Closing Night at Cape Winelands
28/03/2010

After ten days of screenings and events in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, the Cape Winelands Film Festival came to an end on Saturday 27 March, with a screening of winner of the festival's Grand Prix, Eyes Wide Open, which the Feature Film jury described as 'a film whose excellence crosses all aspects of filmmaking'. Attendees included Shirley Adams Director Oliver Hermanus, its star Denise Newman, Kentridge and Dumas in Conversation director Catherine Meyburgh and Streetball director Demetrius Wren.

The festival is just one element of the energy and drive in the Cape towards creating a sustainable film culture. Earlier in the week, Ardman Animations CEO David Sproxton attended the launch of an animation academy at False Bay Good Hope College, which is located on the outskirts of the Khayelitsha township. Also in attendance was Cape Film head Laurence Mitchell, who said that the academy was a nine-year dream that would generate more film talent for the area.

Current talent was celebrated in a number of local awards handed out by the juries at Cape Winelands. This included a Special Mention by the Feature Jury for Denise Newman, who plays the titular role in Oliver Hermanus’ Shirley Adams. She was described as offering 'a moving account of a life that lies behind news stories about gang violence. Shirley Adams' heroism is not the stuff of Hollywood filmmaking. There is no crusade against gun culture or a successful battle to stop the violence that is tearing communities apart. Her bravery lies in facing each day with the determination to survive it. Denise Newman presents us with the real face of motherhood; with the smallest of gestures that underpin her anguish and pain, she captures the spirit of a woman who will go to any lengths for her child and whose resilience knows no bounds.'

The Best South African Feature award was given to Minky Schlesinger for Gugu and Andile, which updated Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet', locating the action in a township shortly after the repealing of the Apartheid laws. The Jury commented, 'Minky Schlesinger's film, with its superb script, draws out the timeless appeal of Shakespeare's work and with editing that captures the breathless pace of the narrative, the result is a work that will speak to young and old, both in the appeal of the play and the way its is incorporated into and sheds light on an important aspect of many people's lives in South Africa.'

Another South African winner was Catherine Meyburgh (editor on Gugu and Andile) for her excellent documentary Kentridge and Dumas in Conversation, which jurist Lucia Saks praised for its exceptional interpretation of two artists’ lives and work, finding an original and inspiring form by which to explore its fascinating subjects.

The Audience Award also went to a South African film, Lonny Price's adaptation of the acclaimed Athol Fugard play, Master Harold…and the Boys. The award was timely, in a week when the world premiere of Fugard's new play, 'The Train Driver' took place at the recently opened Fugard Theatre, in Cape Town's District 6.

The Documentary prize went to Justin Strawhand’s War Against the Weak, which focused on the popularity of eugenics in the early part of the 20th century. The jury praised the film for its novel approach, employing an experimental style and archive footage to explore its subject.

In the short film section, the winning film was British director Sam Donovan's Hammerhead, while Canadian film Danse Macabre picked up a Special Mention.

The Feature Film jury also gave a Special Mention to Heikki Nousiainen for his performance in Klaus Härö's Letters to Father Jacob, which 'subtly details the everyday existence of this private man who, as he comes to the end of his life,' stating that it 'is a performance of grace and humility that befits such an involving story'.

The International Film Guide Inspiration award went to George Ovashili's The Other Bank. The jury’s verdict stated that it offered ‘a fresh perspective on the struggle people face in countries torn apart by conflict and civil strife’. Furthermore the film highlighted 'the dehumanization of soldiers and civilians, whose actions are often brutal and without consequence. Only the young boy, the film’s conscience, is unwilling to stand by while rape and murder become an intrinsic part of daily life. His journey is a microcosm of a society on the
Art on Film
26/03/2010

One of the most extraordinary films at Cape Winelands is a documentary about the artists William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas. An insightful and beautifully realised film, Kentridge and Dumas in Conversation was directed by Catherine Meyburgh, who has worked as editor on Kentridge's films for over a decade. She has just returned from New York, where she has been working on Kentridge's production of Dimitri Shostakovich's 'The Nose', at the New York Metropolitan Opera.

How did the idea for the film come about?

