

JOSEF WOODARD'S SBIFF BLOG, 2008



Photo by Paul Wellman

Woodard's Words: Opening Night 2008

Santa Barbara International Film Festival Round-Up for January 24's Opening Night

By Josef Woodard

Friday, January 25, 2008

It may be a testament to the residual provincial charm and naivete of life in Santa Barbara that we still get a buzz off of twirling, beaming klieg lights. On opening night of the film festival, it's

not hard to find your way to the center of the action in town, and opening night in 2008 found the kliegs in full force, slicing through the rain clouds overhead, specifying the cultural epicenter at the Arlington Theatre. In this venerable, kitsch-fitted house, the 11-day festival opened its portal with the world premiere of an inoffensive and occasionally heart-warming romantic comedy outta' Hollywood, [Definitely, Maybe](#). Summary review: it was certainly better than a poke in the eye.

More important than the opening night fare — historically, never the strongest element of this festival — was the sense of a ceremonial, if frothy, intro to a festival which has grown upward and outward. As SBIFF board president **Jeff Barbakow** mentioned in his introduction, what began 23 years ago as a means of putting bodies in hotel beds during the tourist off-season has grown exponentially, especially in the last five years of [Roger Durling](#)'s kindly directorial guidance and command. This festival has rightfully **taken its place among the world's top 50 film festivals**, a list which includes only a dozen American models. And anyone who has been a longtime SBIFF observer has seen said growth, in numbers and money, in celebrity voltage, and in terms of the artistic side of the medium — for some of us, the most important measure of all.

Photo Gallery

SBIFF 2008 Opening Night



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For his part, the protrusive-coiffed Durling came out in a fit of emotive intensity, making an impassioned speech, dedicating this year's festival to the recently-belated young actor [Heath Ledger](#) (the subject of a SBIFF tribute evening following *Brokeback Mountain*, only two years ago at the Luke Theater). The fact that Durling's wireless microphone kept cutting out only added to the emotional volatility of the dedication. Shifting quickly from tragedy to comedy, Durling introduced the opening film's director, **Adam Brooks**, but endearing young actress **Abigail Breslin** (of *Little Miss Sunshine* fame) took to the podium, announcing that she was Brooks, soon confessing she always wanted to be a director (and who hasn't?).

Live human presence exited stage left and the projectors rolled. But wait, what was this, an actual commercial (for a certain corporate entity, rhyming with **American Schmeck's Press**) preceding the film? Thus far in Santa Barbara, we've dodged the irritating bane of pre-feature commercials. Is the tide turning as of this festival? Let's hope not. That said, this year's festival title trailer is less patently sensual and more matter-of-fact than last year's, but comes equipped with a cool, rocking musical backdrop by **Bruce Winter** and [Zach Madden](#).

Definitely, Maybe, coming soon to a multiplex near you, is a nice enough, if too-long, variation on the feelgood-y romantic comedy theme, bumped up a notch or two by the presence of solid talent like the lovely smart **Rachel Weisz**, the wizened **Kevin Kline**, and the incurably, precociously charming Breslin, but ultimately succumbing to feelgood blandness by the time credits roll.

Then again, we've been trained by more than two decades of SBIFFs not to take the opening night film too seriously: the real meat of the festival unreels in assorted directions in the next ten days, in the dark, sans the klieg factor.



Woodard's Wraps: Film Festival, Day Two

By Josef Woodard

Saturday, January 26, 2008

By Josef Woodard

A MOMENTARY RIP: Aesthetics, star-gazing, rain-dodging and line issues aside, one of the most salient impressions on the official Day One of SBIFF is that this is the first time in the festival's 23 year history sans the Italian & Greek Deli. Since closing earlier this year, the historic slice of Santa Barbara seems a gaping absence at the corner of State and Ortega, especially now with the festival hunkering down on the same block. To outsiders and newcomers, that may seem a trivial kvetch, but the absence feels like a missing piece in the festival experience as we've come to know it. No longer can hungry, huddled masses dash up the block between screenings for gastronomic succor, happily knowing that the food is real, fresh, and non-corporate, in a downhome and locally owned and operated spot. Walking by that corner, a genuflection, a belly grumble and a tear are in order.

On the brighter side, Friday night's main attraction at the Arlington Theatre had largely to do with the hosting venue. It was a pleasantly disorienting feeling to actually see an art film on this more blockbuster-minded big screen, where only 24 hours earlier, we were suffering through

the middling, maudlin opening night Hollywood ditty, *Definitely, Maybe* (alas, rule number one at SBIFF: never judge a festival by its opening night fare). Directed by Sergei Bodrov, *Mongol* is a sweeping Kazakhstani-made epic about Genghis Khan (and Kazakhstan's Oscar bid, not to mention a salvo of revenge against Kazakh-basher Sasha Baron *Borat* Cohen). In the Arlington's epic-loving screen and room, the film beautifully spilled its vast vistas of the Central Asian steppes and its heroic story—not to mention the slow-mo blood-letting of its battle scenes. The Arlington and serious cinema have got to go on meeting like this.

Also on Friday, far quieter, subtler cinema from distant shores came in the form of two recommended films from the expanded “Eastern Bloc” segment of this year's fest, personally programmed by kindly film geeky honcho Roger Durling. From Poland comes the disarming bittersweet existential tonic of *Time to Die*, director Dorota Kedzierawska's slow and tightly-focused portrayal of an old woman nearing the end of her life, and hunkering down in her funky old house with her doting dog. What may sound gloomy is anything but, a life-affirming saga in the end-of-the-line sector of human experience, where cinema too rarely goes (partly what makes Julie Christie's shining vehicle *Away from Her* so special). It's hypnotic in its black-and-white visual strategy, and the superb acting—of both the funny feisty protagonist, , and her highly expressive canine—are surely worthy “of best of the fest” awards.

From Croatia comes *Armin*, another fascinating and odd—by western standards—jewel, well worth checking out (this is also an Oscar submission film, although it's far too interesting to win in a category requiring fuzzy sentimentalism). Here is one of those precious film experiences, seemingly slow and with a paper thin plot, about the journey of a Croatian father and his son to a hotel in Zagreb, to audition for a German film about the Bosnian war. But director Ognjen Svilicic's film boasts a remarkable system of undercurrents and hidden themes beneath the droll, stately compositions and unusual editing cadences.

