

Interview with Steve Gravestock, Canadian Programming, TIFF

Written by Katherine Brodsky



Photo: Michael Buckner/WireImage

Steve Gravestock is the programmer at the Toronto International Film Festival that is responsible for Canadian films. So it's no wonder that he is the man with the "scoop" on all the Canadian film going-ons at TIFF. He shares his thoughts with First Weekend Club on this year's selections & much more in this exclusive interview.

What are some highlights for Canadian films this year?

There's a great group of films coming from BC, including new films from Blaine Thurier (*A Gun to the Head*); Carl Bessai (*Cole*); Bruce Sweeney (*Excited*) – all filmmakers we've featured before; plus a feature debut called *Machotaïldrop*; and a BC/Ontario co-production, a charming and quirky romantic comedy, called *Year of the Carnivore*, which is directed by Sook-Yin Lee, and will open our Canada First! programme.

There are also a number of great films from Quebec, including two films which played Cannes: *J'ai Tué Ma Mère* by Xavier Dolan (which is already a huge hit in Quebec and won three big prizes in Cannes) and Denis Côté's *Carcasses*. Côté is one of the most interesting and unique filmmakers working today – his style, in only his fourth film, is immediately recognizable -- and this is one of his most distinctive works so far. We also have the North American premiere of *La Donation*, by Bernard Émond. This is the final installment in his trilogy about faith, hope and charity -- one of the most impressive film series ever made here. This is a genuinely intense and emotionally affecting work – with a great performance by Elyse Guilbault -- about a doctor trying to decide whether to take over a practice in a remote rural area.

What are some of the films that you're most excited to see people's reactions to and why?

It will be very interesting to see how people respond to some of the films in Canada First!, particularly Alex Craig and Corey Adams' Machotaildrop; Alexandre Franchi's The Wild Hunt; and Rob King's George Ryga's HUNGRY HILLS. They're all very singular, in some cases very strange riffs on genre.

Machotaildrop is about a young kid who wants to be a skateboarding star, but most of the action takes place in this surreal mansion/compound in the middle of nowhere, with this overt emphasis on recycled junk. It has less to do with the slicker explorations of skateboarding culture, like Dogtown and Z-Boys, than movies like Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory or Jean Vigo's Zero for Conduct.

Franchi's The Wild Hunt begins as a sort of fantasy then shifts gears — radically — at least twice. George Ryga's HUNGRY HILLS is set in the 1950s and riffs off of Westerns. It sets up this moral structure/conflict which it undercuts in an intriguing and rather audacious manner.

There a slew of other films which toy with genre, including Reginald Harkema's Leslie, My Name is Evil, a hyper-stylized look at the Manson trial, one of the first great flashpoints for the culture wars that consumed the USA in the 1960s, though it's as much about Iraq. Thurier's A Gun to the Head is like a domesticated film noir, which is kind of a contradiction in terms since most of the heroes in noir are rootless. The hero here gets caught up with some extremely eccentric gangsters, but really he just wants to get back home. Carcasses begins as a documentary but turns into a strange sort of allegory. Phil Hoffman's All Fall Down combines personal essay with a kind of regional history. It's a portrait of a writer whose life goes off the rails which is beautifully, rigorously structured and very affecting.

Were you particularly surprised by any of the submissions?

There were a surprising number of films in genres one wouldn't conventionally – or stereotypically maybe – see as Canadian. The most obvious is Peter Stebbings' Defendor with Woody Harrelson as a mentally challenged man who believes himself to be a superhero. The movie also has Sandra Oh as the court psychiatrist who tries to determine whether Harrelson's character, Arthur Poppington, is sane, and Elias Koteas as one of the chief villains, a corrupt cop. Kat Dennings, who was in Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist, plays a prostitute who befriends him. I'm a comic book geek and I liked it better than some of the big comic book adaptations I saw this year. It does what a lot of the more critically praised comics series have done - it injects elements of realism into a fantasy genre. It was shot in Hamilton, incidentally, and it's really smartly designed. Harrelson gives one of his best performances.

