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September 07, 2006

## TIFF 2006: from zombies to Molotov cocktails

### Celebrity fuels the Toronto Film Festival -- but homegrown movies offer some kick-ass fun

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For 10 days every September, limousines choke the streets and paparazzi stake out hotels as Hollywood descends on the Toronto International Film Festival. TIFF has now begun to rival Cannes in stature. This year its celebrity horde seems thicker than ever, with a guest list that includes Sean Penn, Jude Law, Jennifer Lopez, Anthony Hopkins, Sharon Stone, Russell Crowe, Sandra Bullock, Tom Hanks -- and Brad Pitt, whose appearance could have the impact of a royal wedding if he chooses to brave the red carpet with Angelina Jolie. Celebrity fuels the media frenzy around the festival. But most of TIFF's program -- 352 films from 61 countries -- is obscure. And one of those countries is Canada.

While fall film festivals have proliferated across the land, TIFF remains the prime showcase for homegrown talent. This year's festival, ever mindful of its domestic mandate, is unveiling 37 new Canadian features. Too often, after playing the festival circuit, these films -- at least those from English Canada -- never find an audience. But just as everyone is starting to despair over the state of our cinema, among this year's crop are a few solidly entertaining pictures that blast through the art-house cobwebs.

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The most prominent is *Away from Her*, Sarah Polley's extraordinary feature debut (page 66). Other highlights range from *Fido*, a hilarious satire that puts a nifty spin on the zombie genre, to *Monkey Warfare*, a playful ode to the '60s revolution that achieves an improbable fusion between romantic idealism and punk pessimism. What's exciting about these films is something that's been lacking in the austere existential style that's become a signature of English Canadian film: a sense of pure, kick-ass fun. Even Polley's old-age love story is imbued with enough lightness and wit that it never becomes a burden.

Oddly, one Canadian movie that tests the endurance of the viewer is the festival's opening night gala, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. It comes from Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, whose feature debut, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, was an international triumph. *Journals*, which he directed with Norman Cohn, portrays the clash between Aboriginal and Christian cultures in the 1920s through the story of the last great Inuit shaman and his headstrong daughter. Like Kunuk's first feature, it conjures Arctic landscape and Inuit tradition with stunning veracity. But compared to *Atanarjuat*, which has the power of Greek tragedy, the uneventful narrative feels more like documentary than drama.

*Fido* has less noble ambitions, but irresistible charm. Written and directed by Vancouver writer-director Andrew Currie (*Mile Zero*), it's a genre-spliced mix of *Lassie* and *Night of the Living Dead*. Currie has grafted a sci-fi premise onto a nostalgic vision of the 1950s, rendered with the Technicolor palette of a Douglas Sirk melodrama. In this version of the '50s, the dead won't stay dead. But a company has patented a collar that makes zombies docile, and they work as domestic slaves. The story is set in a *Leave It To Beaver* household with a zombie named Fido (Billy Connolly) who becomes boy's best friend. A pregnant Carrie-Anne Moss (*The Matrix*) plays Mom; Dylan Baker (*Happiness*) plays Dad. With its high style, priceless script, and a pedigree cast sinking their teeth into a rich satire of homeland security, this is exactly the kind of Canadian movie that could break out to become an indie hit.

*Monkey Warfare* is a more low-gloss, low-budget escapade. But that's part of its mock-new wave, retro-guerrilla appeal. Don McKellar and his long-time partner Tracy Wright co-star as former radicals from Vancouver who now live in Toronto, scavenging and selling yard-sale memorabilia of their failed revolution. McKellar's character starts flirting with a young, dope-dealing, bicycle-mad activist (Nadia Litz). A triangle takes shape, and two generations of radical politics combust like a Molotov cocktail -- which is the movie's all-purpose metaphor. Gleefully sampling Jean-Luc Godard, Toronto writer-director Reginald Harkema (*A Girl is a Girl*) wires the visuals and the music with an incendiary wit. And McKellar graciously gives Wright the opportunity to reveal an underappreciated talent, which is what cutting-edge, indie cinema is supposed to be all about.

For the duration of TIFF, read Brian D. Johnson's blog at [www.macleans.ca/behindthescene](http://www.macleans.ca/behindthescene)

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