

Obsessed with the fest

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For 16 days and nights, feast on antigrenre samurai flicks, fluffy French comedy, a San Fran musical, and docs aplenty

1st BITE (Canada) Grab a gang of people and do some heavy drinking before heading down to the only fest film in which every scene is dumber than the one before it. We can't be sure if Quebec hunkster David La Haye knew what he was in for as a Montreal chef who falls under a lemongrass spell in Thailand, but what makes the film so hysterical (not in a good way) is that Malaysian-born director Hunt Hoe takes it all so seriously. By the time our chef falls for Leah Pinsent, playing a bulimic nut case, the film has turned into a cross between Red Shoe Diaries (without nudity) and Iron Chef (sans recipes). In case you can't tell, it bites. Granville 7, October 5 (9 p.m.) and 6 (11:30 a.m.) > Ken Eisner

ACTS OF IMAGINATION (Canada) A delicate tone is carefully established but soon squandered in this low-key drama about & well, not very much, as it turns out. Stephanie Hayes and Billy Marchenski play a brother and sister from Ukraine, now living in Vancouver, who spend a lot of their time wringing their hands about something that happened back home. When Sis meets a gentle older fellow in the neighbourhood, Bro goes ballistic and things, including the movie, fall apart. In the end, Carolyn Combs's first feature is ruined not by minimal plot turns but by uneven acting (oy, those accents) and an unrelieved sense of self-seriousness. Granville 7, October 2 (7 p.m.) and 12 (11 a.m.) > Ken Eisner

BUDDHA'S LOST CHILDREN (Netherlands) Khru Bah is a Thai boxing star turned nomadic Buddhist monk, and this sensitively shot vérité doc follows him into the remote drug-trade border regions where he ministers to the impoverished hill tribes. On the one hand, it's a fascinating study of the hungry, abandoned children he takes in and transforms into literate monks; on the other, it's a tale of tough love, as he drags them along hundreds of kilometres of rough trails, riding bareback on horses, with the tiniest ones crying out of homesickness. Still, this gorgeously lensed journey is not one the viewer will soon forget. Granville 7, October 8 (10 a.m.), 9 (6:40 p.m.), and 13 (11:30 a.m.) > Janet Smith

CATCH A FIRE (U.K./South Africa/USA) Close to two decades ago, Shawn Slovo wrote *A World Apart*, a deeply moving fictional screenplay based on herself and her parents, Ruth First and Joe Slovo's Communists, and the most prominent whites in the African National Congress's struggle against apartheid. *Catch a Fire* is also about a real-life South African hero, but unlike in *A World Apart*, most of the protagonists are black. Director Phillip Noyce does a fine job of showing us how Patrick Chamusso (Derek Luke) has his consciousness raised after being tortured by secret-police officer Nic Vos (a truly terrifying Tim Robbins). Slovo has a seemingly unparalleled ability to pump feeling into revolutionary politics, and *Catch a Fire* is set apart by a surprisingly tender heart. Granville 7, October 3 (7 p.m.) and 5 (2 p.m.) > Mark Harris

CHANGE OF ADDRESS (France) The slowness with which two people who are perfect for each other recognize this self-evident fact is a staple of romantic comedy, and it is at the heart of this bit of fluff. A French-horn player (Emmanuel Mouret) and a shopkeeper (Fanny Valette) manage to pursue misjudged affairs while chastely sharing the same apartment. Clearly, this is the stuff of boulevard comedy, and those who like this sort of thing, as the TV commercial says about a certain brand of beer, will like it a lot. Granville 7, September 28 (2 p.m.) and 30 (11:30 a.m.), and October 2 (1 p.m.) and 4 (6:40 p.m.) > Mark Harris

COLMA: THE MUSICAL (USA) This low-budget youth affair, made in and centring on a characterless suburb of San Francisco, features one of the funniest lines ever to appear in a musical: 'Oh no, he's singing,' someone groans when one of the main characters hops onto a table to deliver his next acidulous aria. The fellow doing the musical declaiming, H.P. Mendoza, wrote the catchy songs and is one of a trio of leads, all playing teens trying to decide what will follow high-school graduation. Hint: they don't drag race down to the malt shop. A bit long, but recommended. Granville 7, September 28 (3:30 p.m.) and 29 (7 pm.); Pacific Cinémathèque, October 9 (9:30 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

COMEBACK SEASON (USA) Ex-Kid in the Hall Bruce McCulloch directs a game cast led by Ray Liotta and Glenna Headly, who play against type as a gentle couple pulled apart by the husband's casual infidelity. In a sitcomlike turn, he's thrown together with his next-door neighbour (Shaun Sipos), an arrogant jock already on the dad's shit list for dumping one of his daughters. The inevitable denouement is dragged out and not very dramatic, or funny, but the film has its own peculiar brand of sincerity, and it's worth seeing to observe the thoughtful things Liotta does with such potentially Hallmark-ish material. Ridge, October 8 (9:45 p.m.); Granville 7, October 10 (11:30 a.m.) > Ken Eisner