I had been working with William on his films since the late 1990s, but Marlene I knew very little about. She had been living in Amsterdam since 1976 and only in recent years had a retrospective down here in her home country, which is surprising. There had been films previously made about William, as well as a film about Marlene, but knowing that they were both gregarious and possessed a great lust for life, I thought it could be interesting if we could bring them together.

I really liked this idea of bringing them together, but it's so hard to create a conversation. I didn't want to do some kind of drunken get together so I needed to find a way to give them equal weight. William is very clear. He gives many lectures and has a very good way of conveying information. Marlene's very interesting and vibrant, but whenever she speaks, she goes on a journey of anecdotes, which can make things hard to contain. However, the two both admire each other's work and they're very different. So much of Marlene's work is about colour and is a painter, whereas William doesn't like painting and works mostly in monochrome.

I approached both of them with the idea of visiting them in their own spaces and placing them together. My interest lay in exploring how this brilliance manifests itself in their personality and the processes of their art.

How did the filming proceed?

The first thing I filmed was Marlene's exhibition in Cape Town. Then I was in New York for William's production of Dimitri Shostakovich's 'The Nose' at the Met and Marlene was having her retrospective at MoMa at the same time, so I was able to film her at that exhibition. Then I came back and filmed the two of them in discussion in January 2009. That interview lasted 6 hours, as well as filming the dinner the night before and William's tour of his studio. After that I spent half a day with William in his studio and about the same with Marlene in hers in Amsterdam. I also had other footage that had been shot over the years and I spent a final morning with William in his studio while he was drawing.

How did you structure the conversations?

Sara Nuttall, who's an art historian and writer came on board and we started with the idea of what is beautiful, discussing art in that context. This area has been widely debated, so out of that Sarah and I plotted areas that we could cover, things that the two of them could speak about easily and openly and things that we wanted them to explore in terms of their art. Sarah would sit down with them and would discuss this landscape of ideas and there would then be the freedom for them to expand on that.

These interviews were constructed to a degree because you want them to cover certain topics, but it would be left to them to open up the ideas and to trigger their memories.

How did you approach the actual filming of the interviews?

A static camera was a real concern to me. But I also hated the idea of moving the camera just because it was static. Initially, we were thinking about a circular track. But I didn’t want to be limited by the camera angle and direction. I also wanted them to be speaking to each other and to have as much eye contact as possible, so I needed to stay on the right line with the camera. In the end I set up two tracks, with the artists slightly angled towards each other. I had two monitors in front of me and I communicated with the two cameras as to where they should be, depending on the discussion. It allowed me to carefully direct where each camera would be at a specific point. And knowing both of the artists quite well by this time, I had an understanding of the direction their conversation was likely to take.

Both William and Marlene have extraordinary and interesting faces and I think the people who watch this film really do get to know them. At least, I hope it feels like that; that you’re sitting, watching the film and feel part of the discussion.
What thoughts did you have about representing one art form through another?

I watched so many art documentaries that adopted a classical approach of being very reverent to each picture, with wide shots and delicate pans down the image. But I felt both William and Marlene have been quite free with their images, given that both use the camera a lot. Marlene uses it as her source, as her reference. She paints with pictures. It was already a relationship she had. I didn’t feel that they had a need for their work to be treated in a reverent way. I now think I could have gone further.

This mixing of the artists’ work with your interpretation comes across most strongly in the discussion of the representation of death, where both artists appear to be re-sensitizing a numbed society to the violence that exists around them.

That sequence was planned from the start. William and Marlene’s work around dead bodies is so extraordinary. I was working on documentaries in the early 1990s and I was seeing images of dead people. I had no direct relationship with the people who had died, but I was shocked by them and felt such an intimate moment with them in their death. Working on an earlier film about William we had used Felix in Exile. It was quite a difficult time for me and that project provided some closure, particularly the process of the newspapers covering the dead body. Marlene’s pictures had the same effect for me. It was a real statement about the way news agencies use dead bodies, the way they present them. As human beings, we have no room to mourn for these people. They are just presented as a series of images. This was something I wanted to make a point about. These artists had turned that approach around and managed to pay huge respect to what had happened to these people. That was really important for me.