Armin is one of those beautiful, deceptively understated films you watch—even after a long day of five screenings—and fall into another dimension, a dimension of sight and sound and festival-worthiness.

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Photo by Paul Wellman

Woodard's Wraps: Film Festival, Day Three

Shows, no-shows, and a Modern Master, Cate Blanchett

By Josef Woodard

Sunday, January 27, 2008

WRITERS STRICKEN: What if they gave a screenwriter's panel and nobody came? Said panel, long one of the most popular non-screening events at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, was canceled on short notice, ostensibly because of a peculiar rash of the "flu" in the writer community. But a familiar two-word phrase popped into everybody's brain upon hearing the news: "writer's strike."

Yes, the strike has hit home, not only for jones-ing SNL fans, but now SBIFF panel fans. Meanwhile, the movie industry warlords are dragging their feet and pinching royalty points for minions in the machinery, those who merely tap on keyboards for a living. Maybe next year's Fest will include a well-placed doc on the strike as cautionary tale and history lesson.

Things have been going right with a high batting average at the Festival so far, enough so that little wrinkles get extra attention. Take, for instance, the cancellation of the anticipated Takeshi

Kitano film *Glory to the Filmmaker* which arrived in town with Italian subtitles. The Italian-speaking Japanese art film demographic in Santa Barbara didn't quite warrant a screening.



Photo: Paul Wellman

Director Todd Haynes

From the very right stuff dept., 2008's "Modern Master" award went to someone who could be deemed an honest-to-goodness Modern Master, Cate Blanchett, toasted at Saturday's Arlington Theatre evening with less glitter and hoopla than the Will Smith evening last year, but with vastly more credibility. Will Smith seems like a nice guy, if not much of an actor. Blanchett seems like a nice gal, and an astonishing actress, even when playing one side of Bob Dylan, in Todd Haynes's recent game experimental quasi-biopic *I'm Not There*.

At the Arlington, Blanchett arrived in a fetching green dress and with baby number three in tow. It makes sense that she would play Kate Hepburn in *The Aviator*, and with such aplomb (as usual): Blanchett has a classic, dignified beauty seemingly connected to her mind and soul, not a cheap surface beauty. Even so, at the Arlington, she talked about viewing her work less as self-expression than as the art of getting duly lost in a character or dramatic project.

"I hear some actors say they see it as personal expression," she said. "I don't understand what all of that means. I find that utterly terrifying. I don't know who I am."

A quirkier clip on this tribute night was her doppelganger turn in Jim Jarmusch's quirky jewel *Coffee and Cigarettes*, a skit which finds her playing both herself as an actress in a swanky hotel and her street-ish Aussie cousin. When Jarmusch offered her the job, she said and mentioned she would be playing dual characters, she immediately said yes: "I love doubling on stage, but it's so rarely done on film."

Being a mother, with another on the way, has been a grounding rather than a complicating factor. "In a way, for me, having children has made me much more focused and less neurotic as an

actor. You just don't have the time to do what I previously thought was preparation but is just anxiety. It did take that neurosis away for me."

FILM NOTES FROM ALL OVER: This year's international film fare continues to impress, day by day. Germany and Austria have a bold presence in the fest, including the Austrian Oscar submission film, director Stefan Ruzowitzky's *The Counterfeiters*, a fascinating piece about the elaborate and potentially destructive counterfeiting operation at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, just outside of Berlin. As with last year's German film *The Lives of Others*—which went on to win the foreign film Oscar—*The Counterfeiters* deals with a hot historical subject in a vivid and artful, but also perfectly accessible and fluidly narrative way.

Germany and Austria have a bold presence in the fest, including *Beautiful Bitch* and the Austrian submission, *The Counterfeiters*

Another German film, writer-director Theo Krieger's *Beautiful Bitch*, has been one of the surprise hits of the Festival's first days, requiring fast footwork and extra screenings to accommodate the demand. Krieger has made an engaging study of the social issue of hapless Romanian orphans forced into pickpocketing rings, in this case, in Dusseldorf. Mean street-level realities of these children, particularly Bica—nicknamed "Bitch," and played with a bracing coolness by first-timer Katharina Derr—is juxtaposed against cushier adolescent life. If it veers away from early realism to the neighborhood of glib sentimentality at times, the film is still a captivating ride, with points to make about the cruelty of fates befalling children and the exploitative systems they fall into.

Krieger was in town to speak after the film, and he expressed his pleasant surprise at the warm reception, and also introduced a Santa Barbara-based friend, Jesse Ballard, who wrote a song for the film. He explained that he was a teacher in his "former life" and had been apprised of the Romanian pickpocket situation through newspaper articles. He also defended the happy ending to his patently grim scenario, noting that "nearly everybody has some kind of chance to change things in their life for the better."

Social issues wrapped up in solid and sometimes wrenching filmic storytelling appears to a specialty for Chinese director Li Yang, whose expose of dangerous mining condition in China *Blind Shaft* was one of the stronger films of the 2006 SBIFF. Now comes *Blind Mountain*, a nightmarish tale in an idyllic mountain village in Northern China circa the early '90s, where a woman has been kidnapped and sold into a marriage, with little hope for escape. The larger subject is the human traffic trade, still an issue in China and beyond. Chinese censors saw fit to make liberal cuts in the version suitable for the Chinese, but this was the uncut "international version—" perhaps a bit long-ish (or was that just the inherent pain of watching our heroine's prolonged suffering and one too many near getaways?). Whatever the case, this is one of many films this year that sticks in the brain, in a haunting way. As a friend said at film's end, with a wry grin, "sleep well."

Woodard's Wraps: Film Fest Day Four

Joe's take on the end of the festival's first weekend.

By Josef Woodard

Monday, January 28, 2008

A DAY IN THE FESTIVAL LIFE: Weekend one of Santa Barbara International Film Festival 2008 is a wrap, and **the verdict thus far finds thumbs in an upwardly direction.** The rains came pouring down for much of it, adding to the lure of dry, climate-controlled spaces in **the Metro cine-bunker** and other venues around town.

