



ENTERTAINMENT



Two shots at glory: In *Flicker*, left, Brion Gysin hoped he'd strike it rich with an alpha wave-generating machine. In *Carry*, "Bozo Dave" fails to make it as a "cut-up clown" at the fair.

Reality bites

Numerous festival films find fertile ground in bittersweet tales of failed artists

PHILIP MARCHAND
MOVIE CRITIC

The documentary may be the ultimate democratic medium. Those who make such films often come armed only with patience, nerve, skill and obsession. And unlike the heroes and heroines of Hollywood, their subjects may be losers who remain losers. They may be stalwarts who battle adversity with a result that is, at best, a draw. They may not even be likeable.

Anvil! The Story of Anvil, tonight's sold-out opening film at the 15th annual Hot Docs, is a case in point. For three decades this Toronto-based heavy metal band has been playing at birthday parties, bar mitzvahs and loud sports bars. The members have won respect from some of the best known performers in their line. They rock. Yet superstardom, or any kind of stardom, has eluded them.

The film by Sacha Gervasi captures the poignancy of failure during Anvil's European tour, where the band appears in stadiums occupied by only a handful of people. It's a disaster from beginning to end, yet the two founding members of the band, guitarist Steve "Lips" Ku-

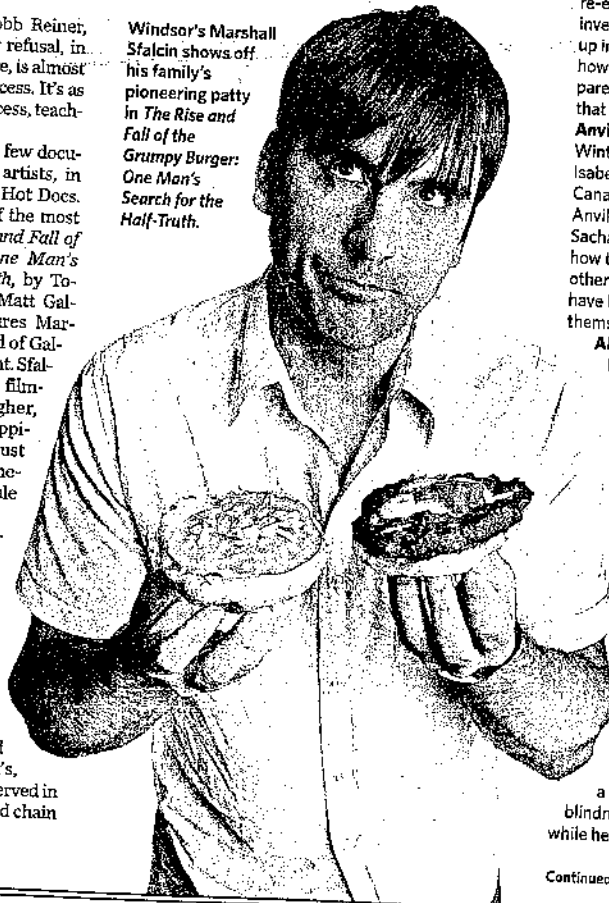
slow and drummer Robb Reiner, refuse to give up. Their refusal, in the face of relative failure, is almost more inspiring than success. It's as if failure, more than success, teaches courage and wisdom.

There are more than a few documentaries about failed artists, in particular, at this year's Hot Docs. It's a rich theme. One of the most remarkable is *The Rise and Fall of the Grumpy Burger: One Man's Search for the Half-Truth*, by Toronto-based filmmaker Matt Gallagher. The movie features Marshall Sfalcin, an old friend of Gallagher's from Windsor, Ont. Sfalcin himself is a devoted filmmaker, who tells Gallagher, "I'm not interested in happiness. I'm interested in just feeling like I've done something good on a larger scale than just for myself."

Sfalcin, 37, created a series of *Twilight Zone*-like episodes, titled *Ten Dollar Tales*, for a local cable station, which pays nothing for the material.

But he had been nurturing grander ambitions for some time. He says he wanted to film the story of his grandfather who created fast food, pre-McDonald's, with his "grumpy burger," served in a now-defunct family-owned chain

Windsor's Marshall Sfalcin shows off his family's pioneering patty in *The Rise and Fall of the Grumpy Burger: One Man's Search for the Half-Truth*.



