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Toronto Film Fest Day 5: Cycling, Silliness, Senior Citizens, Soul and Sexy Babes



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Another jam-packed day at the Toronto International Film Festival. Several more differences have popped up between Toronto and Cannes, the other main film festival I've attended for a decade. First, it's hard to get a read on the buzz for films. The venues are relatively scattered around and there's no central meeting place where people can chat. So it's a lot harder to figure out what others are excited by. Second, journalists seem to come and go much more

quickly at Toronto, probably because it's easier to get in and out. If you get to Cannes, you stay there for much of the fest. But if you can make it to Toronto for a weekend, why not? You'll catch 10 or fifteen movies, network and be on your way in the blink of an eye.

One more difference: no catalog is provided that describes all the films. You can buy one for \$35 but that's pretty outrageous to me. Yes, all the movies are listed online but it's just not as easy to scroll through that day to day, especially when you're walking around town and don't have WiFi. So I've been grabbing movies as they come. My first movie Monday morning was a toss-up and I went with *All Fall Down*, a movie directed by actor Philip Seymour Hoffman. But in fact it wasn't a film directed by Philip Seymour Hoffman. When the publicist said he was in town for interviews, I responded, but isn't he in New York doing *Othello*? I've got tickets for this weekend. No, no, that's the other one. This is Philip Hoffman, an acclaimed documentary filmmaker. I accepted it as fate that I should see this movie...until I read a brief description of it as an "experimental documentary" and other unpromising phrases that I just wasn't up for at 9 in the morning. (# in the afternoon, fine. But 9 am is too early for non-narrative shenanigans. So I shamefacedly slipped away and headed to my other choice, a movie starring Til Schweiger, the "German Brad Pitt" and co-star of *Inglorious Basterds*.

PHANTOM PAIN * 1/2 out of **** -- Maybe I should have stuck with the experimental film. This

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drama was a way too conventional flick about a rascally fellow who is divorced/separated but loves his daughter, woos women with abandon and lives only for cycling. Not a dependable guy. A car accident leaves him with only one leg and he must slowly rebuild his life and -- who knows? -- maybe become a better person. Actually, you do know he becomes a better person. Among the odd touches is the fact that he's a writer who wrote a travel memoir that's quite well done but seems to have taken even modest suggestions from an editor who wanted to print it as somehow insulting. A new girlfriend gives it to another editor who ALSO wants to publish it, but this just annoys him even more. And in a confusing bit of editing, the new girlfriend seemed to have dropped out of the picture when the accident occurred. But apparently HE was the one who pushed her away, or that's what we're told later on. None of this really matters. Actor Til Schweiger is a striking presence but the film is too banal to ever reach the US or make any impression if it does.

YOUTH IN REVOLT * 1/2 OUT OF **** -- Another tough decision. I really wanted to see the Atom Egoyan, but considering he's Canadian, I imagined the screening would be a madhouse and opted for Miguel Arteta's *Youth In Revolt* starring the always dependable Michael Cera. This is yet another hyper-literate teen comedy, with our hero establishing his bonafides in the intro by avowing his love for Sinatra (which barely comes up ever again) and other such telling, cool details. He's a virgin of course and the sexy confident girl staying with her Christian parents at his dad's trailer park is an eye-opener. Little jokes don't quite ring true, like that Sinatra reference that barely surfaces again. He's also a serious cineaste (we see him renting Criterion's *La Strada*) and when he chats with her about films, he says his favorite movie of all time is Misoguchi's *Tokyo Story*. To which she replies it's a great film, but wasn't it by Ozu? His stammering response is "Who can say?" I laughed at that, but it was a cheap laugh. If he had simply been nervous and referred to a film wrongly, ok. But how could he get the director wrong for his favorite film of all time? No one who rents *La Strada* needs to reach for a film reference. You can make a mistake about a lot of movies, but not your favorite. The whole film feels false, though not for any specific reason. It's just a snarky film with Cera stumbling from one misadventure to another while trying to lose his virginity, none of them quite believable (of course) or funny enough to make the believability unimportant. And Cera's shtick -- so winning in *Juno* and *Superbad* -- can feel forced when there's not a real character underneath all the passive aggressive comments and pop cultural references. It's certainly not a bad movie and I enjoyed all the fine actors in it, including the delightfully named Portia Doubleday as the girl and Jonathan B. Wright of Broadway's *Spring Awakening* as her suspicious boyfriend. But the entire film is too familiar and arch to make you believe in any of the characters.

THE PRIVATE LIVES OF PIPPA LEE ** 1/2 out of **** -- This is the fourth film by writer-director Rebecca Miller and I feel like she's still growing and coming into her own as a filmmaker. Is that so surprising? In the days of the studio system, you might direct three or four movies a year and it still might be a while before you found your voice. It's a little unrealistic to expect a first-time director to instantly know how to achieve what they want. We should more often find it a miracle when they do. In this case, the film is based on Miller's own novel, which offers up the younger, seemingly "good" wife of book editor Alan Arkin and reveals her complexity through flashbacks of her life. Unfortunately, most of the flashbacks simply aren't that interesting, whether it's Pippa Lee (a solid Robin Wright Penn) dealing with her pill-popping mom, running off to her lesbian aunt and posing for naughty pictures or other outrageous acts. Frankly, the most outrageous act of all seems her falling for Arkin, who could be her grandfather. In the more interesting present storyline, he's growing resentful about retiring and feeling old. "But you are an old man," Pippa says at one point, all too accurately for his taste. Affairs spring up, kids harbor resentment, Keanu Reeves is the enigmatic new man in town and Pippa starts sleep-walking into the kitchen to eat and then sleep-walking down to the convenience store for cigarettes. A certain amount of comic momentum builds up in the middle of the film and Wright Penn and Reeves have good chemistry. (It's always a relief to see Reeves playing a character in a reality-based film rather than some high concept blockbuster and he consistently delivers as he gets older and better as an actor.) But we don't really understand why one daughter is so cold towards Wright Penn and so we don't really care when they become closer. So despite a strong cast and an improving sense of film's rhythms by Miller, the movie is not quite the sum of its parts. But the parts are getting better.