DANS PARIS (France) Considering how famous it was, it's remarkable how few French films of the past 30 years have been noticeably influenced by that country's new wave. *Dans Paris* is a major exception. Christophe Honor's tale of a happily promiscuous younger brother (Louis Garrel) and his romantically depressed older sib (Romain Duris) sits squarely at the intersection of early Jean Luc Godard and early François Truffaut. Fresh, amusing, richly atmospheric, well cast, and deeply touching at times, this film is a

genuine delight. (There's great music, too.) Granville 7, October 1 (11 a.m.), 2 (4:15 p.m.), and 8 (8 p.m.) > Mark Harris

DEMENTED (France) Canadian Timothy Findley wrote *The Last of the Crazy People*, the novel that inspired this sad tale about a 10-year-old country boy (Julien Cochelin) whose entire family is playing with fewer than 52 cards. Outwardly unemotional, young Martin is a seething cauldron inside as he tries to cope with his mother's agoraphobia, his father's depression, his grandmother's coldness, and his brother's sexual anguish. A lack of friends his own age and gender doesn't help much either. Tragedy is clearly on the way, but what form it will take remains a mystery until the very end. Granville 7, October 1 (7:30 p.m.) and 3 (12:15 p.m.) > Mark Harris

EXPIRATION DATE (USA) Rick Stevenson's dark comedy has a Northern Exposure vibe that never gets too pushy or self-impressed. Robert A. Guthrie is intriguing, if a bit passive, as an understandably gun-shy, part-Native Seattle barista trying to outlive, not outrun, a family curse. And Sascha Knopf is mostly irritating as the gal who comes along to distract him from his unwritten fate. The film offers a nice mix of legend and indie aesthetics, even if things don't quite jell until the very end. Granville 7, October 7 (9:45 p.m.) and 8 (3:30 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

FIDO (Canada) There's always room for zombies, and *Mile Zero* maker Andrew Currie adds an instant classic to the genre with *Fido*, which finds just the right combination of *Leave It to Beaver* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Of course, it helps that the Vancouver director snagged Dylan Baker and Carrie-Anne Moss to play '50s parents who have different reactions when their lonely son gets too attached to their new, if mouldering, house servant. Of course, they're not as swayed as we are that said undead is played by Billy Connolly, sans beard. And speech. Funny how the Scottish comic still manages to kill. Granville 7, October 1 (7 p.m.) and 3 (4 p.m.); Pacific Cinémathèque, October 11 (7 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

HANA (Japan) Traditionally, the heroes of samurai films are supermen who can dispatch 40 villains in the twinkling of an eye, but the protagonist of this antigene piece couldn't slash his way out of a paper bag. By interlacing this pacifist's fate with that of the 47 Ronin, the most duty-bound Japanese warriors of all time, director Kore-eda Hirokazu lets us know that he prefers common sense to ritual revenge. Funny, revisionist, and delightfully sane. Granville 7, October 3 (9:30 p.m.) and 4 (2 p.m.) > Mark Harris

THE HOST (South Korea) Eat your heart out, Roger Corman, Jack Arnold, and Ishiro Honda: South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-Ho has directed the best satirical mutant-monster movie of them all. After vast quantities of formaldehyde are dumped into the Han River at the behest of the U.S. military, a dysfunctional Seoul family is tested to the limit by the strange amphibian that is created. Suspenseful, funny, and chock full of great CGI effects, *The Host* is this festival's Number One Guilty Pleasure and selling out fast. Granville 7, September 30 (3:30 p.m.), and October 1 (9:45 p.m.) and 3 (10 a.m.) > Mark Harris

IN BETWEEN DAYS (USA) Set against a backdrop of Toronto's bleakest concrete overpasses and street corners (but masquerading as a U.S. city), this study of the immigrant experience is either infuriating or mesmerizing, depending on how you look at it. Nothing much happens: South Korean Aimie recently arrived with her divorced mother and spends her days hanging around with a male friend playing video games, nodding off in ESL class, and basically loitering around bus shelters, house parties, and coffee shops. Aimie passes a lot of time sulking and playing hard to get with the guy, but through the use of handheld camera, intimate realism, and sparse dialogue, the film effectively evokes that in-between time when you haven't quite come of age and you don't quite fit into a new culture. Granville 7, October 9 (9:45 p.m.) and 11 (12:30 p.m.) > Janet Smith

