

SYDNEY FILM

FESTIVAL LEFTOVERS

Main Program Dramas

Liquid Sky, a film about the New York punk fashion model scene split feminist filmgoers down the middle. A flying saucer (actually dinner plate sized) lands on the penthouse apartment of a punk fashion model and her lesbian lover, drawn there by a need for heroin like substances. The lover is a smack dealer and a similar substance to heroin is produced, the film argues, during orgasm. This conjunction of circumstances gives our heroine the capacity to kill people she fucks if they reach orgasm – or as she puts it to “kill with her cunt”. This means she can get her own back on her rapist and other men she dislikes. The orgasm scenes go off into spacey LSD special effects which some Festival goers never tired of and some found boring. In some ways the film feeds all those worst nightmares about women and about lesbian relationships. Men’s fears that fucking women will debilitate them and the whole fear of *vagina dentata* is given lots of scope in this film, and the portrayal of the lesbian relationships suggests

trayal of the lesbian relationships suggests possessiveness, domination, pettiness and sado masochism. Perhaps this can be excused because no character in the film is very sympathetic, all are drawn with a cynical "all people are really rotten" style. But if this film was attempting to criticise the "no future" callousness of the New York scene it describes, it fails, instead tending to glorify the values of being "cool" and sadistic. But it was funny, if black, and made pleasant watching, especially the amazing parades of punk high fashion to which we were treated. It *looked* really different. It is interesting to compare the visual riches of this film made by an expatriate Russian, with the stultifying visuals of the USSR film **Private Life**. While the story itself was engaging, the camera and lighting style was ing, the camera and lighting style was over the top socialist realism making the audience go without visual pleasure in watching the film in the same way as the hero of the film has had to forgo family pleasure in his bureaucratic job.

Whereas **Memories Of Old Beijing**, a film from China, was a delight to watch for the use of lighting, scenery and weather. It tells of the town of Beijing in the days before the socialist revolution, seen through the eyes of an eight year old girl brought up in a middle class home with a father who has socialist sympathies.

with a father who has socialist sympathies. In many ways the film parallels the structure of Fellini's **Amacord** and gives one the same warm nostalgic feelings, but of course because of nicety in China the main protagonist must be an eight year old rather than an adolescent, thus avoiding all the bourgeois concerns with sexuality and romance that **Amacord** touches upon.

This film and **Liquid Sky** were two of the five films out of the thirty-two films in the main program which boasted female leads. During one public address about the Festival organisation one woman heckled from the audience, "Where are the women?"

A nice reversal of the usual cowboys and Indians plot was achieved in **The Ballad Of Gregorio Cortez** where it is the Indians, in this case a Mexican, with whom the film sides, against the Texas Rangers who are tracking him down. And the Indian film **Rat Trap**, directed by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, presents a real object lesson for Australian directors in how camera style, framing and lighting can be used to tell a story, and create a mood.

The film relies very little on dialogue to advance the story, and builds up an intentional atmosphere of claustrophobia by its attention to shot detail, to symbolic

by its attention to shot detail, to symbolic imagery, and by repetition of camera movements and framing. It deals with the gradual lapse into paranoia of a lazy, selfish and autocratic landowner.

I loved Wim Wenders **The State Of Things**, but the person sitting next to me, who had come especially to see it, went to sleep in the first fifteen minutes. Not everyone can take a slow careful development of characters and scenario. The film deals with the long arm of Hollywood reaching out in its attempts to control filmmaking all over the world. A film director, Fritz, filming an American financed film in Portugal runs out of money and filmstock to continue when his producer Gordon doesn't return. Eventually he has to go to Hollywood to try and find Gordon, who it seems has had to get himself badly in hock to finance Fritz's film, since it is being filmed in black and white and without a closed narrative adventure style plot, and is therefore not considered "a good risk" or "bankable" as they say these days. The scene between Fritz and Gordon when they are reunited and travelling through Hollywood in the back of a campervan singing "Hollywood, Hollywood: Never been a place people had it so good; 'Cept Hollywood, Hollywood . . .", is I think one of the all time great scenes from a movie. Irony, pathos, naturalism, humour

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- I don't know why.