SOUL KITCHEN *** out of **** -- I rush out of Pippa Lee right to *Soul Kitchen*, the new film by director Fatih Akin, easily one of the best directors working today. The *Edge Of Heaven* was one of my favorite films of 2007 and he's had other major work like *Head-On*. This light comedy is far less weighty than those two, though he has done romantic comedies in his early work. I can't decide whether I'm being lenient because of his track record or harder on it because *Soul Kitchen* is not an out of the ballpark triumph. But the pleasures are many. Our hero (Adam Bousdoukos, the best friend and collaborator of the director) has a run-down restaurant, a girlfriend leaving for



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Shanghai and a brother who gets weekend passes from jail and still thinks burglary is a good idea. It's all set in the multi-culti stew of Hamburg, Germany where Akin was born of Turkish parents. Cultures bounce up against each other with vibrant pleasure, however much shouting there may be. The real enemy in this idealized world are corporate developers who want to buy his waterfront warehouse of a building and put up a shopping mall. Slowly, Zinos -- or rather, the community of friends and neighbors he's attracted -- bring the restaurant to life, thanks to a touchy but brilliant Romany chef, a waitress who falls for his inveterate thief of a brother despite her better judgment, a soul band, a dj and the cranky old man who lives in a space there but never seems to pay rent. It's boisterous, silly fun and though all is resolved nicely, life is just messy enough in the movie to make it feel honest. Hopefully, it will bring Akin the wider audience he deserves. At the very least, the soundtrack will be a blast.

LEDREW LIVE ON CP24 -- Then I raced downtown to the MuchMusic building and a spot on the [cable news network CP24](#) and the primetime show *LeDrew Live* at 9, hosted by [Stephen LeDrew](#). But first I realized I looked almost too much like a freelance journalist -- rumpled shirt, baggy jeans and a generally frazzled appearance after five days of living at the movies -- so I ran into Eaton Centre and bought a new outfit at the Gap in about eight minutes. Unfortunately for me, I was following two very funny actresses from [the Canadian drama *Crackie*](#), including Kristin Booth (who has three films at the festival including one with Woody Harrelson called *Defendor*) and the very funny Mary Walsh. If I were the producer, I would have bumped me and kept them on the entire hour. but they didn't and I chatted with LeDrew, who wears bow-ties a la George Will but is known for his political analysis from the left. I lauded the Canadian film *I Killed My Mother* (which was having its premiere even as we spoke), panned *Dorian Gray* and offered up the general positive consensus on *Up In The Air* and the Coen Brothers film *A Serious Man*. If I didn't slouch too much, I'll consider it a success.

MIDNIGHT MADNESS/BITCH SLAP -- After a quick bite, I got in line for the Midnight Madness [screening of *Bitch Slap*](#), which is the perfect title for a drive-in or midnight movie if I ever heard one and was directed by Rick Jacobson. Organized by Colin Geddes, I'd heard from a number of journalists that he had great taste and the midnight public screenings were a blast. Indeed. I walked in to see a beach ball tossed around the theater, as if we were at a rock concert. When the cast for *Bitch Slap* came on stage, each and every one of them gamely slinked on as if they were working a runway (or more specifically, the pole at a strip club). I've certainly never been to another film festival where the actors were encouraged to turn around and show their assets to the audience. It was all silly fun, to the point where the hyped up crowd even cheered raucously for the logo of Bombshell Pictures. I had to admit, the animated bit showing a WWII bomber looming into view with a busty pin-up gal and the logo for Bombshell adorning the side was pretty awesome. The movie itself certainly had the right attitude -- it came from some of the creative talent behind *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules* and Kevin Sorbo and Lucy Lawless even popped in for some amusing cameos. If a girl in the desert is digging and digging for treasure, you know it won't be long before she complains about the heat and simply must pour a bucket of water all over herself until she's drenched and her dress clings to every curve. And then do it again. And then giggle as she douses the other girls. It's that type of movie, though I'm afraid there's more attitude than story to sink your teeth into. By the way, I'm sure the trailer is fun but if you can find the title sequence online, check it out. It's a great little short film in itself and a nice history of pin-ups to boot.

Day 6 better be good. I only get four hours of sleep so if the movie is boring, I might be out like a light. I'm looking forward to the new Todd Solondz, the directorial debut of designer Tom Ford, perhaps a film about a WW II resistance fighter and then the three hour Australian movie *Wake In Fright*. It's the longest film playing at the fest that I've spotted and going to the longest film has always proven a good bet in the past. Wish me luck!

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