JONESTOWN: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE PEOPLE'S TEMPLE (USA) This chilling peek behind the aviator shades lets survivors tell the gruesome tale of how more than 900 otherwise life-affirming Americans, and a crusading congressman, managed to die at the hands of a madman corrupted by power. The fast-moving doc, made for PBS, is most interesting for its attention to the lesser-known aspects of the Bay Area church before it moved to Guyana. But it could have offered a bit more insight into where Jones's megalomania came from. Granville 7, September 28 (8:45 p.m.) and October 9 (10:30 a.m.); Pacific Cinémathèque, October 13 (1 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

LOOP (Norway) 'How were you as a human?' Looking back on his life, 92-year-old Arne Naess posits this as death's central question. The philosophical documentary *Loop*, which requires an expansive mood on the part of the viewer, follows a small sample of seekers from two slacker fishermen and a fire watcher to a driven rock climber who support the notion that 'the rich world of impulses' that is childhood is 'reined in far too early', as Naess puts it. In the end, the old guy (it is all men in what turns out to be a subtextual study of fathers and sons) decides his life has mainly been about finding a good answer. Granville 7, October 6 (3 p.m.); Ridge, October 9 (9:30 p.m.); Granville 7, October 10 (9:30 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

MILAREPA (Bhutan) In the magic-realist tradition of *Travellers & Magicians*, filmmaker (and lama) Neten Chokling combines an ancient Tibetan Buddhist story with glossy production values and digital effects. The first in a two-part saga, it's the story of a famous 12th-century saint named Milarepa: when his widowed mother is shamed and robbed by her in-laws, she sends him to a sorcery school to take revenge. Some of the characterizations are a little broad, but the scenery on the wide Tibetan plain makes a suitably surreal setting for a supernatural legend, and the arcane morality may reel you in if you let it. Granville 7, October 8 (7 p.m.) and 9 (1 p.m.) > Janet Smith

THE MIST IN THE PALM TREES (Spain) This admirably artistic film attempts to process a tremendous amount of visual

material drawn from antique photographs and film clips. After a while, the effort to impose a narrative, through repetition and sometimes droning voice-overs, on tangentially related material ranging from war newsreels to home movies and 'French' postcards' proves more tiresome than illuminating. Many of the images are fascinating, however, so you might be better off bringing an iPod and supplying your own free-flowing soundtrack. Granville 7, October 7 (7:30 p.m.) and 8 (3 p.m.) > Ken Eisner



At the VIFF, of course you can switch from samurais to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to zombies. Clockwise from left: Japan's Hana is the funny, sane tale of a pacifist warrior whose fate is wound up with those intense Ronin dudes; Israeli photographer Ziv Koren lives life really dangerously in *More Than 1000 Words*; Vancouver director Andrew Currie gives a '50s kid Billy Connolly as an undead manservant in *Fido*. If you love anyone whose books were banned anywhere, see *A Zen Life*, a doc about Zen Buddhist scholar (and friend to kittens) Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.

MORE THAN 1000 WORDS (Israel) Israeli photographer Ziv Koren is the very definition of courage. His intense and formally powerful documentation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is always presented in the most human terms. (He tends to hide this dangerous process from his wife, a gorgeous model only dimly aware and consciously so of his precariousness.) This superb film, which tries to tackle too much near the end, could be seen as a metaphor for Koren's troubled homeland except that, like him, it's far more interested in particulars. Granville 7, October 5 (10 a.m.), 9 (6 p.m.), and 13 (10:30 a.m.) > Ken Eisner

MY SCARY GIRL (South Korea) Like Japan, South Korea is very good at doing black comedy, but many of the jests are just too damn dark for mainstream western audiences to digest. This is definitely not the case with *My Scary Girl*. The tale of a 30-ish, virginal college professor who hooks up with a woman who may or may not be a mass murderer is totally accessible and screamingly funny. This is precisely the kind of movie that Hollywood used to do supremely well before it lost the knack. Fortunately for us, director Sohn Jae-Gon still has it. Granville 7, September 30 (9:45 p.m.) and October 3 (4 p.m.) > Mark Harris

MYSTIC BALL (Canada) Watching Greg Hamilton's highly personal documentary is a bit like going out for dinner with someone who only talks about one thing. Obsession is an understatement when describing the director's love of chinlone, a sport played only in Myanmar. But for those who love learning about different cultures and hate pretension (Ball is devoid of the latter), Hamilton's enthusiasm, and the incredible skill it takes to play chinlone, may just win you over. Granville 7, October 6 (1 p.m.) and 8 (7:15 p.m.) > Janet Smith

OLD JOY (USA) Two former college roommates, played by indie actor Daniel London and cult-music figure Will Oldham, meet after an unspecified absence and go on a short camping trip during which nothing is revealed except the diverging paths their lives will follow. Filmmaker Kelly Reichardt's approach is leisurely and self-assured, and this quietly gratifying movie will be most interesting to viewers genuinely grappling with questions of friendship, ethics, and middle age. (Any reference to Brokeback Mountain, by the way, is a total red herring.) The final scene, while in no way tragic, is unaccountably sad. Vancity Theatre, October 5 (9:30 p.m.), 9 (3:45 p.m.), and 12 (1:15 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