FILM:

Beautiful Bitch

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

Mongol

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

The Counterfeiters

[Showtimes and More](#)

For this festival geek, this time of year means surrendering normal life and waking hours to the pursuit of the good stuff. It can be dangerous business, being sucked into the festival's vortex: despite the solid bets from word-of-mouth, say the crowd-pleasing surprise hit *Beautiful Bitch* and the Oscar bids *Mongol* and *The Counterfeiters*, you don't want to miss the smaller films which may speak more directly to your cinematic palette. And then there is the guilt you may feel for following your heart into a certain bandwidth of the festival's broad programming — in

my case, international films — and missing out on other niches of the program. But it's a mostly happy problem.

FILM:

All Roads Lead Home

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

J.C. Chávez

[Showtimes and More](#)

This intrepid (obsessive?) festival-goer's Sunday in the cinema began at 9 a.m. with the agreeably sentimental, animal-loving American number [All Roads Lead Home](#), a **family-suitable movie lined with feel-good sauce**, but also featured **Peter Boyle** in one of his final performances. The day ended just before midnight with Mexican director Diego Luna's [J.C. Chavez](#), a fine documentary on Mexico's star boxer, Julio Cesar Chavez. (The late screening also included a vivid short, Jeff Barnaby's *The Colony*, in the admirable **Latino Cinemedia** section, curated by **Cristina Venegas**.)

FILM:

XXY

[Showtimes and More](#)

■

FILM:

Triangle (Tie saam gok)

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

My Way

[Showtimes and More](#)

In between those extremes for this film geek came other extremes: *XXY*, Argentine director Lucia Puenzo's **surprisingly sensitive film about a 15-year-old hermaphrodite**; the rip-snorting and kitschy cleverness-lined **Hong Kong action film *Triangle***, which was directed by

three different noted directors in that genre; and the world premiere of the Spanish film *My Way*, an entangled and not entirely successful mash-up of issues concerning Alzheimer's, the wages of drug dealing, liberally splashed with motion-sickness-making handheld camera and cut-up chronology and point-of-view.

(Ancillary note: It's interesting to compare the cinematographic leanings of films this year, often a battle of the rough-hewn, reality-TV style and the patient, stately, still shot -- tripods can be a beautiful thing.)

If there have yet to be any **films for which the superlative "blown away" is suitable**, we've seen plenty of strong and creative films, mostly from afar. The best of these are the sweet and subtle *Armin*, from Croatia, the quiet and witty Israeli film *The Band's Visit* — addressing the Arab-Israeli divide from a completely unique angle — and *Takva: A Man's Fear of God*, a beautifully visual and probing study of spiritual crisis, not to mention a rare glimpse into the ceremonial Islamic, here in Istanbul.

Coming to a theater near you this week are loads more films, including a number of TBA slots reserved for repeats of the jewels and/or crowd favorites. This is also a big week for representation [*No Country for Old Men*](#) — the best film of 2007, sez me and an army of others. The commanding stars from that film stop by the Arlington this week to be toasted. Tonight, it's **Javier Bardem**, and Friday brings **Tommy Lee Jones**. And, oh yeah, **some actress named Angelia Jolie** does the Arlington shuffle on Saturday, in what will no doubt be this festival's show biz buzz moment. Between Bardem, **Ryan Gosling** (whose work in [*Lars and the Real Girl*](#) was a minor miracle), Jones and last weekend's visits by **Julie Christie** and the great **Cate Blanchett**, SBIFF 2008 is one of the strongest years yet for actors deserving their tribute slots.



Photo by Paul Wellman

Woodard's Wraps: Film Fest Day Five

Joe Takes In Bardem, Environmentalists, the Eastern Bloc

By Josef Woodard

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

High in the ranks of the sector of the film festival which could be dubbed “Surprise Hits and Heroes” comes [Garbage Warrior](#), British filmmaker **Oliver Hodges**’ entertaining documentary on the righteously — and rationally — crazed New Mexican architect **Michael Reynolds**. As a champion of “radically sustainable” architecture, (i.e. housing designed to work completely off the utility grid, and built from old beer cans, tires, and the like), Reynolds has been a maverick with a cause for decades, and has suffered for his vision. After building “earth ship” houses and communities around Taos, starting in the ‘70s, his architectural license was revoked for years. Reynolds has a powerful story to tell, and a witty/gonzo way of telling it.

FILM:

Garbage Warrior

[Showtimes and More](#)

But the film is more than just an engaging portrait of a charismatic individualist as he maneuvers through the maze of government bureaucracy. Reynolds' quest to get a bill passed that **encourages experimental architecture** leads him to take his case to the field—building “earth ships” in post-catastrophe regions of India and Mexico. As he repeatedly says, what he's up to is more pressing than ever before, as environmental issues in the wake of global warming move into a state of global emergency. The time to act is yesterday, and Reynolds already has been on the case for much of his life. Like [Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*](#), if on a humbler and more personality-specific level, this film demands to be seen by as many humans as possible. Time is of the essence.

Certainly, one of the most strangely captivating moments in the 2007 film year was [Javier Bardem's](#) dazzling role in [No Country for Old Men](#), for which he's been Oscar nominated in the category of Best Performance by an Actor in a Phantom Role... I mean Supporting Role. As far as bad dudes go, this one was **an unsettling blend of Zen warrior and sadistic evil doer**, yet we never quite get a handle on him (and some suggest that he may be a ghostly cipher). Bardem, a classically handsome and also eloquent sort, stopped by the Arlington last night to talk about his career so far. That life included some racier “Latin lover” roles early in his life, work with the great, inventive Spaniard **Pedro Almodovar**, a soul searching phase as a waiter, and a reemergence in distinctive roles throughout this century — [Before Night Falls](#), [The Sea Inside](#), [No Country](#), and recently-completed work with **Woody Allen**.

Asked by **moderator Roger Durling** about his choosiness, Bardem made the point that “a character is fifty percent of the performance, so if you choose well, you have fifty percent of your work done. Of course, you have to bring your own thing to the work, but the character will help a lot, just by being well-described on page. I have to really believe what I'm doing and once I believe, I can go far with it.”