The King Of Comedy, Martin Scorsese's latest, was a fitting closer to the Festival. Asked immediately afterwards if I had enjoyed it I answered Yes and No. My questioner pointed out that such ambivalence was understandable - it was not really made to be enjoyed. It was, like the whole Festival in this respect, extremely frustrating. It concerns the efforts of Rupert Pupkin (Robert de Niro), a nobody, to use his idol Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis), a famous comedian, as a means of starting his own career as a





King Of Comedy

comedian. Pupkin finally has to resort to those ever more common American habits, — lies, gun threats, blackmail and kidnapping, in order to make the American rags-to-riches (or ignonymity to fame) dream come true for him. If **Taxi Driver** was to be blamed for the Reagan assassination attempt, god knows what crimes will be thought to follow from **King Of Comedy**. But it is clear that the point Scorsese is making is that it is in the gap between the sober and unpleasant reality of most Americans' lives and the unreal expectations of fame and fortune that American society encourages that the explanation for normal American citizens' resort to nasty manipulations and illegal means lies. In this examination of American values Scorsese plays filmically with the whole notion of fantasy and reality, and up till the end, refuses the audience

and up till the end, refuses the audience the satisfaction of seeing either comedian perform. Their ability is irrelevant. It is only their position as have or have not that counts. But we begin to feel the same frustration Pupkin himself feels about his not being able to take the stage. Neither Pupkin nor Langford are likeable characters, but the suspense of the narrative drives the film's watchers on to see the unravelling of Scorsese's

argument.

The Festival was frustrating because one had to sit through a lot of pretty average films in order to strike the few good ones. Most of the other dramas from the main program dealt with male angst, or honour or lost honour, and their concerns and outcomes were pretty predictable. They looked nice, they were well put together and they left you cold. Another film that should be excused from that blanket condemnation was **Red Powder**, a Cuban film set just after the revolution. Another *Filmnews* contributor described it aptly as "socialist soap opera", and it did have some of **A Country Practice's** occasional skill in dealing openly with a range of issues and subplots in somewhat unorthodox ways.

Good as it was to see the Alternative Selection films screened as part of the

selection films screened as part of the Festival proper and not marginalised, the level of walkouts during some of the five o'clock sessions made me wonder if this practice was alienating some of what Festival organisers may regard as stalwart regular subscribers. You can't please all of the subscribers all of the time. How Rod Webb will manage to cater for the diverse interests of Festival subscribers next year will be interesting to see.

Gill Leahy

In the last issue of Filmnews Gillian Leahy's review of two of the forums at the Sydney Film Festival were got at by the gremlins, and did not make the best sense, so we are reprinting it as it ought to have read, together with a comment from Susan Dermody on Gill's interpretation of her talk.

Screen Education

After an overlong period of polite questioning film lecturer Liz Jacka broke the ice during question time at this forum with an articulate attack on the publicly funded bodies, the AFI and the Film School, for their lack of concern for the development of screen education. She bemoaned the lack of a power base for educators and would be students of screen

...and a group of students of screen studies, which meant pleading with the likes of Kathleen Norris (AFI) and Frank Morgan (Deputy Director of the AFTUS) for these bodies to seriously take some responsibility for screen education. A free-for-all followed, with audience members voicing many dissatisfactions. I can't report this very accurately as I became too involved to take notes. The anger that seeped out had nowhere to go and the forum ended by being unsatisfyingly

unconstructive. The establishment's critics could not manage a fully convincing demolition job nor was the forum an effective solution finding effort. This public debate should be continued. It is hoped that the AFI should take responsibility at least for that.

Australianness

This forum was presented by John Tulloch and Susan Dermody, and was notable for the wit of some of Dermody's talk which was based on a chapter of her and Liz Jacka's forthcoming book on the Australian film industry. *Filmnews* readers will find a lot of the ground the talk covered in Dermody and Jacka's article – "The Australian Film Industry and the Holy

Australian Film Industry and the Holy Roman Empire”, in the last issue. But this was the first time Dermody coined the term “AFC Genre” referring to films made in the period 1975-1980 which were promoted by the AFC as “worthy” and were more or less held up as models to the industry as opposed to say the Tony Ginnane school of movies. The elements of this genre she described as

- 1 having worthy subjects;**
- 2 morally inoffensive protagonists;**
- 3 evoking a gentle sympathy;**
- 4 character based narratives innocent of**

social history;

- 5 unshaped narratives; and**
- 6 attention to *mise en scene*, eg lyrical pans over the countryside.**

Apart from this camera movement is pragmatic – metonymic not metaphoric (ie camera movement is only used to get people from point A to point B etc – it is not symbolic or mood setting etc). Prime examples of this genre would include **Picnic At Hanging Rock, Caddie, Break Of Day, Picture Show Man and Gallipoli. In the post AFC tax incentive era **We Of The Never Never and Man From Snowy River** carry on the same tradition.**

Talking about what audience this

Talking about what audience this genre constructed – what *we*, Dermody ventured to suggest it was a *we* of the Never Never. The end of the AFC genre period Dermody said was due to a number of factors. Budgets were rising, the audience was tiring of the genre, investment was short and the tax incentive lobby had begun. Joe Skrynski's appointment as Chief Executive of the AFC, coming as he did from a Harvard business school background and banking, reflected many aspects of this juncture, she said.

Gillian Leahy

