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Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: September 22, 2010 03:58 PM

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Toronto Film Fest Wrapup: The Reviews, the Stories, the Glamour, the End!

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OK, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) is over and I've caught up with my sleep. Yes, it's the home of Oscar hopefuls and more of a hype machine than ever. But me, I'm thrilled to get a chance to see a huge chunk of Oscar-hungry movies in 10 days and get 'em out of the way (or look forward to seeing them again).

Cannes is the mother of all film festivals, but for friendliness, ease of access, and a broad selection of interesting movies, Toronto is right up there in importance. Venice has Old World charm, Sundance is scrappy, Telluride is exclusive and Berlin is stern. But

thanks to festivals relaxing over sharing movies with other events around the world, Toronto is their equal. And since we rank movies all the time, why not ranks fests and call this one #2? It's also very audience friendly so if you're in Toronto or considering a trip, it's a great excuse to head there. Onto the highlights.

The Best Director You Haven't Heard Of ... Yet

Last year at Cannes I was thrilled by the debut of writer-director-star Xavier Dolan and his movie *I Killed My Mother*, which won numerous awards. I interviewed Dolan and patiently waited for the film to open in the US. Unfortunately, it never got a proper release and isn't on DVD yet. His second film *Heartbeats* debuted this year at Cannes and came to Toronto (Dolan is from Canada) and reaffirmed his status as a young talent many critics expect great things from. I'm going to profile Dolan properly when his movie opens (probably in February). But for now, here is the trailer to his film. Better yet, [jump to the AOL blog](#)

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Queersighted to check out some video from my chat with Dolan. You'll be hearing a lot more about him in the future.

Midnight Madness -- The Best Reason For Being Exhausted

The string of midnight movie screenings is both very tempting (it's a blast to see fun genre pics with a wildly enthusiastic general public) and exhausting (you won't be in bed till 3 am at the earliest and the first screening is usually at 9 am the next day. I blame Colin Geddes, who has been programming Midnight Madness for the past 13 years (with another year as co-programmer). I chatted with him for the [Los Angeles Times](#) blog [Hero Complex](#). [Check it out](#).

Success Stories

The King's Speech -- vaulted into the Oscar race and just as importantly proved it's a likely audience pleaser that will make a bundle for the Weinstein Co. They can handle a prestige pic like this in their sleep.

Meek's Cutoff -- pure arthouse fare, this enigmatic Western was a big hit with critics, winning the IndieWire critics poll, and scored a distribution deal with Oscilloscope, which has great taste. A big step forward for director Kelly Reichardt and another strong performance by every indie film's favorite actress, Michelle Williams. (She's also marvelous in the terrific gem *Blue Valentine*, which played at Sundance and Cannes before coming to Toronto and deserves a lot more end of the year noise for her and Ryan Gosling's raw, wounded work.)

127 Hours -- erased fears people had that this story about a mountaineer who has to cut off his arm in order to survive was some sort of endurance test that moviegoers would have to grit their teeth to watch. Not with the It Boy James Franco charming the socks off us in the central role and director Danny Boyle using every gimmick in the book to ease us through.

Super -- this Rainn Wilson comedy about a schmuck who turns himself into a crime fighter (a la *Kick-Ass*) was the first film at the fest to make a deal. It launched a very satisfying market in which reasonably priced movies made deals and will be seen by wider audiences. The story was not some record price for an indie flick that may or may not pan out. It was the return of sanity in the marketplace, which hopefully means more labors of love will get made down the road.

The Lightbox -- Officially called the Bell Lightbox but I'm not paid to advertise companies, the Lightbox is an impressive new headquarters for TIFF. Numerous screening rooms (with wide side aisles so you can scurry down and out even if someone has stood up in the aisle to slowly put on their coat and chat with friends) and a nice central space with cafe and bar look elegant. Even better are the spaces for installations, which include a great trailer for TIFF's list of Essential Cinema (shout out to my friend Stephen Garrett of [award-winning Kinetic Trailers](#) for his excellent work) and a Guy Maddin installation that was the highlight of the fest for me. On the downside, when they're having a black-tie event, it becomes wildly difficult to actually get into the Lightbox from the press headquarters unless you wander into traffic. That's the price cinephiles must pay, I guess.

Client 9: The Rise and Fall Of Elliot Spitzer -- This entertaining documentary joins *Inside Job*, *Tabloid*

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and *Cave Of Forgotten Dreams* as documentary highlights for the year that no one will want to miss. Surely the best twist in movies during the past 15 years has been the broad acceptance of documentaries which are seen by many more people and get a much better release in theaters and on DVD than ever before. I give credit to Michael Moore, who created the documentary blockbuster and forever changed audience perceptions about how much fun they could be.

Stake Land -- Not one of my favorites, but this zombie movie was highly touted by Colin Geddes, the man behind *Midnight Madness* and was certainly impressive on a technical level. It won the *Midnight Madness Audience Award* and will lead to bigger and better things from director Jim Mickle. Other big winners in the sci-fi/horror/genre world were *Monsters*, *13 Assassins*, and *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*.

