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Posted: September 11, 2009 02:24 AM

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# Toronto Film Fest Day 1: Peasants, Cats, Goats, Nymphs and War

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The Toronto Film Festival kicked off on Thursday. This is my first time at the festival after covering Cannes for a decade. I have a good feel for a lot of the other festivals: Sundance is over-crowded and people get into a frenzy over a lot of films that end up not mattering the day after the festival ends. Venice and Berlin and a lot of other cities have good to very good festivals located in marvelous cities. But Cannes is still the Wimbledon of festivals and Toronto is still the

other one that matters most. Come to Toronto and you can catch the hottest films from Cannes, fall releases looking for a platform to tout themselves and Oscar hopefuls.

It's also often called the friendliest and easiest film festival to attend. Day 1 sure backed that up. Getting my press badge was a breeze and oh, by the way, here's a free pass to ride the subways and buses throughout the entire festival. (Thank goodness I only bought a day pass when coming in from my friend's home.) And when a trailer before every film thanks the volunteers, the audience actually burst into applause to thank the volunteers. Only in Canada!

Since Toronto is a vibrant city (my mom's family is from here), you don't get that isolated, everyone around you is talking about cinema vibe of Cannes. You do see festgoers with their badges on the streets near the main cinemas. But you can walk a block away and breathe in auteur-free air whenever you want. And the stress level is way down: I got into every screening I wanted, even though showing up at the last minute for the final film of the day meant I had to sit in the front row. So here are the five films I saw on Day 1.

**HUACHO** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\* -- This is almost the prototypical festival film, one that is intriguing but will never see the light of day outside the fest circuit. Director Alejandro Fernandez Almendras makes his approach clear early on. It's a day in the life of a hardscrabble family in Chile. The morning starts for everyone -- mother, son, grandmother and grandfather -- and then we spend about a reel (20 minutes) seeing the day each of them had. The grandmother makes cheese and then sells it on the side of a street. The mother works for the lady of a grand estate who chides her

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for not managing her money better and refuses to give her an advance; the mother then returns a dress she's been wearing (she never takes off the tag) to get some quick cash. The little boy spends his day at school yearning to play on a PSP; the other boys call him "peasant." And the grandfather struggles to put up a fence in a field and then has a drink at his local. Very familiar territory, but there's enough detail and specificity to maintain your interest, which is saying a lot when you're talking about a rather routine day and what I assume are mostly untrained actors. The price of milk goes up so the grandmother tries to raise her prices, only to lower it back down by the end of the day so she isn't stuck with cheese. The little boy finally gets to play a video game (one of those dancing game machines at a video arcade) but he gets so few chances to play he's terrible. The grandfather tells long stories but no one ever listens. It all adds up to a more humane, involving film than it might otherwise have been.

**DOGTOOTH** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\* -- How often can a film have you wondering what the hell is going on but at the same time maintain your interest without frustration? I probably knew too much about this movie, so if you're willing to see a really eccentric movie with a plot straight out of an absurdist play, skip my review and wait to see it. Are you still reading? Here's a little more: two parents in Greece have kept their three children completely isolated from the world. The kids never leave the compound of their off-the-beaten-track home and have been fed tales of the vicious kitties that tear people apart just outside the perimeter. (Yes, "kitties.") But sex will out: the boy is old enough (at least in his late teens) that the parents pay a woman to come in and sleep with him (rather mechanically) while the two sisters lick each other on various parts of the body in exchange for gifts. The children are constantly coming up with games (who can leave their fingers under the hot water tap the longest) and the parents devise ever stranger ways of explaining away terms they don't want the kids to know (the word "sea" is used to describe a leather chair, for example). This could play as a surreal comedy: a couple of scenes find one girl improvising moments from videos of *Rocky II* and *Flashdance* she sneakily watched. It also plays as deeply disturbing, with the parents pushed to extremes to protect their kids from the world they fear. The audience I saw took it very seriously indeed. But play it at midnight in New York and it would seem a very different film. Fascinating. I want a second viewing to make sure it doesn't just play once, but it's hard to shake and the cast is right in tune with the wavelength of the film.

