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Nov. 27, 2006

Autumn in NY

Fall Film Festivals Harvest Diverse Talent

AUTUMN IN NEW YORK

by Doris Toumarkine

As sure as temperatures drop and leaves turn, fall in New York means a rich harvest of film events for fans and professionals who embrace independent and foreign product. Summer may be the movie season for kids of all ages, but autumn in New York is *that* time of year for those embracing *auteurs*, not actioners.

Again, the twin peaks of this bountiful fall harvest, which also included the IFP Market and Conference (an unparalleled networking and informational event), the Independent Film Week (promoting indie films in theatres) and upstate's cozy Woodstock Film Festival, were the Film Society of Lincoln Center's 44th New York Film Festival (NYFF) and the 14th Hamptons International Film Festival (HIFF).

Unlike lower Manhattan's sassy spring upstart--the gangly, precocious and increasingly populist and expanding Tribeca Film Festival--the NYFF and HIFF do not kiss the assets of Hollywood but focus on specialized product that may or may not have distributors attached.

Both festivals value their exclusivity, although Hamptons presents many dozens of features compared to 28 this year for New York. But HIFF is cutting back somewhat, making it increasingly selective. Said artistic director Rajendra Roy, "Submissions were up, but the number of films we invite has gone down by about 10%. So it was an incredibly competitive year."

Both fests offer special programs and sidebar events that feed the hungry appetites of devoted cinephiles. The NYFF, for instance, in conjunction with HBO Films, offered audiences "Directors Dialogues" with Stephen Frears (*The Queen*) and other filmmakers, and a celebration of "50 Years of Janus Films." Reflecting on the boutique event's many options beyond its main selections, Richard Peña, program director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and chair of the NYFF selection committee, noted, "The thing that all of us are facing is the decline in moviegoing as an activity. Between the expansion of cable, all the Internet offers, and services such as NetFlix, there's much less of the feeling that audiences have to rush to see anything. People simply assume that they will be able to see what they want on DVD. I fear that film viewing in theaters will become an increasingly specialized experience. So because all of us are still very committed to the 'projected experience' as part of cinema, we are aware that we must work harder to attract audiences by showing new or rare works and also adding lectures, panels, etc."

The Hamptons fest, even for its short five-day run, continues to be rich in sidebar offerings. Per usual, there was a lineup of panels addressing filmmaking and political issues and tributes to luminaries on both sides of the camera (Robert Altman, producers Ted Hope and Christine Vachon, actor/local Alec Baldwin and Ellen Burstyn and Famke Janssen, both starring in HIFF selections and tribute subjects). The New York event, meanwhile, boasted an impressive filmmaker turnout and luminaries like Kirsten Dunst, Helen Mirren and Warren Beatty.

New York tends to play favorites year after year, delivering films from returning *auteurs* like this year's Pedro Almodóvar, Alain Resnais and Michael Apter, among others. But HIFF, while growing more international in its reach, tilts more towards commercially oriented American indie films and documentaries. This year, that effort resulted in a handful of great films that are distributor-ready. On the narrative side, they included the romantic comedy *The Treatment*, starring Chris Eigeman, Famke Janssen and Ian Holm, and the Rutger Hauer starrer *Mentor*, a cynical take on a *ménage à trois* in academia from two fledgling Baltimore filmmakers.

NYFF offerings like Stephen Frears' *The Queen*, next in line for Oscar coronation; *Marie Antoinette*, Sofia Coppola's annoyingly entertaining and splashy Euro-trash take on pain-free, party-filled French history; and *Little Children*, suggesting that malaise in the 'burbs is more prevalent than strip malls, have already proven their pedigree and punch in the commercial marketplace (though *Marie* may experience another rude climax to so young a life).

Other NYFF selections that should ring box-office bells are Pedro Almodóvar's just-released *Volver*, from Sony Pictures Classics, another energetic

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1. Happy Feet	\$37.03
2. Casino Royale	\$30.78
3. Deja Vu	\$20.57
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5. Borat	\$10.30

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expression of female angst and warmth. Also strong was Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* from Picturehouse, a magnificent blend of a child's fantasy life meant as antidote to Spain's fascist reality, boasting extraordinary performances from Franco-Spanish star Sergi López and Ivana Baquero, a discovery who suggests a young Jodie Foster. The film is also a visual pleasure, whose look del Toro, at his press conference, so appropriately called "eye protein, not eye candy."

Traffickers in small foreign gems, NYFF presented the remarkable Turkish entry *Climates*, from Zeitgeist, which features the filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan and his wife in a poetic evocation of modern solitude and male/female divisiveness.

New Yorker Films was represented in NYFF's lineup with *Belle Toujours*, a quirky homage to Buñuel's *Belle du Jour* that boasted the always interesting contributions of French vets Michel Piccoli and Bulle Ogier.

Other NYFF highlights included South Korea's intriguing *Woman on the Beach*, from Hong Sang-soo, another returning NYFF auteur. Surely a distributor will pick up this amusing examination of a screenwriter who manipulates women not quite as skillfully as he does words.

Strand Releasing's NYFF selection *Poison Friends* should find success in theatres, as this French entry is a wise look at gullibility and deceptive charisma among a group of gifted literature students. Among the most talked-about entries were Alberto Lattuada's 1962 Italian comedy classic *Mafioso*, which Rialto will bring to theatres, and David Lynch's *Inland Empire*, this *auteur's* first foray into HD.

