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FESTIVAL COVERAGE

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

ROME FILM FEST

By *Caveh Zahedi*

Now in its second year, the spectacularly-funded new-kid-on-the-block Rome Film Fest (Oct. 18-27) exhibits the apparently ontologically inescapable teething pains that all toddlers must endure – disorganization, poor communication skills, a certain clumsiness, and a forward-looking sense of “anything’s possible.” Also, a tendency to imitate the mother’s facial expressions – in this case, the Venice Film Festival in particular and every other “big” film festival in general. What this often leads to is the empty husk of spectacle, or spectacle disassociated from its original purpose and adrift in the free-floating play of eternally recombinant signifiers that is contemporary culture.

Add to this a way-out-of-the-way location that typically took over an hour of travel time to get to, a state of the art audio-visual complex that was weirdly non-functional – for instance, seats in the balcony facing not towards the screen but at a 90 degree angle – and films that were supposed to be subtitled in English but weren’t, and voilà – the Rome Film Festival! But there were stars aplenty: Robert Redford! Tom Cruise! Sean Penn! Emile Hirsch! Sophia Loren! Bernardo Bertolucci! Gerard Depardieu! Jane Fonda! Martin Scorsese! Scratch that, Scorsese couldn’t make it. Ang Lee!

The festival’s most trumpeted achievement was the premiere Francis Ford Coppola’s *Youth Without Youth*, his first film in ten years and his self-proclaimed return to his indie roots. Also included was a new documentary on Coppola titled *Coda: Thirty Years After* by his wife, Eleanor Coppola (*Hearts of Darkness*), followed by an on-stage interview with the man himself. And indeed, the presence of Coppola and his family seems the perfect objective correlative for what this festival was all about – star power, a rather dated notion of cinema, and a fuzzy-minded stab at Italian-ness.

A more courageous curatorial foray was the largest retrospective ever of the always brilliant but occasionally slapdash films of the astonishingly prolific Chilean



FALL 2008

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Director Raul Ruiz, a filmmaker whose work is so original and challenging that a different approach was needed. It's not enough just to quietly screen 40 Ruiz films in a festival of this size and scope. There needed to be discussions, lectures, special guests, and an on-stage interview. Instead, the Ruiz retrospective was relegated to the margins of the festival, with Ruiz receiving a lifetime achievement award at an award "ceremony" the time of which was never announced. Such oversights made the retrospective seem like someone's half-hearted attempt to add another notch to their festival belt rather than a sincere and passionate expression of admiration for Ruiz's prodigious opus.

The most memorable event of the festival, for me, was the in-person conversation with Terrence Malick. Malick, who is legendary for never appearing in public or granting interviews, made a rare and, as far as I know, unprecedented public appearance, with the stipulation that there would be no cameras and that he would only talk about his love of Italian cinema. Like most Malick-worshipping cinephiles, I attended the event with impossibly high expectations. But Malick did not disappoint. He was disarmingly gentle, shy, soft-spoken, humble, and sincere all at once. It struck me as remarkable that someone so obviously pure of heart and other-worldly could exist and function in the gaudy, tinsel-strewn, cut-throat world that is contemporary cinema.

@ 11/28/2007 03:42:00 PM

Comments (1)

Thanks for this hilarious and discerning review of the festival!!!

Contemporary cinema is at a loss . . .

posted by  Anonymous @ 12/19/2007 11:06 PM

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