

HOT DOCS International Documentary Festival

(Toronto, April 26 – May 5 2002)

Report by Susan MacKinnon

This was the ninth encore for Hot Docs. It is now the largest event of its kind in North America and it has been exhilarating to watch its establishment and growth over the years. There is now a daunting array of cinematic and career-building opportunities available, and it is impossible to see and do everything.

The event has grown from seven to 10 days and the number of films screened has increased to over 100 of the best non-fiction films from 24 countries.

During the week there was an assortment of panels, a two day pitching forum, and a master class with two of the greats - Frederick Wiseman (*Titicut Follies, High School, Law and Order, Hospital, Meat, Deaf, Zoo, Missile*) and Alan King (*A Married Couple, Warrendale*). Frederick Wiseman was presented with the 2002 Lifetime Achievement Award.

The Doc Shop featured a complete library of the 1,200 films submitted to the festival. The facility included an on-demand videotheque where buyers, festival programmers, sales agents and distributors were given priority. This is an excellent service as the filmmaker is supplied with a print out of everyone who has viewed the film, with contact details and comments.

Theatrical release

At a time when four FFC-financed films are about to have theatrical releases (*Fond Memories Of Cuba, My Mother India, A Wedding In Ramallah and Much Ado About Something*), it was invigorating to attend a panel on theatrical possibilities for documentaries, "*Adventures On The Big Screen*".

The panel looked at some of the models that international distributors are devising in response to the growing demand for non-fiction. Panelists were Kees Ryninks, Head of Documentaries at the Dutch Film Fund; Amy Hardie, filmmaker/creator of DOCSPACE (UK); Marcus Hu, Co-President, Strand Releasing (USA); and Mark Slone, Vice-President of Marketing and Publicity, Odeon Films (Canada).

At a time when the documentary form is being eroded by reality TV and format programming, it was wonderful to hear of initiatives to rebuild the status of documentary.

Kees Ryninks spoke of a new Dutch initiative where the Film Fund paid for ten digital projectors to be installed in ten cinemas around Holland on the condition that the cinemas run documentaries two days a week. The projectors cost

\$75,000 each. The same film screens simultaneously in all 10 cinemas giving the film more exposure than a one-off screening in one cinema. This has been attracting press, writing about the documentaries as cinema releases. The audiences are building and including a wide age group.

Continuing the push to expose cinema audiences to documentary was Amy Hardie, who has set up Docspace in the UK. Docspace's research reveals that there is a cinema audience for good documentaries, made up of people who watch less than the average amount of television and who are from a broad demographic covering young and old.

Docspace is committed to four strategies to increase audience contact: cinema, e-cinema, education and on-line resource. Docspace takes themed documentary seasons to novel venues and reaches special interest groups as well as the full education sector. The Cinema pilot screens 45 documentaries in 4-8 week runs, showing the cream of world documentaries. Questions were asked about what makes a documentary attractive to a theatrical distributor, and what are the strategies to maximise its commercial success.

One commercial theatrical success has been Sandi DuBowski's *Trembling Before G-D*, a feature-length film about Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who are gay or lesbian. The film shows the profound dilemma of these people in reconciling their passionate love of Judaism and the Divine with the drastic Biblical prohibitions that forbid homosexuality. There is a website www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com inviting people to help with the theatrical release of the film. It also lists all screenings in the past and future for the film, with dates and locations. Sandi joined forces with the classy New York-based distributor New Yorker Films. He works on the theatrical release full time with the company and his film is soon to gross US\$1 million.

New Yorker Films was founded in 1965, by Daniel Talbot, as an outgrowth of his legendary movie house, the New Yorker Theater. Early acquisitions such as Bertolucci's *Before The Revolution*, Godard's *Les Carabiniers*, and Sembene's *Black Girl* established New Yorker's tradition of presenting the world's most innovative, artistically significant and politically engaged films.

New Yorker Films also services the US non-theatrical market for both drama and documentary. It has a devotion to accumulating works by important individual directors -- a policy especially suited to retrospectives and university courses. It has the most extensive collections anywhere of the films of such seminal cinéastes as Alea, Almodóvar, Fassbinder, Godard, Herzog, Oshima, Ozu, Satyajit Ray, Sembene, Straub, Tanner, and Zhang Yimou.

www.newyorkerfilms.com

Other sessions

I also attended the session titled “Europe’s Big Three: Germany, France and the UK”, which was moderated by Jan Rofekamp, President & CEO, Films Transit International (Canada). The panellists were Jane Balfour, President, Jane Balfour Services Ltd. (UK); Heino Deckert, Managing Director, d.net.sales (Germany); and Yves Jeanneau, Head of Documentary Unit, France 2.

Each spoke about the broadcasters in their territories committed to documentaries and what appealed to them. They spoke about the rapid market shifts and recent developments and fragmentation in Europe's leading documentary markets.

“The View From There: American Broadcasters” looked at the US documentary market. It looked at how recent political and economic developments are affecting the US market and how globalisation and the consolidation of ownership in the American market is changing the role of independent production companies. Assembled on the panel were moderator, Nancy Abraham, Vice President, Original Programming, Documentaries, HBO (USA); Nick Fraser, Commissioning Editor, BBC (UK); Elizabeth Cullen, Vice President of Acquisitions & Co-Productions, Oxygen Media (USA); Mark Fichandler, Senior Director, Development & International Co-Production, Court TV (USA); Laura Fleury, Director of Documentary Programming, A&E Television Networks (USA); and John Lindsay, Senior Vice President of National/International Production, Oregon Public Broadcasting (USA).