ONCE IN A LIFETIME: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF THE NEW YORK COSMOS (USA/U.K.) Sports, celebrity, male rivalry, and media manipulation all come under scrutiny in this highly entertaining look back at a time, in the mustachioed mid-'70s, when soccer almost made it in the USA. The breezily made movie's yes, there are wah-wah guitars' focuses on 'starfucker' Steve Ross (as an ex-aide calls him) when his Warner Communications was at its zenith. It was Ross's obsession with football, and with Brazilian demigod Pelé specifically, that built a team from scratch, and also spelled its doom. Vancity Theatre, September 28 (7:30 p.m.); Granville 7, October 7 (3 p.m.) and 12 (6:20 p.m.) > Ken Eisner

THE RAILROAD ALL-STARS (Spain) Documentaries have covered this subject before, but never with such verve. Chema Rodriguez's account of the soccer team founded and staffed by two-dollar whores from literally the wrong side of the tracks in Guatemala City is both lively and touching, respectful and cheeky. These women might be victims of society, but they're willing to try and kick their way into a better world, and we cheer them on, regardless of whether they score or not. Granville 7, October 3 (noon) and 10 (9:15 p.m.) > Mark Harris

THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL? (U.K.) Richard Dawkins is a True Believer. Or, to be more precise, a true Unbeliever. The author of *The Selfish Gene* is not one of your quiet, unassuming atheists. Instead, this distinguished British biologist inveighs against God from the pulpit. (At least, he would if he believed in pulpits.) As Dawkins challenges the convictions of believers of all the major monotheistic faiths, one can't help but feel that he's cut from the same cloth as the men he decries. For Richard Dawkins, there is no God but Darwin, with Thomas Henry Huxley as his prophet, a credo that results in a film that is as unintentionally funny as it is provocative. Granville 7, September 30 (1:30 p.m.); Pacific Cinémathèque, October 1 (7 p.m.) > Mark Harris

SON OF MAN (South Africa) Why mince words? This Xhosa-language, modern-dress version of the life of Christ is the most moving Passion ever put to celluloid. A hundred times better than Mel Gibson's blood fest, it's even better than Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Brought to you by the people who worked the same uncanny alchemy on Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. What can they possibly do next? Granville 7, October 7 (3:30 p.m.) and 10 (9:45 p.m.) > Mark Harris

TACHIGUI: THE AMAZING LIVES OF THE FAST-FOOD GRIFTERS (Japan) This is definitely not a no-brainer. This quirkily animated history of postwar Japan as seen through the eyes of sidewalk-stall operators who are themselves transformed into 3-D computer graphics requires a certain knowledge of what's gone on in Tokyo since 1945, as well as an appreciation for nontraditional anime. If you're in the know, you'll be enthralled; if not, you might be merely perplexed. Granville 7, September 28 (10 p.m.) and 30 (2:30 p.m.), and October 3 (4:15 p.m.) > Mark Harris

TALES OF THE RAT FINK (Canada) The latest pop-culture jamboree from Ron Mann (*Grass*, *Comic Book Confidential*) looks at the story of funny-car inventor Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth, who embodied the creatively rebellious spirit behind the hot rodding craze, and attendant symbology, of the postwar era. The film's only tedious digressions happen when Mann lets cars do the talking' even if he was understandably stoked to have such auto-associated figures as Jay Leno, Tom Wolfe, and American Graffiti's Paul Le Mat (nice detail!) add their voices. In any case, it's no drag. Ridge, October 5 (7 p.m.); Granville 7, October 7 (2 p.m.) and 11 (11:30 a.m.) > Ken Eisner

TEN CANOES (Australia) Although Rolf de Heer is not Aboriginal, no one is likely to accuse him of cultural appropriation with this marvellous tale about evil sorcerers and jealous brothers setting their sights on forbidden women in both the past and the far-distant past of pre-colonial Australia. Using different colour palettes to distinguish epochs, de Heer does everything in his power to keep things as non-western as possible. David Gulpilil's frequently raucous narration nicely counterbalances the gorgeous backgrounds. Granville 7, October 5 (9:30 p.m.) and 7 (1 p.m.) > Mark Harris

A ZEN LIFE (USA/Japan/U.K.) Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki was the prolific Japanese scholar whose breakthrough books on Zen Buddhism were once banned in the American South on the grounds that they were 'too convincing'. According to this profile by Michael Goldberg, Suzuki was also a calm, compassionate, and wise individual. As a documentary, *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki* demonstrates the same admirable qualities as the philosopher it so obviously loves. Granville 7, September 30 (4 p.m.); Ridge, October 7 (7 p.m.) > Mark Harris