

NATIONAL POST

Wednesday, March 19, 2008

Presented by

Chock-a-doc!

The world's pre-eminent documentary filmfest has everything from homeless buggy races to bug embraces. Here are the 10 most promising picks

Vanessa Farquharson, National Post

Published: Wednesday, March 19, 2008

The room was packed to capacity, to the point where people were drifting behind the bar. There was talk of insect porn, Canadian heavy-metal music and a new way to get high without doing drugs. No, it wasn't another raging party in the club district last night, it was the press conference yesterday morning for the Hot Docs film festival.

Now in its 15th year, the event has steadily grown over the years to achieve international acclaim, often presenting documentaries that go on to win numerous awards, including Oscars.

"This is a festival that flirts with the mainstream but embraces the margins," said programming director Sean Farnel. "It's an incredible time for the documentary form, which has become such a vivid, vital space. ... We considered well over 2,000 films this year, which is a lot of alone time."

But the hours upon hours of alone time spent by programmers has added up to an impressive roster of films, which tend to fit into an overall theme of "serious and playful," according to Farnel. These range from docs about the bombing of Air India Flight 182 or the torture of suspected terrorists at Abu Ghraib to ones about shopping cart races in North Vancouver and the

invention of a hypnotic "Dream Machine."

With over 170 films to choose from, the options can be a little overwhelming, so here are 10 selections from the schedule that are pretty much guaranteed to knock your doc socks off:

1. Anvil! The Story of Anvil Directed by Sacha Gervasi; U.S.A.

A big hit at Sundance, this documentary about the ageing Canadian rock band who "set off on a calamitous European tour and prepare to record a new album" sounds much like *This is Spinal Tap*, but in this case, it's all true. "It's the opening film and I think it's going to be this year's *Helvetica*," said Farnel. "It's one of those films that crosses audience lines so anyone can enjoy it."

2. Green Porno Directed by Jody Shapiro, Isabella Rossellini; U.S.A.

"I think Isabella Rossellini has been hanging out with Guy Maddin a little too much," said Farnel when introducing this series of short films about the bizarre mating habits of insects. Originally conceived to play only on the screens of mobile phones, these trippy mini-docs star the legendary actress in a variety of quirky bug costumes.

3. Air India 182 Directed by Sturla Gunnarson; Canada

The director of last year's *Beowulf & Grendel* transitions from fiction to non-fiction with this provocative look at the 1985 Air India tragedy.

Making its world premiere at the festival as the Canadian Opening Presentation, it's a first-person account of the conspiracies leading up to the attack and the roles CSIS and the RCMP played during the aftermath. "This has profound implications about the way we think of ourselves and

the society we live in," said Gunnar-son at the press conference. 4. Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma Directed by Patrick Reed; Canada

Chronicling the return of the former president of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) to Somalia and Rwanda in order to confront past and present human tragedy, this doc has often been compared to Shake Hands With the Devil. "It's very much about making sense of it all," said Reed at the press conference, "making larger statements and reflections on the nature of the world today and where we could go tomorrow. If you watch the nightly news, you see these images of death and destruction, but what you don't see are the human faces behind it and their stories." 5. Standard Operating Procedure Directed by Errol Morris; U.S.A.

Although it opens in theatres on May 2, immediately after screening at Hot Docs, this is a film any devoted Errol Morris (The Fog of War, The Thin Blue Line) fan will be itching to see. In what the director refers to as "a non-fiction horror movie," audiences are asked to confront the iconic photos taken in the fall of 2003 at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and examine how they served as both an expose and a cover-up. 6. The Forgotten Woman Directed by Dilip Mehta; Canada

Deepa Mehta's brother, a renowned photographer, returns to India in the wake of his sister's Oscar-nominated film Water to examine the current situation of the widows there today. His directorial debut comes as a sort of critical response to all the questions raised in Water about women's rights and the ongoing issues at isolated ashrams.

7. The Rise and Fall of the Grumpy Burger: One Man's Search for the Half-Truth Directed by Matt Gallagher; Canada

Marshall Sfalcin of Windsor, Ont.-- a dead-ringer for Jason Schwartzman -

- sets out to make a film about his grandfather, who claims he invented fast food. With barely any cast members, even less money and family complications getting in the way, his plans start falling by the wayside. Fortunately, his friend and documentary filmmaker Matt Gallagher is there to capture the entire thing.

8. Tiger Spirit Directed by Min Sook Lee; Canada

Award-winning documentarian Min Sook Lee looks at how North and South Korea aren't just split physically, but emotionally as well. Taking audiences into the Demilitarized Zone, she introduces us to elderly couples who've been waiting for news of family members they haven't seen in over 50 years and to young defectors still traumatized by memories of their escape.

9. Carts of Darkness Directed by Murray Siple; Canada

The program summary says it all: "Eccentric homeless bottle-pickers transform into rubber-burning road warriors when they race their shopping carts at 70 km/h down the steep roads of North Vancouver. Verite-style intimacy and extreme-sport cinematography craft this poignant and thrilling portrait."

10. Flicker Directed by Nik Sheehan; Canada

Gay pop-culture icon Brion Gysin set about finding a way to alter thought patterns without the use of chemicals or drugs, and ended up creating a hypnotic "Dream Machine" that uses a pulsing light to match the alpha-wave rhythms in the brain and lower stress levels. "Thank God I didn't drop any acid this morning," said Farnel after trying out one of the machines set up at the press conference. - Hot Docs runs from April 17 to 27 in Toronto. Showtimes and more info can be found at www.hotdocs.ca or

by calling 416-637-5150.

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.