The Wedding Planners
25/03/2010

One of the smaller pleasures of Cape Winelands feature competition section is a comedy of cultural difference by Napoleon Helmis. Wedding in Besarabia follows Vlad and Vica as they prepare to get married in the bride’s hometown of Chisinau, the capital of Moldova and once part of Romania, until it was annexed by Soviet forces in 1940. The couple have chosen to return there knowing that the tradition of giving the new couple money will help support them in their new life together. However, Vlad’s proudly patriotic Romanian uncle and Vica’s godfather, who appears to be in love with her, appear hell-bent on destroying what should be a happy day.

The wedding-as-hell movie has been done many times before, most brutally in Robert Altman’s A Wedding. Helmis’s film might fall short in terms of satire, but it is an observant, often very funny and occasionally acerbic film. The best scenes take place at the drawn-out reception, where family members attempt to outdo each other in their patriotic claims and almost fanatical devotion to the newlyweds. Vlad Logigan in particular, as the put-upon groom, is superb, as he attempts to keep his head whilst the wedding party loses theirs through alcohol consumption and name-calling.

If only Brian Lally’s 8.5 Hours had half the wit of Wedding Besarabia, it might have been even partially bearable. It details one day in the life of four office workers: a woman whose relationship has fallen apart and finds herself with no place to live; a cuckolded office manager; a lothario who is visited by the mother of a one-night stand and a man who is about to be married but desires a different life.

From its cringe-worthy opening scene, 8.5 Hours is a train-wreck of a film. The performances for the most part lack any credibility, while Lally’s direction no more competent than a poorly produced daytime soap. That most characters lack any attractive traits may not have been an issue had they been developed well. However, the film lurches from one crassly written scene to the next, unsure of its tone (one scene moves clunkily from comedy to tragedy and finally something akin to a supernatural thriller) and failing to convince on any level.

A Conflict in Israel
24/03/2010

The two Israeli films screening in competition at Cape Winelands this year both explored disenfranchisement to very different effect. In The Loners, Anton ‘Klin’ Ostrovsky and Henry David play two Jewish Russian émigrés who have entered the Israeli army. While one is following in the military footsteps of his high ranking father, with a commission bestowed on him, the other is a hardened foot soldier, whose penchant for violence seems destined to land them in trouble. When both men are found guilty of selling weapons to Hamas, which are eventually used in the deaths of Israeli citizens, they are sentenced to time in prison. When faced with transfer to a civilian prison, the men take their captors hostage, desperate to prove their innocence.

Renen Schorr’s film, co-written with Guy Meirson and Moshe Zonder, is based on a true story. In its early stages, the film works well
in highlighting how the men are excluded from parts of Israeli society because of their nationality. However, any further exploration while they are in prison is merely perfunctory as the film sets up a more conventional prison siege drama. The central performances are strong and Schorr's direction builds suspense well, particularly in the army's attempt to break the siege, but the film lacks any overall political angle, in the end offering little more than the events as they unfolded.

Haim Tabakman's Eyes Wide Open, by contrast, presents a riveting account of an illicit affair between two men, which takes place in a cloistered orthodox community in the heart of Jerusalem. When Ezri (Ran Danker) shelters from a storm in Aaron's (Zohar Shtrauss) shop, the butcher takes to him, offering the young man a job and a place to stay. Having recently lost his father, Aaron is glad of Ezri's company, his new friend showing him a way to enjoy his life once again. But their relationship soon turns physical, which attracts a harsh response from members of the local synagogue.

Without a doubt one of the highlights of the festival, Tabakman's film is a sensitive portrait of the growing bond between the two men and a coruscating account of prejudice, petty grievance and hypocrisy amongst in this small community, which even Aaron is not free from. Aware of how his actions are likely to be judged if he is found out, yet unable to end his relationship with Ezri, Aaron still feels he can coerce a another member of the community from seeing the woman he loves because her father has betrothed her to someone else.

As the tension between Aaron and the community grows, Tabakman accentuates the claustrophobic world, his camera rarely rising above eye-level, closing the streets in upon the butcher. The film's closing moments leave us to decide whether Aaron has accepted his lot or is willing to pay a higher price in escaping the system he is both part of and longs to escape from.