

Slings, arrows and outrageous film criticism

BY MATTHEW HAYS, MONTREAL

The World Film Festival's stormy relationship with the media is reflected perfectly in one of this year's stand-outs, Maria de Medeiros's feature documentary *Je t'aime... moi non plus*. The film is an insightful and often hysterically funny examination of the complex relationship between filmmakers and film critics. Shot at Cannes, the film has a broad range of directors discussing their most memorable reviews. Atom Egoyan loved what The Village Voice critic Jim Hoberman had to say about *The Sweet Hereafter*. He also recalls when a critic at a film festival praised his first film, *Next of Kin*. The result Egoyan expected was a major review; instead, months later, he got half a sentence.

But the filmmakers also discuss the pain that can be caused by scathing reviews. A director says a review slammed one of his films so badly that his lead actress seriously considered suicide. David Cronenberg says the artist can't help but take criticism to heart: "It's not abstract, it's personal, of course," he says.

Ken Loach, Pedro Almodovar and Wim Wenders seem particularly bitter about the film critic community. Wenders says that when he's approached by someone who says that they saw one of his movies and it changed their life, that is worth more than any number of positive reviews. The reviewers themselves attempt to explain their own complex reasons for becoming reviewers. As one puts it, he's met many critics who want to be filmmakers, but he's never met any filmmaker who aspires to be a critic.

Medeiros, an actor perhaps best remembered for her role as Bruce Willis's girlfriend in *Pulp Fiction*, asks various questions, including why men critics outnumber women critics by such a significant margin. (Many of the women conclude it's sexism that keeps them from positions of authority and power; oddly enough, Medeiros doesn't ponder why the same imbalance exists among filmmakers themselves.) One of the European critics actually suggests, with a straight face, that the role of a critic is a lonely and sad one and that is why so many homosexuals are drawn to the vocation.



A *Silent Love* is directed by Montreal-based Federico Hidalgo.

Montreal-based filmmaker Federico Hidalgo has won hearts and minds with his droll romantic comedy *A Silent Love*. The movie, which had its world premiere at Sundance in January, is a perfectly international masala, a charming glimpse at a truly strange triangle that evolves when a Montreal film professor marries a Mexican Internet bride and brings her back to Canada. The only condition in return for her hand in marriage? Her mother must also come along to live in Montreal with them. Hidalgo, who also scripted, handles the scenario with a beautiful subtlety that allows the richly drawn characters to unfold with their dignity intact. This is a funny, unusual and sharp film, especially impressive given that it is the director's first feature. The

three lead roles are perfectly filled by Susana Salazar, Noel Burton and Vanessa Bauche (*Amores Perros*).

One of last year's most intriguing World Fest entries was *Alexandra's Project*, an Aussie wonder about midlife dissatisfaction and severe marital discord. The folks Down Under are at it again this year, with Alkinos Tsilimidos's *Tom White*, a film about a man who, upon learning that he's lost his job, promptly loses his grip on sanity and abandons home and family to drift into a street life. The film's script is somewhat uneven, but lead actor Colin Friels delivers the performance of the festival, offering an emotionally devastated man who desperately seeks intimacy as he wanders through the dark underbelly of Sydney. A painful and wrenching por-

trait, Friels's turn is a singular achievement.

The Montreal documentary filmmaking producer-director team of Abbey Neidik and Irene Angelico (*Dark Lullabies*, *The Cola Conquest*, *She Got Game*) have created one of the festival's most moving pictures. *Unbreakable Minds* follows three young men suffering from mental illness as they work to rebuild their lives. The film empathizes with the three as they strive to confront their inner demons and reconnect with the outside world. An emotional film that makes full use of the power of documentary, it stands with the ranks of many of the best films portraying mental illness, including *Titicut Follies*, *Warrendale* and *Grey Gardens*.

If the World Fest takes its hits for not being star-studded enough, the organizers do manage at least a few celebrity drop-ins during the event. The fest kicked off with Isabelle Adjani, in town last weekend to accept her lifetime-achievement award and trash Canada's seal hunt. She's book-ended by Penelope Cruz, who flew in yesterday for a press conference to promote *Non ti Muovere* (Don't Move), Sergio Castellitto's celebrated Italian film in which Cruz plays a homely but virtuous nurse. Cruz has received her strongest reviews ever for the role and is now generating considerable Oscar-buzz for the turn, despite the fact that the film is not in English.

Montreal's World Film Festival screens until Sept. 6. Info: www.ffm-montreal.org

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