From his discerning filmography of the last few years, Bardem, now 38, has clearly taken a more serious approach to his art. “Movies are very entertaining, of course,” he said. **“Movies won't solve the world's [problems] or give us a clue about the meaning of life, but movies can ask some questions for us to answer.** Those are the films I want to be part of.”

FILM:

Shadows (Senki)

[Showtimes and More](#)

Also sees: Macedonian director **Milcho Manchevski's** [Shadows](#), an unusually smart entry in the supernatural cinema genre, is part of this year's especially strong Eastern Bloc programming.

Macedonia's Oscar submission, the film evocatively works its theme of forces beyond the pale, with reflections and shadows taking a primary role in the narrative, along with an erotic subcurrent that feels more Eastern bloc-ish than leeringly Southern California.

FILM:

Amal

[Showtimes and More](#)

[Amal](#), made in Delhi by Canadian director **Richie Mehta**, is one of those feel-good, formulaic foreign films propped up by blatant tactics and characters. It **teeters on melodrama**, with good and bad people too-clearly delineated, but still is consistently charming, offering a rare view of Indian life with a few surprises in store.

FILM:

The Mourning Forest (Mogari no mori)

[Showtimes and More](#)

[The Mourning Forest](#), from Japanese director **Naomi Kawase**, may be the festival's most meditative film, and certainly make's my "Best of the Fest" list. It may take a minute to re-adjust your westernized, hyperactive senses, and pre-programmed hunger for old-fashioned formulaic structure. The theme is mourning, at a forest-based Buddhist center for those who have lost loved ones, but the mood is never morose and humor is ever-waiting in the wings of the film. From the long opening shots through to **the truly hypnotic final long take** (which gets my vote as the take of the festival), we understand that this film takes its time and delivers its pay-offs from unexpected angles.



Woodard's Wraps: Film Fest Day Seven

Highlights Include *You, The Living, Short Circuits*

By Josef Woodard

Thursday, January 31, 2008

Reverend Albert Wagner was an African-American folk artist in Cleveland who heard the call at age 50. God, he explained, was telling him to turn away from a life of drinking, drifting, and serial womanizing — producing a large, multi-family brood — and devote himself to painting. “God and art saved Reverend Albert,” says Wagner in third person. **Wagner passed away in 2006** and has been taking his place in the ranks of important American “outsider” artists ever since.

FILM:

ONE BAD CAT: The Reverend Albert Wagner Story

[Showtimes and More](#)

One of many strong documentaries in this year’s SBIFF, [*One Bad Cat: The Reverend Albert Wagner Story*](#) is filmmaker Thomas Miller’s account of the story, deftly conveyed through personal anecdotes and footage from the last stretch of Wagner’s life. But mostly, and wisely, the film tells Wagner’s story through the artist’s overflowing bounty of art, **full of sex, youthful nostalgia, racial tensions, and religious messages**. Apart from an irritatingly bland and synthetic musical score (qualities antithetical to the rough, elemental expressiveness of Wagner’s art), the film is an engaging portrait in the tricky genre of films about artists. It effectively pulls us into the experience of the artist and the African-American male, behind the mountain of intuitive imagery created during Wagner’s 30-year outpouring.

Generation Cyber: Virtual reality meets [Asperger’s Syndrome](#) in the mostly gripping Belgian film, [Ben X](#); a story about the edgy paradox between cold, hard realities and the mutable “endgames” of computer gaming. But **director-writer Nic Balthazar**’s study of an afflicted and super-sensitive Belgian high schooler (easy prey for predatory bullies), also taps into present-day techno-psychology, dealing with the elusive nature of reality in an age of Internet connectivity and all its invasive and prankster aspects. (As it goes with movies about technology, the cutting edges seen here will look quaintly obsolete ten years from now). While the film eventually steers into emo overkill, it has enough substantial commentary beneath its hurtling surface energy to make it much more than just another teen flick from Belgium.

FILM:

Ben X

[Showtimes and More](#)

Vignettes of Different Colors: Two of the strongest films in this year’s festival line-up take separate routes on the road to film as narrative mosaic. Slovenian director [Janez Lapajne](#)’s *Short Circuits* leans towards the tragic, with glints of the comic, while the dryly hilarious Swedish film, [You, the Living](#), is a comedy **liberally lined with Swedish angst**. Both films wear their structural and stylistic concepts well, and their form richly supports the content. Here, basically, is what a film festival is all about; discovering gems from far shores which play by their own artistic rules, and work.

FILM:

Short Circuits (Kratki Stiki)

[Showtimes and More](#)

Slipping back and forth in time and between various characters' stories, *Short Circuits* appears more non-linear than it is. Key dramatic points involving lost mobility and innocence, on various levels, are connected by an ingenious and slow-brewing logic. With **an atmosphere of moral second-guessing and looping, cruel fate**, *Short Circuits* has the feel of a film by the late, great **Krzysztof Kieslowski**, but with its own creative voice at work in a maze-like human tragicomedy (emphasis on the tragi).

FILM:

You the Living (Du levande)

[Showtimes and More](#)

Director **Roy Andersson's** *You, the Living* — its title taken from a [Goethe](#) quote — is a captivating quirk of a film, whose typically Scandinavian deadpan sensibility blends in with a deceptively cool and rational, but ultimately dream-like succession of fifty long-take vignettes, including some vivid and bizarre dream sequences. Some of the vignettes are connected to others, others aren't, keeping us guessing about the sneaky narrative grid. These formalist follies drop us in on **characters who brood for a living**. And if you have a taste for this kind of cinematic drollery, convulsive laughter will spill forth, possibly causing the less sympathetic people next to you question your sanity.

By this point, lost deep in the celluloid opium den just past the mid-point of the festival, the obsessive festivaler starts to get a sense of the forest past the trees. S/he starts to name names, gauge the overall landscape, and assign brownie points. This viewer hereby anoints *Short Circuits* and *You, the Living* as **strong Top Ten candidates**, and the Swedish film contains the funniest sex and execution scenes of the festival. Of course, the jury isn't completely out yet.

