



Telluride Film Festival August 31 – September 3 2012

by Lindsey Campbell

With hiking, parasailing, fishing, and outdoor adventures aplenty, each year the most devoted cinephiles make their ascent to Telluride, Colorado in order to sit in dark rooms, staring at the moving pictures on the wall for four consecutive days. For 39 years, the small town (pop. 2400) has been home to one of the world's most prestigious film festivals, the Telluride Film Festival. Films selected by the Telluride Film Festival garner a certain level of esteem, as the festival itself is closely affiliated with Criterion Collection, UC Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive, and the National Film Preservation Foundation. Bill and Stella Pence, founders of Janus Films (predecessor to the illustrious Criterion Collection), co-founded the festival with Tom Luddy in 1974. The Pences retired from the festival in 2007, leaving it in the capable hands of Gary Meyer and Julie Huntsinger along with Luddy. Since 2007, the festival has maintained the level of quality that its founders intended.

Telluride Film Festival is unique in that one does not get to preselect what to see nor when. The festival uses a multi-coloured pass system, with each colour representing a certain level of access to screenings and events. Festivalgoers are thus not required to buy tickets or make reservations for specific screenings or programs, and the official program remains a closely guarded secret until noon of the opening day. This tradition ensures a festival with no media blitz and paparazzo, allowing audiences to experience a selection of films without any preconceptions. Attendees must be truly open to whatever the program has to offer. The Telluride Film Festival remains smaller and shorter than most, fostering a community experience, while its mountain setting creates a casual, low-key

atmosphere. Because it is impossible to pre-plan film screening choices, word of mouth, timing, and pass type help make one's festival experience.

In tune with the laid-back atmosphere, the festival weekend kicks off with a street party on Main Street called the Opening Night Feed after which festivalgoers head directly to the first round of screenings. There are only three permanent screening venues in Telluride, and so, the festival borrows the town's notable venues and in the weeks leading up to the festival, the production team meticulously designs each of the additional six theaters, thereby transforming Telluride from a small mountain town to a dedicated festival space. As per the Telluride Film Festival's one-word motto, SHOW, showmanship is of utmost priority and the 39th edition once again delivered an outstanding selection of 25 feature length films, 29 shorts, and a few select revivals.

Though films are required to have never been screened in the North America, newly-restored prints are screened as part of retrospective programming. This year, the spotlight fell on director Jack Garfein with screenings of his, *Something Wild* (U.S., 1961) and *The Strange One* (U.S., 1957). This year, the festival also included a Looney Tunes retrospective to mark the 100th birthday of Chuck Jones, a beloved friend of the festival who twice drew the festival poster and was first honoured with a retrospective at Telluride in 1976. Additionally, each year the festival invites a Guest Director who has the honour of selecting a handful of films, including revivals. The esteemed Geoff Dyer was this year's Guest Director. An eminent scholar on *Stalker*, Dyer brought a pristine 35mm print — unavailable on this continent — as part of his film selection which included *Beau Travail* (Claire Denis, France, 1999), *Together* (Lukas Moodysson, Sweden, 2000) and two Werner Herzog films; *Lessons of Darkness* (France-U.K.-Germany, 1992) and *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (Germany, 1974).

Besides the premieres, revivals, and restorations, each year there are a number of other programs including the presentation of silent films with a live orchestra —a

truly unique experience. This year, Clarence Badger's *Hands Up!* (U.S., 1926) was screened with accompaniment by pianist Donald Sosin, and The Mont Alto Motion Picture orchestra accompanied a screening of *The Marvelous Life of Joan of Arc* (Marco de Gastyne, France, 1929). Serge Bromberg delights, year after year, with both his storytelling and celebration of cinema and for its 20th year Bromberg's *Retour de Flamme* program included a screening of the newly restored Chaplin short *The Immigrant* (U.S., 1917) and the forgotten Disney film *Hungry Hobos* — a film not screened since 1928! For those who desire to go beyond seeing films, the *Talking Heads* midday panel discussions are a great way to spend the lunch hour outdoors, while the *Q&A Conversations* in the courthouse are more intimate with a smaller audience. Discussions are moderated by actors, directors, and invited guests. Finally, the festival winds down with a closing noon panel in Town Park during the Labor Day picnic.