And what's a film festival without a revelation or two? Paradoxically, one of this year's NYFF surprises was the 1981 Warren Beatty *auteur* turn *Reds*, about the legendary lefty duo of John Reed (Beatty) and wife Louise Bryant (Diane Keaton). Just as the film proved hugely entertaining, its press-shy director--at the fest's post-screening press conference--proved highly instructive in the art of taking control. Crafty Beatty would take a question without really answering it, turning it into his own opportunity to rant and reflect. Commenting (although not asked) on the current state of moviemaking, the Hollywood legend decorously blasted film marketing and "tenuous" attention spans and how these determine which (Hollywood) pictures get made today, pictures for "people at a mall on Friday night."

The Hamptons Fest kicked off dramatically and bravely with Shadow Releasing's *The Situation*, which marked a number of firsts. The film was the fest's first opening-night world premiere and one of its first non-studio opening offerings. More interestingly, especially to industry and marketing mavens, *The Situation* is this country's first fictional feature to deal with our war in Iraq. Directed by Philip Haas and starring Connie Nielsen, this classy drama, with Morocco as a convincing stand-in for Iraq, deals with a journalist (Nielsen) who realizes that the immense violence around her largely victimizes the innocent.

If NYFF can be described as "old reliable," HIFF more often springs "new surprises," like it did a few years back with Lionsgate's surprise suspense hit *Open Water*. and Zeitgeist's Oscar-winning period drama *Nowhere in Africa*. Among this year's stunners was Picturehouse's hilariously candid documentary *Who the \$#!% is Jackson Pollock?*, an anti-(art) establishment expose orchestrated by Teri Horton, a feisty, uneducated 75-year-old granny/former truck driver who takes on the snotty art establishment in her efforts to authenticate the five-dollar painting she bought at a shabby thrift shop. Teri is a tough-talking Elaine Stritch-of-the-Ozarks and the suspense of whether her painting is a fraud or a \$50 million Jackson Pollock masterpiece makes for a killer arc. This slick doc is as exhilarating as it is revealing about class in America and what, um, is art.

Macky Alston's haunting doc *The Killer Within*, which Discovery Films will sell theatrically before the cable airing, tells the complex and provocative story of a seventy-something, warm and loving family man and respected psychology professor whose shocking, largely hidden past includes his planned shooting spree at Swarthmore College and his actual cold-blooded, gratuitous murder of a fellow student.

Philip Groening's German/Swiss/French co-production *In Great Silence*, which Zeitgeist will release early next year, is a long, slow, plotless, largely silent yet totally mesmerizing exploration of life in La Grand Chartreuse French Alps monastery, one of the most austere Catholic monk retreats in the world. While this unique doc may not exactly serve as a sales pitch for such minimalist life styles, it will provide a quiet haven for audiences of all cloths. As they say, you don't have to be Jewish--or is it Catholic?

And *Inheritance*, which took several HIFF awards, is a disturbing, emotionally wrenching account of a meeting between Helen Jonas-Rosenzweig, a Nazi concentration camp survivor, and Monika Hertwig, the daughter of the camp commandant Amon Goeth (depicted in *Schindler's List*) who enslaved her. Filmmaker James Moll, who shot in HD, largely leaves it up to the audience to determine the nature of that enslavement, although such evasion suggests an ordeal unspeakably cruel and horrific.

On the narrative side, Scandinavia was well-represented and well-rewarded at HIFF. Norway's intriguing and artsy *The Bothersome Man* took the Fest's Golden Starfish Best Feature award, which came with a package of in-kind production services totaling \$185,000. This U.S. premiere, directed by Jens Lien and partially shot in Iceland, tells the story of the sterile afterlife of a young suicide whose relocation is a heaven-like purgatory of unstressful routine and sterility. Thanks to its glacially stylized, crisp, otherworldly look, the film also took the Kodak Award for Best Cinematography. As it unfolds, the film commands interest about where it is going, but, for many, the destination may not prove worth the journey.

From Argentina came *Family Law*, an upbeat but quirky family comedy about a Jewish lawyer father, his lawyer son and the latter's wife and kid. The benign eccentricity of the characters and situations recalls the kind of populist, two-cylinder European comedy vehicles that are too light or goofy to travel well.

Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, in its U.S. premiere, took the \$25,000 Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Film Prize in Science and Technology for a feature-length film, and stirred up plenty of guessing about whether such an odd, romantic, time-scrambled tale, steeped in sci-fi and historical musings, could

ever catch on in the marketplace, even with its Warner Bros. muscle and Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz's star power.

Support for the Hamptons festival keeps growing each year and is a combination of corporations, local governments (Long Island's Suffolk County and the town and village of East Hampton) and "resident philanthropists," explained executive director Denise Kasell. Corporate sponsors this year included American Airlines, Altour International, Time Warner Cable Media Sales and Regal Entertainment.

Kasell elaborates, "Our sponsorships are all custom-designed to deliver just the right kind of program that a client is looking for, and that changes annually. Now, for instance, there seems to be a focus on hands-on activities that engage both filmmakers and the general public. So we have the Audience Awards sponsored by Volkswagen, or Panasonic's '48 Hour Film' program for filmmakers... We just need to keep listening and stay flexible."

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