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Woodard's Wraps: Day Nine

The best film festival entry so far? Joe thinks so.

By Josef Woodard

Friday, February 1, 2008

BEST OF THE FEST? History shows us that there are several ways to fill a theater for an Santa Barbara International Film Festival screening. Naturally, word-of-mouth buzz counts for a lot, and the prospect of seeing films in the running for **Best Foreign Film Oscar** piques the mass curiosity, as does a bit of French froth comic relief from the more serious stuff. **And then there is the Durling Factor.**

Last night's initial screening of Fatih (*Head On*) Akin's amazing new film, *The Edge of Heaven*, was packed, at least partly thanks to the avid stumping of festival director **Roger Durling**. He has been going all over town singing the film's praises, and the crowd came out in happy droves. He tries, feebly, to avoid the f-word — "favorite" — in talking about films, but sometimes rules are made to be broken.

FILM:

The Edge of Heaven

[Showtimes and More](#)

Quite simply, *The Edge of Heaven* may well be **the best film of SBIFF 2008**. It's edgy yet human, compelling in its narrative structure, acting and virtually every facet of the filmmaking.

As with *Head On*, Akin's new film deals with elements of sex, violence and cinematic stylization, but all in a much subtler and happenstance way. The Turkish-German director again moves across borders, literally, of economic and ethnic realities, dredging up telling racial vertigo on the way to conveying the importance of tolerance and compassion. It's a haunting and beautiful film. Catch it if you can. If not, this is one film which will make its way back to Santa Barbara, if there's any justice.

CONTINENTAL DREAMING: Latin American cinema has had a friend in SBIFF for years. But that friendship has warmed up considerably in the last several years, thanks to curator **Cristina Venegas**, a UCSB professor who scours the possibilities and takes us south, into a corner of international cinema all too overlooked—even by the art house circuit. Latin American culture itself is a quiet giant, overshadowed by the North American, European and Asian worlds, as Santa Barbarans have discovered first-hand in various ways. During Uruguayan-born **Gisele Ben-Dor's** era as maestra of the Santa Barbara Symphony, she cleverly snuck loads of fascinating Latin American music into the mix, an enlightening and distinguishing period in our orchestral history.

Of course, more than its sub-popular culture classical music counterpoint, Latin American cinema is a vast and varied world, differentiated by country, attitude, political history and other factors separating one cultural neighborhood from another. That much we learn from the diversity of offerings this year.

FILM:

The Silly Age (La edad de la peseta)

[Showtimes and More](#)

Yesterday, for instance, one could start out in the vibrant Kodachromatic world of pre-Castro Cuba, with **Pavel Giraud's** *The Silly Age*. It's a coming-of-age film about a ten-year-old boy discovering the wonders of the other gender, and caught between the strength of his photographer grandmother and the aloofness of his single mother. We feel the looming transition of the Revolution in the air, but for this window of time in 1959, it's all about sensuous visuals and clothes bathed in warm light, reminiscent of *In the Mood for Love* and *Amarcord*, by turns, but in old hedonistic, capitalist Havana.

FILM:

Not By Chance (Não Por Acaso)

[Showtimes and More](#)

From that film, we wandered across the Metro Theaters lobby to Brazil and another time and place entirely. Director **Phillipe Barcinski's** fine *Not by Chance* is one of many festival films this year dealing with the unexpected blows and **cross-town traffic of fate**. Traffic is the key word in a story about a divorced traffic control dispatcher, with an omniscient overview of the

complex city grid, and a pool table maker, and their parallel paths, joined by matters of traffic. Barcinski weaves a good and emotionally magnetic multi-strand yarn, without falling into pretentiousness or stylistic overkill.

EAST-ISH TRADE ROUTING: Chalk up another one for the Eastern European bunch. Viewing films on the program in a competitive manner may be unfair, but it's a natural human instinct. The discerning part of the brain wants to keep things in order, considering one thing in light of another. It's also partly a defense mechanism, a way to winnow down the huge list of films in the festival and cherry-pick.

FILM:

The Trap (Klopka)

[Showtimes and More](#)

That said, the sector of the programming — or “sidebar” as the festival puts it — which has presented the most consistently strong and provocative content, at least from this viewer's vantage, is **the Eastern Bloc**. Late last night (spilling past midnight), once again, we were transported to Eastern Europe, this time to Serbia's Oscar submission film, **Srdan Golubovic's** *The Trap*, and fairly dazzled by the vision presented. A morality fable about choices made and values compromised in the face of an unpleasant fate is not unlike the narrative of **Woody Allen's** new one, *Cassandra's Dream*. But it has the added plot thickener and heart-renderer of a child's innocence at stake, a theme also strong in one of the best films of the festival, the powerful Slovenian film *Short Circuits*.

Moving into the terrain of stories involving threatened children is risky business, courting melodrama and cheap theatrics. Some of that manipulative gloss bubbles up in *The Trap*, but only fleetingly, thanks to the strong, firm guidance of Golubovic's directorial hand. It was enough to keep us wide awake, even on a school night.



Woodard Wraps: Film Fest, Day Nine

Tommy Lee Jones, French Cinema, Animation, and vast Brazilian drama

By Josef Woodard

Saturday, February 2, 2008

There was no more haunting scene in American cinema last year than the end of *No Country for Old Men*, a surprisingly lyrical, contemplative finale to a film not shy of violence or Coen Bros. brand irony. It's more like a reflective coda, really, than a tidy conclusion, and nobody could possibly have delivered it with the drawling bravado and wisdom of Tommy Lee Jones. A kind of hush fell over the Arlington Theatre last night as Jones—being paid tribute here--discussed the now infamous ending, as if his very timbre took us back to that drawling place of reverie in the film.

Jones, never one to suffer fools or give in to excess idle gab, let alone self-analysis, summed up the film and its ending thusly, in slow, steady, Texan tones: "It's a contemplation about morality, but it's not simple and it's very subtle. He talks about his father and a dream he had about his father. He dreamed that the world is going to be a better place. If you just keep riding on through the dark and through the desert and through the freezing cold long enough, you'll have a fire waiting for you. It's a very kind of comforting thought. The last phrase of the movie is 'but then I woke up.' He refers to that as a dream. You're left with a further contemplation. Is there any reason for optimism? Is it only a dream, and if it's a dream, is it real. I think that's kind of what it's about.