I met with Kim Spender from WorldLink, which is a satellite TV channel in the US that reaches over 17 million homes and is non-commercial, like PBS. WorldLink’s mission is to provide Americans with a global perspective on news and culture. As such it is the only channel where Americans can see a full spectrum of news, documentaries and music from around the world (a bit like the SBS). They also program foreign feature films that don't get broadcast anywhere else. The license fees are low, but that goes with the territory. They survive on foundation grants, viewer contributions and corporate underwriting. www.worldinktv.org.

New media

In conjunction with the festival’s inaugural exhibition of new media works, Hot Docs presented a series of panel discussions focussing on creative and business concerns related to interactive and convergent media documentary production. CyberDocs was geared toward producers and directors eager to explore and exploit new technologies, and to new media practitioners interested in non-fiction storytelling.

The Festival

The Opening Night film was the eco-doc *Blue Vinyl*, by Judith Helfand and Daniel Gold. It was a rollicking comedy at the same time as being a shocking expose of the global vinyl industry.

Australian filmmaker Sherine Salama had a sell-out world premiere screening of the FFC-financed film *A Wedding In Ramallah*. This wonderfully observant film will next show at the Sydney Film Festival.

This year Hot Docs showcased Canadian director Zacharias Kunuk, whose recent first feature, *Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner*, won the Camera D'Or at Cannes. This film was shown at this year's Adelaide Arts Festival and most recently at the Sydney Opera House as part of the Message Stick Indigenous Film and Video Conference. Living in a remote area of Canada, Kunuk has made many documentaries about Inuit people and their history and culture, using actors in his films. The majority of his works are set in the past, the 1940s, a period after the arrival of the white missionaries and government officials but before traditional ways were disrupted by relocation of Inuit to permanent settlements. His works are neither historical dramas nor simple observational documents, but rather complicit community creations.

A film that I missed seeing, but is a must-see at the upcoming Sydney Film Festival, was veteran filmmaker Anand Patwardhan's three-hour epic *War And Peace*. It is about the conflict between India and Pakistan, one that could lead to nuclear war as is presently playing out. Patwardhan unravels the complex historical and political situation and manages not only to make sense of it, but to suggest solutions to almost insoluble problems.

The Toronto Documentary Forum:

This was the third Forum under the leadership of Michaelle McLean. For buyers, the event offers a slate of pre-selected projects by some of the world's most interesting filmmakers. Over the two days, 36 projects are pitched by their production teams and lead broadcast partners to a panel of commissioning editors and financiers. With over 70 commissioning editors present, there were not enough seats at the table – an embarrassment of riches!

The Toronto Forum is based on the successful Amsterdam model and is presented with their co-operation. Projects must have at least 25 per cent of their finance in place to qualify, including the commitment of at least one broadcaster or distributor.

Two Australian projects were pitched and went very well. *Lucky Kings* was presented by producer Steve Jeffares and director Maciek Wszelaki, with SBS commissioning editor Ned Lander. The film is about the exotic subculture of

poker and the World Series in Las Vegas. Many of the commissioning editors had purchased Maciek's first film, *Original Schtick*, and were responsive to his next film.

The other Australian film was *The Showman – In The Footsteps Of Frank Hurley*, pitched by Simon Nasht and the ABC's Dasha Ross. Simon screened a good-looking promo and spoke about the world's insatiable appetite for icy adventures.

Other pitches that were hot property included *The Rivonia Trial*, a film about the CIA's involvement in the capture of Mandela, tracing the back room deals of international government; pitched by UK filmmakers Pascale Lamche and Nick Fraser.

Another was *The Colour Blonde*, elegantly pitched by the ever popular Walter Braamhorst, AVRO, and Olaf Grunert, ZDF, on behalf of the absent filmmaker, Albert Knechtel. The film is based on the scientific premise that natural blondes are on the brink of extinction - the blonde gene is a recessive gene and inevitably will breed out.

One of the most disturbing pitches was from Joe Berlinger and Sara Scully, for *You Again: A Human Cloning Love Story*. Nancy Abrahams from HBO presented the film with them pointing out that she is behind the film due to its extraordinary access to a couple who have begun the process of cloning the woman in order to have a baby. The boyfriend is the doctor.

Hot Docs was pleased to report that this year four films pitched at past Forums were screening in the festival – the New Zealand film *Georgie Girl, Offspring, Two Towns Of Jasper* and *Tyler's Barrel*. The FFC financed film *The Hacktivists* was pitched at Hot Docs two years ago and was now back in Toronto in the Doc Shop. The FFC-financed film *The Original Mermaid* was first pitched at Hot Docs and is now in post-production.

This pitch process is working well and will be carried through to our own DocuMart at the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) in Byron Bay on the 17 February 2003.

I am a member of the Hot Docs International Advisory Council and this year was asked to be a consultant to filmmakers who had their films screening in the festival. I was available for two days to talk about distribution of their films and the films' sales potential.

**Prepared by Susan MacKinnon
30 May 2002**