**THE MEN WHO STARE AT GOATS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\* This George Clooney comedy is based on the true-ish stories of the US military's exploration of psychic abilities and the paranormal as potential weapons for war. It's spun into a far too elaborate story of a journalist (Ewan McGregor) who stumbles on Clooney and the loony story of psychic research prompted by hippie and career soldier Jeff Bridges. There are modest laughs in the film but it has a convoluted structure and takes forever to tell a very slight tale of LSD, competing psychics and McGregor's wary acceptance of this story. It doesn't help that the backdrop of 9-11 and prisoner torture takes some of the larkiness out of the goofy tone of the film. Clooney is game and McGregor was lucky casting: the tons of jokes about Jedi warriors naturally have an added spin here. Not much else does.

**NYMPH** \*\*\* for cineastes only out of \*\*\*\* - Not quite sure why I stayed with this one. The Thais sure do love their endless tracking shots and obscure storylines. This one has a girl attacked by men in the jungle who turns into (or was?) a woodland nymph and gets her revenge. Then the film proper begins, with a cute girl who is cheating on her shlubby photographer husband with her much cuter boss. She and her husband head into the jungle for a vacation. But he literally becomes a tree-hugger and either wanders off or is swallowed up by a tree. She heads home distraught but doesn't tell anyone when he shows up unexpectedly, even though the police are searching the jungle for him. Why doesn't she say anything? Because she's imagining it? I knew better than to expect any real answers. But I was held by the visuals and an ominous score filled with the sound of creaking, groaning wood. As an aside, every print of a film includes a marker when a reel is ended, traditionally used to tell the projectionist they should be ready to change reels. It's usually a dot in the upper right hand corner and they appear every 20 minutes on every print. Once you notice them, you can't believe you've been watching movies and never spotted them before. This movie's eerie mood was heightened by the BIGGEST reel marker I've ever seen: it was a gigantic, scrawled 14 or perhaps E14 that covered the entire middle of the film. It was so prominent, I thought at first it was some sort of subliminal message we're meant to spot. But no, it's just the wackiest reel change symbol I've ever seen.

**CITY OF LIFE AND DEATH** \*\*\* despite the weak finale -- This Chinese film tackles the Rape Of Nanking and like the fine *Katyn* of last year, it's basically a catalog of horrors, presented soberly and well. How do you critique it, I felt at first. Though the horrors pile on, the film takes a few interesting tacks. First, it's shot in beautiful black and white. Second, we see much of the film through the eyes of a Japanese soldier, who is distraught by the horror around him. Since the



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Japanese soldiers generally partake in one horrific act after another, this was a welcome attempt not to paint them as pure Evil (which frankly would detract from the horrors that occurred -- they were committed by real people, not monsters, which makes it worse). A few brief English language characters are all so poorly and awkwardly voiced, you'd swear the actors were dubbed. I felt a strong emotional connection even as I felt the movie didn't try and manipulate me too much (stock characters of noble woman, cynical whore, and plucky child notwithstanding). They hit a good finale with the Japanese soldiers celebrating their victory with a martial parade. But that's undercut by a soft coda in which the film tries to underplay the misery of what we've seen by emphasizing too much the guilt of our Japanese hero and the potential for a happier future for at least one Chinese survivor. It rings false after a film that rang mostly true. Still, there was decent applause for the movie at the end, the strongest of the day.

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I've been to the Toronto Film Festival several times and indeed it is a great experience. The

city, the movies, the people, plus the weather which is still very pleasant at that time of the year makes one feel like in paradise. And one shouldn't forget also the food places -- I even developed a routine after seeing a foreign film to go to an ethnic restaurant that corresponds to the nationality or the region of the film. Every movie buff should go at least once in their life to the Toronto Film Festival!

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Extremely cool article, I've been hearing about the Toronto fstvl for a long time now. I especially like your reviews and actually telling us, what in the world happens in the story lines!!! Print more of this guy's articles on HP!

... if you have to make space, then maybe don't print so many Lindsey Lohan twitter details and let this Dude talk about the world of filmmaking!

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Totally different with people in Toronto. The stars are more free to actually go out without being trampled.

Not fest related but Joe Jonas out running streets in Yorkville. Try that in US!!!

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Michael Giltz is one of the best writers on film and music anywhere--the real deal.

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