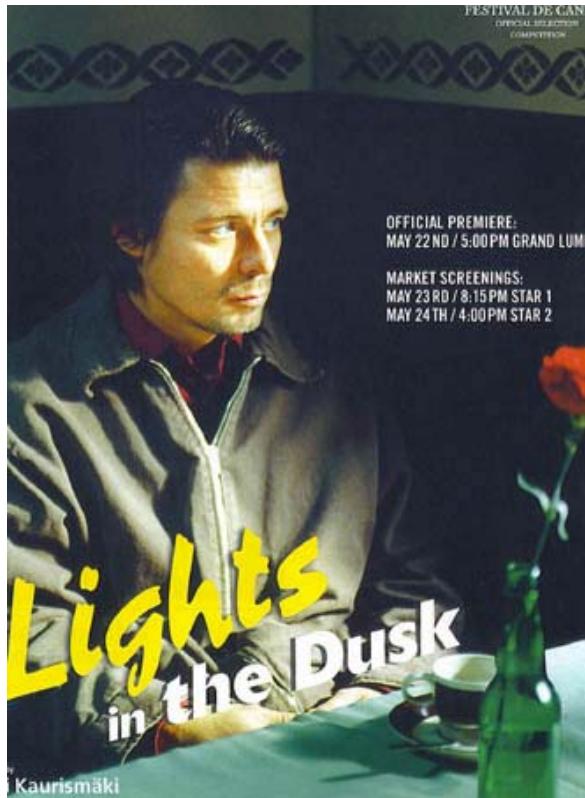
from Her

the complex, collaborative medium of film, an work may be flawed, but is rescued by some another. That's certainly the case with the **Polley**-directed Canadian film *Away from Her*, sometimes poignant, sometimes prosaic and film-ish tale about a couple's slide into Alzheimer's cruel sunset. But the film is recommended for the luminous and performance by one **Julie Christie**. She's got

glowing, elderly beauty in check, and a subtle range of emotional connections, complicated by the crossed wires and foggy pockets of her condition. Early in the film, she distractedly muses “I think I may be starting to disappear.” The ensuing performance fleshes out that very notion of a human disappearing act, but with regular flashes of insight and emotional epiphanies along the way.

Hers may be the finest performance of SBIFF '007. The next few days will tell.

From East Germany to Mexico City to Kurismaki



You know it's film festival time in Santa Barbara when, on a **cold and soggy Sunday**, you can map out the **dopest route between several films moviefone has never heard of**. From late morning to midnight, the dogged festivalgoer could take in *The Lives of Others*, a newly-Oscar nominated German film about Stasi, the secret police force; a cool and arty Mexican documentary, *In the Pit*, about a bridge construction in Mexico City (as much a profile of the working class as the project); the dazzlingly, mock-doc reconstructed Inuit-meets-Danish explorer tale of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*; and the happy story-crossing atmospheric French froth of *Avenue Montaigne*.

Oh, and most impressive of all (for those in tune with the director's unique vision), we got a look-see at the latest from director Aki (*Man without a Past*) Kaurismäki, Finland's Jim Jarmusch. Like Jarmusch, Kaurismäki knows about the imperative of the well-composed, unhurried shot and the potential expressive power of gently-broken rules and expectations in cinema. His new one, *Lights in the Dusk*, about a hapless loner for whom fate has a pocket full of woe in store, is full of his own brand of neo-Finnish-noir. Color and lighting are worth

the price of admission, as is the hypnotic and formal pace and texture. Even this **glum and tawdry femme fatale tale in Helsinki** feels like a zestier version of a **Robert Bresson** film.

Generally, Sunday's crop represent the kinds of films which the expanding universe of film festivals (reportedly now up to 1,400 worldwide) is ideally suited. Which among them can we expect to find in regular release over the next year? *The Lives of Others*, an engaging and poignant history lesson about **East Berlin in the last gasping years before the Wall fell**, stands a strong shot at the arthouse circuit. (A trailer from that film is below.) *Avenue Montaigne* is a **feelgoody tapestry**, probably headed for an arthouse near you/us.

Alas, Kaurismäki's new one — not as strong as *Man Without a Past*, but stunning nonetheless — may not make that public screening grade. But he's one of those **acquired tastes and festival icons** well worth seeking out, coming soon to a DVD outlet or Netflix near you.