HOT DOCS continued on E2

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

A sampling of Hot Docs films recommended by our critics. More details at hotdocs.ca.

Air India 182 (Tonight, 9:30, Winter Garden; Tomorrow, 1:30 p.m., Isabel Bader) Sturla Gunnarsson's look at the infamous terrorist bombing features re-enactments, plus interviews with investigators and other individuals caught up in the tragedy. It is the testimony, however, of the family members who lost parents, spouses, children and siblings that will break your heart. *Philip Marchand Anvil! The Story of Anvil* (Today, 7 p.m., Winter Garden; Tomorrow, 4:15 p.m., Isabel Bader; Sun., 9:30 p.m., Royal) Canada's own *This Is Spinal Tap*, featuring Anvil, a metal band founded in 1973. Sacha Gervasi's bittersweet doc charts how these likeable metalheads inspired others to achieve fame and riches yet have been unable to taste superstardom themselves. *Peter Howell*

All Together Now (Sat., 9:15 p.m., Bloor; Sun., 3:45 p.m., Bloor) Adrian Willis records, at a sprightly pace, rehearsals of Cirque du Soleil's Beatles-themed *Love*. Tension arises due to the presence of redoubtable widows Yoko Ono and Olivia Harrison, yet the two surviving Beatles provide surprisingly genial commentary. *PM*

As Slow As Possible (Tomorrow, 9:30 p.m., Royal; Tues., noon, ROM; Sun., April 27, 9:30 p.m.) The title of this meditative doc by Scott Smith refers to the ongoing organ performance, scheduled to last 639 years, of a score by John Cage in an ancient church in Germany. It may also refer to Ryan Knighton, who has a bit of sight left and hopes total blindness will arrive as slow as possible while he journeys to the church. *PM*

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Funding windfall gives Luminato a leg up

KNELMAN from E1

Price's extension and a long-term funding windfall from the Ontario government give Luminato a tremendous opportunity to make its mark collaborating with artistic organizations all over — whether they're in Toronto, the rest of Canada or other countries — on the kind of ambitious projects that have to be planned years in advance.

"Knowing that I will be here for the next five years and having the long-term funding support we have received adds up to a major intersection of stability," Price said. "It means we can form partnerships and do strategic planning for new work that might take three or four years before we can actually have it in the Luminato program."

For Price, who sees Luminato as a great, expanding arts centre without walls, there is a huge difference between presenting a show that has already been produced elsewhere and being a key part of its creation.

"It changes the whole dynamic when we are involved in commissioning work," she says.

Cases in point from last year's Luminato festival: *Not the Messiah*, a spoof that involved the collaboration of British comedy genius Eric Idle and his cousin, TSO maestro Peter Oundjian, went on to tour Australia and will also tour the U.S. after being commissioned for Luminato and having its world premiere at Roy Thomson Hall.

And *Norman*, about the great National Film Board animation creator Norman McLaren, went on a 12-city tour to places including Hong Kong and Mexico City after being co-commissioned by Luminato and the National Arts Centre.

"If you look at an arts event as a product," says Price, "then you see there is a manufacturing pipeline that makes it possible. We can play

Failed artists vindicated, in part, by telling their story

HOT DOCS from E1

called the Hi Ho Restaurants in the Detroit/Windsor area. Sfalcin wanted to rescue this episode from historical obscurity and restore the reputation of his grandfather as a fast-food pioneer.

Gallagher filmed Sfalcin's attempt to film this story. "Marshall was struggling to get the truth from his uncles as I was struggling to get the truth from Marshall about his life," Gallagher says. The result is a cinematic *Portrait of the Artist as a No Longer Young Filmmaker*. Sfalcin's film, alas, comes to grief as his uncles, unwilling to revisit their failure, clam up. Sfalcin remains artistically unfulfilled. Can he ever attain that fulfillment?

"I think he's got the talent," Gallagher says, with a slight laugh. "He's got, you know, the drive to do it and he's got the talent to do these B-movies. He's extremely hard-working."

A very different failed artist is the subject of Nik Sheehan's *Flicker*, about Brion Gysin (1916-86), a Canadian artist and mystic and close friend of novelist William S. Burroughs.