Though films at the Telluride Film Festival are not awarded prizes, each year there are three guests of honour who are presented the Silver Medallion for their significant contribution to cinema, of which past tributees have included Meryl Streep, Gerard Depardieu, Viggo Mortensen, Chuck Jones, Walter Murch, and Agnes Varda. One such medallion was awarded to legendary B-Movie director Roger Corman who is himself the subject of a new documentary film, *Corman's World: Exploits of a Hollywood of a Hollywood Rebel* (Alex Stapleton, U.S., 2011), also screened at the festival. Corman's films *The Masque of Red Death* (U.S., 1964) starring Vincent Price, *The Intruders* (U.S., 1961) featuring a young William Shatner, along with *Rock'n'Roll High School* (1979) were all screened at the Abel Gance outdoor theater. French actress Marion Cotillard received a medallion and was in attendance with Jacques Audiard's new film *Rust & Bone* (France, 2012), an astounding film about a young woman in the aftermath of losing her legs in a freak accident. The film's success at Telluride caused many to predict that *Rust & Bone* would garner Cotillard another Oscar nomination. The third medallion went to Danish actor and Bond villain Mads Mikkelsen, who was representing not one but two films; Thomas Vinterberg's stirring piece about mob-mentality, *The Hunt*

(Denmark, 2012) and *A Royal Affair* (Nikolaj Arcel, Denmark, 2012), a beautifully shot historical epic about Denmark's famed "mad" King Christian VII, his unfaithful wife and the king's doctor. *A Royal Affair* has since been selected as Denmark's official entry for the 85th Academy Awards.

Hyde Park on Hudson (Roger Michell, U.S., 2012) had its world premiere on Friday night at the Abel Gance in Elks Park, located in the town's center. The film centers on FDR, his cousin, and the King and Queen of England's visit to upstate New York in 1939. Festival and town regular Laura Linney was in attendance, along with co-star Bill Murray for the film's premiere. Ben Affleck, with family in tow, was also in town for a sneak preview of *Argo* (U.S., 2012), his new political thriller about the Iran hostage crisis.

Salman Rushdie, also a Guest Director alumnus, accompanied director Deepa Mehta for the highly anticipated adaptation of Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (Canada, 2012). Festival regular Michael Haneke was in attendance with his newest film about an elderly couple, *Amour* (Germany, 2012). Ken Burns returned with *The Central Park Five* (U.S., 2012), a film he made with his daughter Sarah, which investigates the case of the five Black and Latino teenagers, convicted of raping a white woman in Central Park in 1989.

Noah Baumbach returned to Telluride, presenting *Frances Ha* (U.S., 2012) a film he co-wrote and co-directed with his newest muse, indie darling Greta Gerwig. Though quirky and fun, *Frances Ha* plays out like a 90-minute episode of Lena Dunham's *Girls* (U.S., 2012), complete with *Girls* star Adam Driver. Unfortunately, Frances' neuroses do not play out in the same self-deprecating way that makes Lena Dunham's *Girls* all the more compelling. Ultimately, the film tries too hard to make Frances' awkward low self-esteem hip, though it does manage to balance being both capricious and shallow, while otherwise looking great and delivering some comedic respite.

Michael Winterbottom's slow moving and quiet *Everyday* (UK, 2012) is a fascinating study of the daily tedium in the life of a young family getting by while the father is in prison. Actress Shirley Henderson is utterly compelling as the young mother, and what makes *Everyday* all the more interesting is that it was shot a few weeks at a time over the course of five years, so that the children grow in front of your eyes over the course of the film. Winterbottom, Henderson, and all five children were in attendance.

The low-key mobster/assassin biopic *The Iceman* (Ariel Vromen, US, 2012) premiered, starring the incomparable Michael Shannon as notorious contract killer Richard Kuklinski. Actor Ray Liotta and director Vromen presented the film. *The Iceman* resists letting the audience into Kuklinski's head, which prevents any real insight into the main character. With little else to hold onto, *The Iceman* skims over what seem to be important narrative points and could have easily been 30-40 minutes longer to add "meat" onto what felt like a skeleton of a film.