"This movie is not about answers, it's about really good questions."

Jones' tribute night was capped off by an award given by Andrew Davis, who directed Jones in *Under Siege*, *The Package*, and *The Fugitive*. And the evening came as a neat bookend to Monday night's tribute to Javier Bardem, the other cool, mystical character in *No Country*. This-is-your-life style tribute evenings at the festival can be trying, for those in the spotlight and in the house, but there is something comforting about being in the room for a casual, ostensibly conversational presence with great artists, like Jones, Bardem and—last Saturday's subject/victim, Cate Blanchett.

One expects a very different vibe, not to mention paparazzi density, at tonight Angelina encounter.

FILM:

Roman De Gare

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

Priceless

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

Sous les toits de Paris (Beneath the Rooftops of Paris)

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

Time to Die (Dorota K dzierzawska)

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

Alexandra

[Showtimes and More](#)

THE FRENCH ARE COMING: French films have been conspicuous by their absence, until yesterday, that is. Three have arrived in time for the festival's final weekend, starting yesterday afternoon with *Roman de Gare*, Hitchcock-worshipping director Claude Lelouch's latest tautly-crafted crime and punishment saga. Last night, we arrived too late to get into the traditional token French Froth of the fest, *Priceless*, but ducked into director Hiner Saleem's *Sous les toits de Paris (Beneath the Rooftops of Paris)*, a disarming moving film full of sweetness, poignancy, and refreshingly minimal reliance on dialogue. Visuals and acting do the talking, along with sparingly applied Parisian music, in another of this festival's sensitive and creative tales of an elderly person's reality (alongside *Time to Die* and *Alexandra*, both excellent senior-focused films).

FILM:

Ratatouille

[Showtimes and More](#)

DON'T CALL 'EM CARTOONS: The fine art of animation has a notable status in SBIFF 2008, the year that Pixar magnate Brad Bird is paid tribute to on the heels of the brilliant all-ages favorite *Ratatouille*. A program of animated shorts at the Lobero on Friday morning inspired in multiple directions, reminding us that animation is a medium of great variety, from piece to piece, in terms of form, content and image-making technique. In animation, the very look and means by which that looks is achieved becomes part of the art, at the most fundamental creative level.

Among the many intriguing shorts seen in the program were NYU student Zeth Willie's computer animated *The Needful Head*, the effectively enigmatic mosquito's eye-view piece *Blood by Tell* by Andrew McPhillip, from Toronto (Canada is a longtime wealth of animation vision), and Canadian George Schimizgebel's *Jeu*, in which numbers, letters, shapes and real world situations rapidly morph, to the tune of a perpetual mobile movement of a Prokofiev Piano

Concerto. Josh Raskin's dazzling *I Met the Walrus* comes from yet another corner of its own devising; drawing on a clandestine tape of a conversation with John Lennon in a hotel room in 1969, with peace as the leitmotif, illustrated by Terry Gilliam-like free associational animations. It's a weird hoot.

FILM:

Not By Chance (Não Por Acaso)

[Showtimes and More](#)

BRAZIL, MANY SIDES THEREOF: Of the countries represented in the Latin American Cinemedia section of the festival, it seems that Brazil is represented by the widest variety of fare, if only that this huge country is one of many facets. Bittersweet emotionality and intriguing storytelling give Phillipe Barcinski's *Not by Chance* its distinctive and rueful charm.

FILM:

Serras da Desordem (Hills of Disorder)

[Showtimes and More](#)

A fascinating documentary, *Serra da Desordem (Hills of Disorder)*, from Andrea Tonacci, tells the tale of an indigenous Amazonian Indian who spent 10 years living alone in the jungle after being displaced from his land. The film follows the man's "reentry," into quasi-gentrified villages, the urban landscape of Brasilia and finally back to his tribe, all with an intriguing mix of cinema verite, as newscasters replace the intrusive role of a narrator and implied themes of civilizations ravages in a nation where tribal cultures still exist, if uneasily.

FILM:

Bog of Beasts (Baixio das Bestas)

[Showtimes and More](#)

And then, from a different corner of Brazil and the cinematic spectrum, there is this year's edgiest film, *Bog of Beasts*, touching sexual brutality, the surrendering of a teenage girl's innocence, and sexual double standards in a rural sugar cane town. Director Claudio Assis adopts a neo-realist approach in his film, an unflinching and unsentimentalized depiction of life beyond a moral compass or balance. The graphic scenes and gnarly carnal sadism would seem gratuitous were it not for the power of the filmmaker's vision, bolstered by strong visuals—i.e. the burning cane fields mirroring brewing sexual anger--remarkable and sometimes scary performances, and the admirable resistance to easy resolution. We left the theater drained and psychically battered, perhaps, but also with the feeling of having gone through a highly filmic experience.

TOP TEN LIST IN TRAINING: In rough order of artistic interest, here's a top ten list of films, still in progress:

The Edge of Heaven

You the Living

Armin

The Mourning Forest

Takva: A Man's Fear of God

Time to Die

The Band's Visit

Short Circuits

Alexandra

Garbage Warrior

Santa Barbara
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Photo by Paul Wellman

Woodard's Wraps: Film Fest, Day Ten

Angelina Jolie's might; Phyllis DePicciotto Talks Old Days; and More SBIFF-y Flicks

By Josef Woodard

Sunday, February 3, 2008

PRETTY BUT MIGHTY: There may be no more stark disparity between what we read and see in the papers — the subspecies of the tabloids that is — and the actual story than the case of [Angelina Jolie](#). She pops up in our sightlines at grocery store checkouts on a regular basis, as manufactured news and idle speculation, titillating fabrications and scuttlebutt swirl about this woman. But to her great credit, Jolie rises above the scurrilous din with an uncommon dignity.

