

Flirting with the mainstream, embracing the margins

Vanessa Farquharson

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The room was packed to capacity, to the point where people were drifting behind the bar. There was talk of insect porn, Canadian heavy-metal music and a new way to get high without doing drugs. No, it wasn't another raging party in the club district last night, it was the press conference yesterday morning for the Hot Docs film festival.

Now in its 15th year, the event has steadily grown over the years to achieve international acclaim, often presenting documentaries that go on to win numerous awards, including Oscars.

"This is a festival that flirts with the mainstream but embraces the margins," said programming director Sean Farnel. "It's an incredible time for the documentary form, which has become such a vivid, vital space ... We considered well over 2,000 films this year, which is a lot of alone time."

But the hours upon hours of alone time spent by programmers has added up to an impressive roster of films, which tend to fit into an overall theme of "serious and playful," according to Farnel. These range from docs about the bombing of Air India Flight 182 or the torture of suspected terrorists at Abu Ghraib to ones about shopping cart races in North Vancouver and the invention of a hypnotic "Dream Machine."

There's also a brand new program called Next, which in a very post-modern way focuses on the artistic process as it relates to documentary filmmaking.

With over 170 films to choose from, the options can be a little overwhelming, so herewith are 10 selections from the schedule that are pretty much guaranteed to knock your doc socks off:

1) Anvil! The Story of Anvil

Directed by Sacha Gervasi; U.S.A.

A big hit at Sundance, this documentary about the aging Canadian rock band who "set off on a calamitous European tour and prepare to record a new album" sounds much like This is Spinal Tap, but in this case, it's all true.

"It's the opening film and I think it's going to be this year's Helvetica," said Farnel. "It's one of those films that crosses audience lines so anyone can enjoy it."

2) Air India 182

Directed by Sturla Gunnarson; Canada

The director of last year's Beowulf & Grendel transitions from fiction to non-fiction with this provocative look at the 1985 Air India tragedy. Making its world premiere at the festival as the Canadian Opening Presentation, it's a first-person account of the conspiracies leading up to the attack and the roles CSIS and the RCMP played during the aftermath. "This has profound implications about the way we think of ourselves and the society we live in," said Gunnarson at the press conference.

3) Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma

Directed by Patrick Reed; Canada

Chronicling the return of the former president of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) to Somalia and Rwanda in order to confront past and present human tragedy, this doc has often been compared to Shake Hands With the Devil. "It's very much about making sense of it all," says Reed at the press conference. "It makes larger statements and reflections on the nature of the world today and where we could go tomorrow."

4) Standard Operating Procedure

Directed by Errol Morris; U.S.A.

Although it opens in theatres on May 2, immediately after screening at Hot Docs, this is a film any devoted Errol Morris (The Fog of War, The Thin Blue Line) fan will be itching to see. In what the director refers to as "a non-fiction horror movie," audiences are asked to confront the iconic photos taken in the fall of 2003 at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and examine how they served as both an exposé and a cover-up.

5) Green Porno

Directed by Jody Shapiro, Isabella Rossellini; U.S.A.

6) The Forgotten Woman

Directed by Dilip Mehta, Canada

7) The Rise and Fall of the Grumpy Burger: One Man's Search for the Half-Truth

Directed by Matt Gallagher, Canada

Marshall Sfalcin of Windsor, Ont. - a dead-ringer for Jason Schwartzman - sets out to make a film about his grandfather, who claims he invented fast-food. With barely any cast members, even less money and family complications getting in the way, his plans start falling by the wayside. Fortunately, his friend and documentary filmmaker Matt Gallagher is there to capture the entire thing.

8) Tiger Spirit

Directed by Min Sook Lee, Canada

9) Carts of Darkness

Directed by Murray Siple, Canada

10) Flicker

Directed by Nik Sheehan, Canada

Hot Docs runs from April 17 to 27. Showtimes and more info can be found at www.hotdocs.ca