Christian Petzold's *Barbara* (Germany, 2012), about a doctor who is banished to a small town in Germany during the 1980s, got rave reviews from the few that were able to actually get into one of the small theaters where it screened. The droll sexual tourist piece *Paradise: Love* (Ulrich Seidl, Austria, 2012) was hit or miss with the viewers. Its unflinching look at the middle-aged women who flock to Kenya to be serviced by "beach boys" caused a few walkouts, though most were compelled by this semi-improvised, meditative piece. The Kafkaesque *Superstar* (Xavier Gannioli, France, 2012) centering on an ordinary man who wakes up one morning to find out that he is a celebrity, without knowing why or how split audiences, while the psychological thriller *The Attack* (Ziad Doueiri, Lebanon-France, 2012), about a man who discovers only too late that his wife is a suicide bomber, surprised audiences generating a lot of positive commentary.

Sarah Polley's incredible *Stories We Tell* (Canada, 2012) respectfully won over its audience early in the weekend. Produced by the NFB/ONF, *Stories We Tell* is an

intimate portrait of Polley's family that delightfully plays with documentary form and questions how we make sense of memory and truth. *Stories We Tell* quickly became the talk of the festival, playing to packed houses for throughout the week.

Haifaa Al Mansour's *Wadjda* (Saudi Arabia, 2012) has the honor of being both the first film to be entirely shot in Saudi Arabia and the first film directed by a Saudi woman. *Wadjda* is a delightful film about a young girl who wants to have her own bicycle. It is a must see! Al Mansour was in attendance and was able to describe the difficulties filming *Wadjda*, explaining how she had to direct the actors from inside a van, using walkie-talkies and a monitor, due to the laws prohibiting women and men from sharing public spaces.

For the festival weekend, the library turns one of its conference rooms into the small Backlot Theater which runs free programming throughout the weekend and is also home to smaller documentary films. This year the Backlot hosted 12 films, among them Concordia professor Marielle Nitoslawska's *Breaking The Frame* (Canada, 2012) about the groundbreaking filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist Carolee Schneemann; Katrine Boorman's *Me and Dad* (U.K., 2012) about her famous father John; David Bradbury's *On Borrowed Time* (Australia, 2012) recounting Australian director Paul Cox's battle with cancer and *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, Hungary, 2012), an original piece described as a nostalgic "meta-love story" made from hundreds of famous movie clips. Never shy of pushing the envelope, particularly in terms of documentary cinema, Telluride also featured Joshua Oppenheimer's much-discussed brutal documentary *The Act of Killing* (Denmark, 2012). In this film, Oppenheimer invites former Indonesian death squad leaders to reenact their mass killings in the cinematic genre or style of their choice.

The festival also chooses some nine or ten short films to play before features, along with three short film programs. This year, filmmaker (and long-time film festival employee) Barry Jenkins was entrusted with putting together the shorts

programs, and he rose to the occasion with a very strong selection. The *Filmmakers of Tomorrow* programs, short films by student and emerging filmmakers were outstanding. Gerard Barrett's *Pilgrim Hill* (Ireland, 2012), a quiet little film about the daily life of an Irish bachelor farmer, was featured as part of the shorts program *Great Expectations* and won my heart in its brief 78 minutes, making it one of my festival favorites this year. Not unlike *Stories We Tell*, *Pilgrim Hill* skillfully plays with documentary form. Esmail Monsef's delightful *Under the Colours* (Iran, 2012), a short about young soldiers who find a red skirt, preceded *Pilgrim Hill* along with Caleb Slain's *It Ain't Over* (U.S., 2012).

Certainly, it is impossible to take in over thirty films and programs over the weekend. Next year the festival will inaugurate a new large capacity theater and will be adding a fifth full day in order to celebrate its 40th rendition. The festival directors have promised to keep the amount of programming the same, giving festivalgoers that extra day to catch more of its diverse offerings. The 40th Telluride Film Festival will be held August 29 to September 2, 2013.