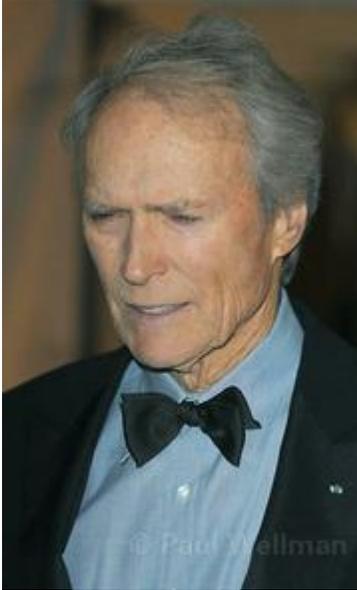


Photo: Paul Wellman

Clint Eastwood

As seen with this year's [A Mighty Heart](#), she's got real depth and range as an actress, even if she rarely gets a chance to show it. And not at all as an afterthought or token gesture, Jolie's concern for the real world and its affliction can be infectious. She's a shining example of a mondo-show biz celebrity with a brain and heart intact. Both of those qualities were in the house at the Arlington on Saturday night, as a packed and adoring crowd listened to her turn for a this-is-your-life session.

An "Outstanding Performance of the Year" was given to her by [Clint Eastwood](#), in whose upcoming film, [The Changeling](#), Jolie stars. Naturally, sometime-local boy **Brad Pitt** was in the throng as well (Pitt, incidentally, had his own recent work represented in this film festival, with the screening of the hypnotically fine film *The Assassination of Jesse James*).

Photo Gallery

SBIFF 2008 Outstanding Jolie



[Enlarge photos](#) | [View thumbnails](#)

As anyone with even cursory access to media — even on that fleeting grocery store line basis — knows, Jolie met her man on the film *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, about a couple of assassins. Looking back on that film, Jolie said, “It’s one of those films that both Brad and I tried to get out of. A friend of mine read it and said, ‘If ever you were to do an action comedy, this is the one you should try to do. It seems like you’d have a great time doing it.’ **Obviously, I’m very glad I did it, because it changed my life.**”

She was speaking, of course, about the Pitt factor, not some aesthetic epiphany.

Speaking of Eastwood, Jolie commented, “He’s just so nice and so cool. Everybody on the set is so happy and respected, and many on the crew have worked as a team with him on several films. We all left that film thinking, ‘When are we ever going to have this kind of experience again?’ He’s brilliant, and decisive. You’d be surprised at how many directors aren’t decisive.”





Photo: Paul Wellman

Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt

But the main subject at hand at this moment is Jolie's critically-acclaimed performance as [Mariane Pearl](#) in *A Mighty Heart*, about the execution of Wall Street Journal reporter [Daniel Pearl](#) in Pakistan, at the outset of the post-9/11 middle morass we're in now.

"The most important message of this film, and (Mariane Pearl's) book and the message of Danny and Marianne, is to **take all of that terror and that horror and to rise above it**, remain loving, remain tolerant, remain optimistic, and they continue to do that," said Jolie at her most poignant on Saturday night. "I think that is the message. We do need to face these very serious threats, things that scare us and things that are true, that there is a lot of aggression out there. But also, we have to take a deep breath and learn how to confront it and not just by spitting back hate."

Mighty indeed.

FROM DAY ONE TO FIVE MINUTES AGO: There are many regular faces one finds drifting through the obsessive community of festival goers each year, clutching dog-eared programs and looking perhaps frazzled in the furtive effort to not miss any of the good stuff. One such familiar figure over many years has a deep connection to this festival and its advancing legacy: **Phyllis DePicciotto** was there at the beginning, 23 years ago, bravely birthing the festival, and was its director for 13 years.

Stopping outside the Metro Four to talk a bit about the formative, pre-teen years of the festival, DePicciotto spoke of the festival's early days. Then, with headquarters based upstairs in the [Granada Theatre](#), the film festival was a brave experiment, at a time when there were a few dozen film festivals around the world, versus the hundreds now in existence. In the beginning was the fueled by city money geared by interest in expanding off-season tourism, but the city council was fairly baffled about just what a film festival was and who and how the benefits

Starting in the beginning, DePicciotto created the basic festival model, which continues today, if on a much larger and more solid operational scale. She brought notable tribute subjects, including **Jimmy Stewart and Robert Mitchum**, and stirred in lots of fine foreign films in among the admittedly uneven American fare. The U.S. Premiere of [Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette*](#) (with its standout performance from **a young Daniel Day Lewis**) ruffled some feathers and drew some angered responses, offended by its gay scenes and theme. That was then, this is now.

She sees the festival's current status, ranking ever higher in the international circuit of festivals, as the "**fulfillment of a dream.**" That wasn't just idle lip service. We would have continued talking, but there were films to be seen and seats to be staked out.

FILM:

Priceless

[Showtimes and More](#)

FROTH DEPT.: It seems like each festival brings out a token French froth title, coming in handy for those who seek out the lighter fare and as comic relief for serious (hopeless?) festival-goers who have bathed in angst and artful darkness in the rest of the program. *Priceless*, director **Pierre Salvadori's new vehicle for Audry (Amelie) Tatou**, was this year's model, predictably drawing capacity crowds. As a comedic lark, the film mostly suits its purpose beautifully, but wears out its welcome. With its cheery story of shameless gold diggers lusting after money and the accoutrements of wealth, the film is like bubbly which eventually goes stale.

FILM:

The Debt

[Showtimes and More](#)

ALSO SEENS: The Israeli film *The Debt* spins a suspense story, cutting across decades, about a Massad agent and her elusive quarry, the Nazi "surgeon of Birkenau." *Epitaph*, a visually elegant Korean ghost story, is one of the better entries in the East x West sidebar, which was surprisingly weak this year.

FILM:

Epitaph

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

The Edge of Heaven

[Showtimes and More](#)

HANDICAPPING THE FINAL DAY: SBIFF draws to a close and some of us will soon rejoin the real, physical world, already in progress. Looking at the Sunday program, here are some recommended fare: *The Edge of Heaven*, the latest from German director Faith Akin, is the best film of this festival, engaging and subtly edgy; *Alexandra*, from director Alexander Sokurov, is a filmically inventive, disarmingly meditative story of an old woman who visits her Russian soldier grandson at his base in Chechnya.