Sacha Baron Cohen's Antics Revealed; Three Films from Day One

On day one of SBIFF '007, the intrepid or hopeless event hopper could have taken in excellent film experiences from Croatia (*Grbavica*), Russia (*The Italian*), and even Iraq (*Ahlaam*), all highly recommended viewing, and also Kazakhstan... not. Yes, this was the day Borat graced our fair city, in the form of [Sacha Baron Cohen](#) (pictured by Paul Wellman), appearing as SBC, in five-o'clock shadow and a baseball cap festooned with a bear. Cohen and his smash hit film descended on the Lobero, with a screening and a strange, strained conversation with the man/men of the hour in Hollywood.

There were three other guys from the movie onstage — the producer and two writers — but frankly, nobody cared about them. Such is the power of a new superstar on the comedic landscape: when he appears, we hang on his every word (of which the mum, and sometimes glum Cohen was reluctant to give much) and await the **comic sexy time** (which he delivered a bit of, heeding the wisdom of **aiming at**

genitalia, at one point offering a female audience member the chance to confirm that his package was in order).

Pity interviewer [Leonard Maltin](#), who did his level best as straight man/fall guy interviewer on a crooked playing field. But he acquitted himself nicely and even personally registered on the **laff Richter scale**. Asked if he was innately fearless, Cohen hemmed, hawed, and finally admitted "at the end of the day, I want to make the funniest film possible. Sacrifices have to be made. I was ready to have a man sit on my face." He also admitted that "Peter Sellers was always my hero. You believed Clousseau really existed." **Ditto Borat.**

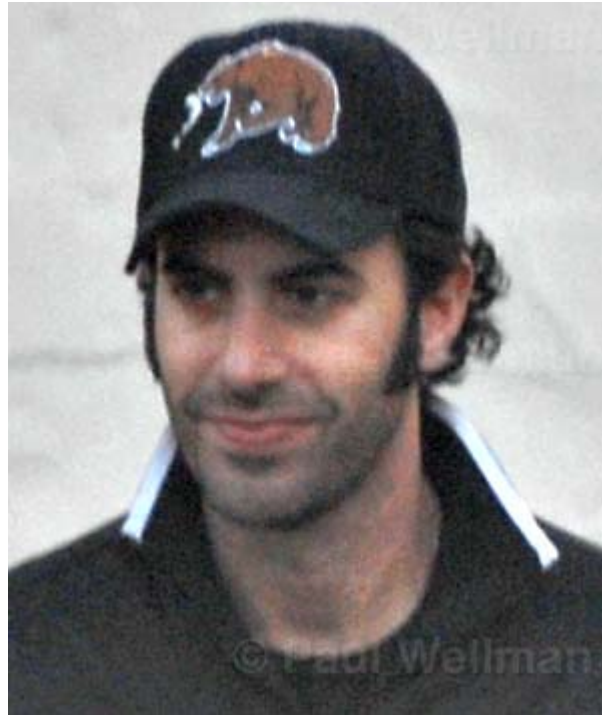
During the audience Q&A segment, [Bunny Bernhardt](#), bless her heart, appeared as a faux Kazakh woman and gave Cohen a bouquet. "I thought she was going to shoot me," he said after, then asked the next man at the microphone "you have no flowers for me?" At some point, the taciturn Cohen had had enough: "this is the revenge of the American people, isn't it?"

And the Movies?

From the film front (oh yeah, that), *Grbavica* is a powerful slice-of-life from post-war Bosnia, in the not-so-peaceful aftermath of the conflicts there. The film, which shows again Sunday, January 28, at the Metro 4, plays like a sober but ultimately hopeful sequel to another, much more harrowing film seen at SBIFF many years ago, *Vukovar*.

The Italian is the sweetest and most filmic orphan tearjerker you're likely to find at the moment. (It plays again Tuesday, January 30, 7:30 p.m. at the Lobero and Wednesday, January 31, 4 p.m., at the Metro 4.)

And, quite seriously, writer-director [Mohamed Al-Daradji](#)'s brave film *Ahlaam*, shot guerilla-style in wartorn Baghdad, confirms a core value of this and other film festivals: they connect us with the living, breathing world **far outside Hollywood's petty interest**, tapping the contemporary world's woes and joys in ways mass





corporate media has grown increasingly inept at.

After the screening, Al-Daradhi spoke with the audience and explained his rationale for making the film, offering that “the process for me was to say `who are you and what are you doing?’” That’s a **stirring manifesto**, especially under the circumstances, still raging.