Rob Stefaniuk's rock and roll vampire comedy Suck, which features this amazing list of cameos (Alice Cooper, Iggy Pop, Henry Rollins, and Alex Lifeson has a great cameo), which are very sharply conceived. Stefaniuk is the head of this band that's going nowhere when one of them runs into this scary Goth type and comes back looking ... paler. Suddenly, they're wildly successful.

Jacob Tierney's The Trotsky is almost a teen comedy, though markedly different from most. It's closer to Wes Anderson in some ways. It follows a teenager (Jay Baruchel from Million Dollar Baby and Tropic Thunder) who believes he's the reincarnation of Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky. He's so convinced that he's the reincarnation of Trotsky that he expects that he'll marry an older woman named Alexandra, and he'll be exiled twice and ultimately assassinated, just like the real Trotsky. His father punishes him by sending him to a public school, where he immediately starts a movement for a student bill of rights. It's got a great cast – Michael Murphy, Emily Hampshire, Genevieve Bujold and Colm Feore. It's one of the funniest, sharpest comedies I've seen this year.

Gary Yates' High Life is this energetic, frenetic heist-gone-wrong picture which is very concisely made with some very strong performances. Matt Bissonette's movie, Passenger Side, is a very intimate take on the road movie, while Ruba Nadda's Cairo Time is a really touching romance with some exceptional performances.

I suppose it makes sense that we'd have three documentaries which debunk received knowledge this year. Neil Diamond's Reel Injun analyzes the stereotypes about Native Americans and First Nations people in Hollywood movies, while Peter Raymont and Michele Hozer's film about Glenn Gould, Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould, shows us a very different version of the icon, and Brigitte Berman's film on Hugh Hefner, Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel, does the same.

Do you feel like the competition amongst Canadian films is getting tougher?

Every year we see really solid movies we won't be able to program for a variety of reasons and this year was one of the toughest. There are a lot of good filmmakers out there.

Are you seeing any trends?

Well, the bending of genres is prevalent this year, as I outlined, plus there's a lot of great work coming from British Columbia. Bruce Sweeney's Excited is a wickedly funny comedy about a man who has bedroom problems, hasn't had a date in nearly a decade and meets a woman he's very interested in. It's really sharp. Carl Bessai's Cole is a drama about a young man trying to escape his life in a small town and is very

sensitively and intelligently directed, a lovely film.

The Toronto International Film Festival has gotten very big, very high profile and very international. Why do you feel that it is important to keep a strong focus on Canadian film?

It's one of the core missions of TIFF to spotlight Canadian films not just at the Festival, but through our year-round programming as well - at TIFF Cinematheque through retrospectives such as that of the recent Directors' Fortnight at Cannes programme, featuring many classic Canadian films; Film Circuit provides under-served Canadian communities with access to Canadian and international films through grassroots distribution, marketing and exhibition; the annual Student Film Showcase which celebrates a diverse and exciting range of emerging student work including animation, documentary, fiction and experimental films; the Film Reference Library publishes the only online encyclopedia exclusively devoted to Canadian film with over 850 entries written by knowledgeable experts; Canada's Top Ten is an annual event that celebrates and raises awareness of contemporary Canadian cinematic achievements. We have recently published *Toronto on Film*, an anthology about how Toronto is presented on film with an insightful wide-ranging essay by Geoff Pevere of the Toronto Star, which is the centerpiece of the book. (We're doing a series of films based on the book at the TIFF Cinematheque in October.) With the University of Toronto Press, we're co-publishing a book on Atom Egoyan's *The Adjuster* by Tom McSorley. This extends to film-related projects and installations – our Future Projections programme at the Festival showcases talented Canadian media artists each year. Our new building at King and John, Bell Lightbox, will give us even more opportunities to showcase these kinds of projects.

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer some questions for us.