FILM:

Alexandra

[Showtimes and More](#)

FILM:

The Unknown Woman (Sconosciuta, La)

[Showtimes and More](#)

Rumor and buzz have it that *Small Gods* is reportedly a semi-experimental project from Belgium. *The Pixar Story* caps off a visit this year from Brad (*Ratatouille*) Bird, and prospects are strong that the closing night film, Giuseppe Tornatore's *The Unknown Woman* is a winner, albeit much darker and more graphic than his beloved *Cinema Paradiso*.

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Woodard's Wraps: Day Eleven

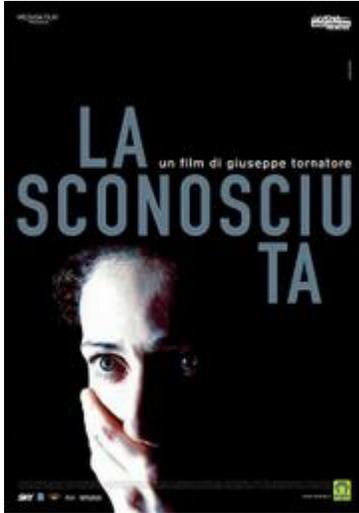
Closing Night, Louise Hogarth's *Angels in the Dust*, and Getting Your *Fix*

By Josef Woodard

Monday, February 4, 2008

WRAPPING IT, GUTSILY: With a more subdued and soggy atmosphere than the film festival's opening night 11 nights earlier, SBIFF 2008 ended on a strong and happy note on Sunday night. Well, the happy note came in terms of the satisfaction of another rich and dense edition of festival that keeps rising in the international ranks, and again kept serious cinema

customers mostly glowing. It was happy, also, in that Italian director **Giuseppe Tornatore**'s latest film, *The Unknown Woman*, capped off the 11-day festival with a closing night film much stronger and more festival-worthy than we've come to expect from this spot in the SBIFF program.

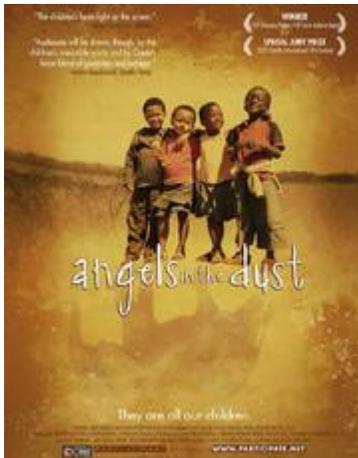


Poster for *The Unknown Woman*.

Happy, though, isn't the most precise adjective to describe the nature of the film itself, an elaborate tense Hitchcock-ian mousetrap punctuated by graphic violence and sex (and sexual violence) and general nastiness beneath the cool visual scheme and lush, insinuating musical score. Suffice to say, this is a very different film from Tornatore's classic heart-warming paean to cinema, *Cinema Paradiso*. But it made for an ideal — if shy of uplifting — festival aperitif, a nice finishing touch for a festival chock full of impressive goods this year.

THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE METRO: While we got insights about the world from a bold roster of films from around the world — and from beyond the usual Western European cinema sources — a solid program of documentaries also opened eyes and hearts, in more of a direct reality check kind of way.

One of the several moving socially- charged docs, part of the was *Angels in the Dust*, director **Louise Hogarth**'s clear, focused, and moving portrait of a private orphanage and school outside of Johannesburg, run by the Cloete family for nearly twenty years. At the center of the operation is the heartfelt dynamo and avid activist **Marion Coete**, who we watch in action as she comforts children and AIDS victims, and afflicts adults who mistreat them. Aside from the alarming details about the troubling social conditions in this country, gripped by a full-on AIDS epidemic, we get a poignant perspective on the too-often neglected aftershock of the epidemic: the children here are orphaned or soon to be orphaned because of AIDS. Hogarth wisely keeps her focus tight, conveying the broader situation by telling stories of specific orphans, with the powerful force that is Marion Coete at the center.



After the screening, director Hogarth, who lives part of the year in South Africa, talked about her own transformation while embarking on this project. “I was hearing about the orphan situation and I was seeing it,” she said. “You would see kid washing the car windows and see desperate people by the side of the road. **I found myself being not that sympathetic.** I heard other sad stories and thought that someone has got to tell the story of what’s happening to the kids, because it’s not really on the larger agenda. As an example, this year, they have the International AIDS conference, this year in Mexico City, and orphans aren’t even on the roster, they’re not even a consideration.

“So I started looking for some way to tell the story in a human fashion. Friends told me about the Cloetes. This friend was telling me that ‘they’re just angels in the dust,’ and she started to cry. I went down to see them, and immediately when I met Marion and Con —particularly Marion — I just loved her and everything that she is doing. A lot of the issues she was dealing with are issues we have in the U.S.

“I don’t want to make a documentary just to kind of suck the audience dry. I want to try to give something back. The spiritual crisis and what we’re doing with our lives to make a difference, these are issues we all concerned with, and death and dying, an issue we often push aside but they don’t at all. Rape is another issue.”

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT: It can be hard to run from one film to another without traces of culture shock. A world or two, for instance, separates the compassionate *Angels in the Dust* and the perky/edgy American indie film *Fix*, which lionizes a charismatic addict’s self-indulgent follies on the teetering path to rehab. But *Fix* is an entrancing and deceptively deep film, which director **Tao Ruspoli** disguises as a cinema verite-meets-reality television romp about a documentary maker and his partner’s efforts to steer his charming rogue of a brother to a rehab in Anaheim in time to beat the demands of The Man. Really, it plays like an irreverent adventure — a day in the life of a charming rogue — tooling all over Los Angeles, from Lost Hills to Watts to Palos Verdes and more. L.A., the sprawling landscape of broken dreaming, is the tacit umbrella character here, in a film of surprising intrigue and creative bodaciousness.

Ironically enough, *Fix* won the **Heineken Red Star Award**, presumably on the basis of its artistry, not in the “Most Substances Abused in a Single Film” category.