The Volunteers -- TIFF plays trailers before every film (too many trailers; can't they cut them out for the critics, who have to watch them 30 or more times?). But one of them is a tribute to the 2000+ volunteers who make TIFF feasible. And every single time the public audience breaks into applause and even some critics at the press screenings. Heck, it wouldn't occur to most other events to thank volunteers before every single film (maybe a shout out at the closing ceremony). But they do it here and it gets applause every darn time. And you know what? They deserve it, since even if they haven't a clue and can't answer your question, the volunteers really do want to help. I was rescued by one when my umbrella broke and I left my badge at home who walked me into the screening without my even thinking to ask. Thanks!

Potiche -- Francois Ozon offers up this trifle, or should I say truffe. It's delightful and breezy with Catherine Deneuve utterly winning as a trophy wife in 1970s France who takes over her husband's umbrella factory when he falls ill and does a surprisingly effective job. Fun, which is not often a word you use even to describe the good movies at a fest and all the more welcome for it.

Under-appreciated Gems

Several films caught my eye and deserve wider attention than they got.

Attenberg -- Hardly an unknown quantity, this Greek film received admiring reviews from most that saw it. But it's so distinctive and so sharply done (every element is precise) that to me director Athina Rachel Tsangari was one of the real finds of the fest.

Lapland Odyssey -- Writer-director Dome Karukoski has a string of dramatic hit films in Finland, at least that's what the production notes claim. This is his first comedy and I was struck by the polish and skill of the movie on every level. It's a goofy comedy about three friends on a road trip/mission: they need to find a digibox (a cable box that gives you access to programming) on a Friday night or one of them will lose his wife. Chaos ensues, of course, including a "killer lesbian" sports team, crazy Russians, a woman who posed topless for a video game, vengeful taxi drivers and more. Like most comedies of this sort that work, at the heart of *Lapland Odyssey* are three friends who really care for each other. I'm now thoroughly intrigued by Karukoski, who has a great calling card if he wants to work in Hollywood and whose work I'd love to see.

White Irish Drinkers -- Right towards the end of the fest, after most critics had left, I saw this solid drama about a young man coming of age in Brooklyn in the 1970s. It's a good film debut for TV maven John Gray, best known for the hit series *Ghost Whisperer* and a string of solid TV movies. This is clearly a labor of love and it benefits from a strong cast, including Stephen Lang, Karen Allen, Peter Riegert and talented newcomer Nick Thurston.

The Stories I Filed

[Toronto Film Fest Preview](#) for HuffPo

[TIFF Days 1 and 2: Midnight Madness](#)

[TIFF Day 3: Strikes, Snafus and Sexploitation!](#)

[TIFF Day 4: Old Men, Young Girls, Graham Greene and Amigos](#)

[TIFF Day 5: Ozon Saves A Dour Day](#)

[TIFF Day 6: Hello, Lapland!](#)

[TIFF Days 7 and 8: Boston, Beliefs, and The Bang Bang Club](#)

[TIFF: Days 9, 10 and 11: The Irish, The Scots And Werner Herzog](#)

[Aliens, Monsters and Killers Welcome -- Meet The Mind Behind Midnight Madness](#) for the LA Times

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Xavier Dolan -- [The Best Director You've Barely Heard About](#) for AOL's blog Queersighted

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Conviction **
FUBAR II *
The Legend Of Beaver Dam (short) ***
Black Swan ** 1/2
Jack Goes Boating **
The Illusionist *** 1/2
Never Let Me Go **
It's Kind Of A Funny Story **
Let Me In **
Machete Maidens Unleashed! ***
Blessed Events ** 1/2
Beginners ** 1/2
Brighton Rock **
The Sleeping Beauty ** 1/2
What's Wrong With Virginia *
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Potiche ***
Stake Land **
Submarine ** 1/2
Three **
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Monsters ** 1/2
Rabbit Hole ** 1/2
Client 9: The Rise and Fall Of Elliot Spitzer ***
Lapland Odyssey ***
John Carpenter's The Ward * 1/2
Aftershock * 1/2
The Town **
Super ** 1/2
13 Assassins **
The Bang Bang Club **
127 Hours ** 1/2
The Way **
Attenberg *** 1/2
Neds **
The Butcher, The Chef and The Swordsman ** 1/2
Cave Of Forgotten Dreams *** (but *** 1/2 for the experience)
Fire Of Conscience ** 1/2
White Irish Drinkers ***
Casino Jack **
Meek's Cutoff *** 1/2
The King's Speech ***
Guy Maddin installation at Lightbox ****

THE MOVIES I MISSED AND WANT TO SEE

Tabloid
Detective Dee and the Mystery Of The Phantom Flame
Miral
I Saw The Devil
Home For Christmas
Hereafter
Insidious
Black Ocean
Made In Dagenham

The Conspirator
Barney's Version
The Trip
Stone
Sarah's Key
Buried
The Promise: The Making Of Darkness On The Edge Of Town
Nostalgia For The Light
Mysteries Of Lisbon
The Legend Of The Fist: The Return Of Chen Zhen
Beautiful Boy
Ceremony
The Debt

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There is less then A handful of people who's movie I will see (or TV for that matter) just because they were in it or created it. John Gray is one of those very few whose quality is so consistent, who tells the kind of stories I love to hear, that make me feel good, empowered, inspired or determined to do and be more then then I am on my own hero's journey. We NEED more of these kinds of movies like White Drinkers, so I and my fellow teachers and friends from the college and chomping at the bite to have this movie come to Phoenix, Az from what we hear of both the storyline and our trust in the story teller!

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