His great bid for fame was his invention of the flicker machine, a bright light inside a rotating cylinder with patterned holes. The flicker produced is said to correspond to alpha waves in the brain, and when subjects close their eyes and lean close to the cylinder, they often report a boost in alpha wave-stimulated creativity and transcen-



Anvil! *The Story of Anvil* is a portrait of one band's thirst for superstardom.

dence. One of the interviewees calls the device a "portal into the time-space continuum." Another reports that, "It's like touching God in a way, or somewhere where you don't have access in your daily life." Per-

formance artist Kenneth Anger cautions, however, that "I don't think it works unless you smoke a pipe of hash."

Gysin had great hopes of marketing this device à la lava lamps,

thereby making himself a fortune. For whatever reason, however, the flicker machine never found its way to the mass market. This left Gysin permanently embittered — "It poisoned his life that he wasn't successful," his agent recalls — demonstrating that failure, artistic or otherwise, does not always lead to increased spiritual depth.

A particularly sad instance of artistic failure is portrayed in Alison Murray's *Carry*, about fairground workers. One of these workers is known as "Bozo Dave," a "cut-up clown," whose act is taunting passersby into throwing balls at a circle on a canvas beside him. If they hit the circle, Bozo Dave falls into a water-filled tank.

It may not be the ballet or an art-school project, but Bozo Dave's routine is a form of performance art nonetheless. In the early morning he puts on his clown face, lifts his shoulders and marches to his post, psyching himself up by repeating, "It's show time." Bozo Dave eventually leaves the job and the carnival, but it is not because his spirit has wilted.

"That job will take a toll on your body," he says. By the time he quits, he is suffering from knee, back and shoulder pain.

None of these people take their frustrations lightly — failure is still humiliating.

The irony is that their very failure has been turned into a kind of triumph through the presence of a filmmaker who has humanized them.

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS CONTINUED

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Bigger, Stronger, Faster* (Mon., 6:30 p.m., Bloor; Wed., 9:30 p.m., Cumberland) The directorial debut of bodybuilder-turned-filmmaker Christopher Bell begins as a standard exposé of the evils of steroid use in sports. But the film goes on to look unflinchingly at every side. Prepare to have your beliefs tested. PH

Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment (Fri., April 25, 9:15 p.m., ROM) In June 1963, just months before his assassination, president Kennedy faces one of the greatest challenges of his administration: whether to enforce his promise of racial integration. This is Robert Drew's follow-up to *Primary*, part of a retrospective honouring cameraman Richard Leacock. PH

Flicker (Wed., April 23, 7 p.m.,

Tues., 4:30 p.m., Innis) Here's a remarkable doc by Isabelle Lavigne and Stephane Thibault about the relentless pressures faced by Baie Comeau's junior hockey team, a slow-paced movie in which virtually no hockey is shown. PM
Primary (Fri., April 25, 9:15 p.m., ROM) An early example of American cinéma-vérité that demonstrates JFK's willingness to embrace the new age of media. As a presidential hopeful in 1960, it's a case of Kennedy charisma vs. the old-boy network. PH

The Rise and Fall of the Grumpy Burger (Sun., 7 p.m., Royal; Wed., 11:55 p.m., Bloor) Matt Gallagher creates a story within a story as he films an old friend, Marshall Sfalcin, filming a fictionalized portrait of his own family — and trying to make something of his life in the process. PM

the adage goes, but it also never tells the whole truth. Errol Morris goes deep into the infamous photos of prisoner abuse at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. Were the villains individual soldiers or their insensitive army masters? PH
Tonite Let's All Make Love in London (Tomorrow, 11:45 p.m., Bloor) A rare viewing of Peter Whitehead's impressionistic 1967 "rock concerto" about the fashion, music, media and ideas of mod London during the swinging '60s. PH
Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy

Had Lived (Wed., 9:45 p.m., Isabella Bader; Sat., April 26, 7 p.m., Royal) It tackles one of the thorniest what-ifs of modern history: would avowed peacemaker John F. Kennedy have ended U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War if an assassin's bullet hadn't cut short his presidential reign? Instead of focusing on superficial attributes or individual public statements, filmmaker Koji Masutani examines JFK's decision-making as a whole, through careful analysis of six international crises. PH

AMERICAN BANDSTAND IDOL Bobby Rydell

His songs include:
"Kissin' Time"

May 26th
duet show

Stage West
ALL SONGS BY THE ARTIST