

The 60th Edinburgh International Film Festival

Or, why you don't see many German comedies

In today's permissive society, few taboos are left. Sex is everywhere. Anything goes in our impolite society and we're free to talk about it whenever and wherever we want.

Sex just isn't shocking anymore.

If the best cinema holds up a mirror to our society then this year's Edinburgh International Film Festival had mirrors on the ceiling, was wearing a gimp mask and sniffing amyl nitrite. Now in its 60th year, Britain's longest running film festival isn't quite ready for the pipe and slippers just yet.

Sex and its censorship was the major preoccupation of Kirby Dick's *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*. Having run afoul of the monolithic Motion Picture Academy of America (the industry body who award film classifications in the US) in the past, Dick's documentary set out to expose this cabal of secretive, self-appointed moral guardians by, how else, hiring a couple of lesbian private detectives to track down the board members responsible for giving his and other filmmaker's movies the restrictive NC-17 rating. While there's a certain amount of amusement to be had from watching a lesbian private detective go through someone's garbage, Dick has serious points to make; namely that an inherent double-standard exists at the heart of the MPAA that penalises independent films while favouring the major studio releases that are its bread and butter, and exposing the MPAA's hypocrisy when it comes to portrayals of sex and violence (sex = bad, violence = good). It's no surprise then that when Dick submits his film for classification in the final reel he receives the dreaded NC-17 rating.

Also sure to get an NC-17 rating is *Destricted*, a collaboration (consisting of five short films) between prominent artists and filmmakers exploring the place of

pornography in today's society. Gaspar Noe's segment was as cheery and life-affirming as his previous films *Irreversible* and *Seul contre tous* while BritArt stalwart Sam Taylor-Wood's film of a man masturbating alone in the desert had nothing to say but at least looked pretty. Perhaps the best segment was Larry Clark's documentary *Impaled*, which offered a critique of the porn industry by exposing its workings; he gives a young man the chance to audition a series of porn actresses and to star with the actress of his choice. The final result is anything but erotic.

Sex was played for laughs in two very different films this year, Germany's *Black Sheep* and *The Oh In Ohio* from the US. A sophisticated and rather gentle comedy, *The Oh In Ohio* chronicles one sexually dysfunctional middle class wife's (Indie darling Parker Posey) search for an orgasm, which involves seeing an Annie Sprinkle-style hippie sex therapist, experimenting with sex toys, dallying with Heather Graham's wholesome lesbian before finding fulfilment in the arms of Danny De Vito's swimming pool installer. Gentle and sophisticated aren't words that could be used to describe *Black Sheep*. Crude and vulgar, *Black Sheep* proved why so few German comedies gain a release in the UK. They're not funny.

A dreamy eroticism suffuses *Seven Heavens* and *The Ring Finger*. Shot in both film and high-definition video, *Seven Heavens* is a dark, disjointed love story and may be the most formally challenging film of the Festival. With its splintered narrative, distorted soundtrack and hallucinatory images that waver in and out of focus as if the film were projected on the surface of a pond (an effect achieved by shooting through layers of rippled glass), *Seven Heavens* is hypnotic and feels like a

half-remembered bad dream. While far more conventional in terms of style and narrative, *The Ring Finger*, is how *Secretary* might have turned out had it been directed by David Lynch. Dark, sexy and mystifying, it's a film that gets under your skin.

Uber-geek Kevin Smith finally unveiled *Clerks 2*, the long-awaited sequel to his 1994 breakthrough hit and a welcome return to form. What plot there is revolves around one of our slacker heroes quitting his dead-end job for marriage and the good life in Florida, leaving behind his best mate and the woman he really loves. Vulgar, profane and funny, *Clerks 2* features, ahem, 'inter-species erotica' and takes pot-shots at racism, religion, the disabled, the Lord of the Rings trilogy ('... all about the walking. Nine hours of hobbits walking. Man, even the trees walked in that movie!') and all things pop culture. But there's a sweetness that runs through the movie that the original lacked, a poignant affection for his slowly maturing characters, a sign perhaps that Smith himself is growing up.

This year's crop of British films were a mixed bag, none of which you really felt the need to see in a cinema. In fact *Shoot the Messenger*, the BBC's controversial racial identity drama appeared on primetime TV a scant week after its Festival screening. The rest were the usual mix of life-affirming triumph over adversity and gritty urban drama with the Michael Powell Award going to *Brothers of the Head* a cod-drama/doc about a fictional band featuring conjoined twins who single-handedly invented punk. I may have made it sound more fun than it was.

Far more crowd-pleasing were three films from the US, *Hoodwinked*, a *Rashomon*-style retelling of the Red Riding Hood story firmly in the post-modern

tradition of *Shrek* ('Ah, "the wolf did it" ... talk about profiling') which delighted kids, big and little, *Wristcutters*, an afterlife love story where the path to true love never runs smooth, not even when you're dead, and the hit of this year's Sundance, *Little Miss Sunshine*, where the ultimate dysfunctional family (including a suicidal gay uncle and a heroin-snorting, curmudgeonly Grandpa) pile into a camper van and drive cross-country to cheer on 7 year-old Olive in the final of the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. Smart, funny and refreshingly saccharin-free, *Little Miss Sunshine* has you rooting for the hopeless underdogs even though you know they can't possibly win.

One of the highlights of any EIFF are the Late Night Romps; visceral, extreme slices of future cult cinema which in the past have given us the *Ringu* movies and Takashi Miike's *Audition*, films every bit as likely to shock and offend as they are to entertain, and this year was no exception. *H6 – Diary of an Assassin* was a repellent study of a Spanish serial killer and featured some nauseating scenes of sexual violence; demented French horror movie *Sheitan* mixed devil worship and an almost goatlike Vincent Cassel in what felt like a Gallic *Wicker Man*; *The Red Shoes* reimagined Powell and Pressburger's dark fairytale as a Korean splatter movie where anyone who

wears the titular pumps ends up getting their feet cut off. Best of the bunch however was William Kaufman's *The Prodigy*, a low-budget gangster thriller with an unkillable bad guy straight out of an 80s slasher flick that delivered the kind of down-and-dirty thrills you want around midnight.

Even *The Prodigy*'s demonic killer would probably think twice before tackling the German girl gang in Brigit Grosskopf's gritty *Princess*. Harsh, bleak, brutal and funny, *Princess* is the kind of film Ken Loach would have made had he been an angry young German woman. And it isn't afraid to thumb its nose at *Citizen Kane* with an ironic final scene payoff.

Perhaps the best American films of the Festival both featured performances by the same actor, Jeremy Renner. In *Neo Ned*, Renner plays Ned, a Nazi skinhead who falls in love with a young black woman who believes she is the reincarnation of Adolf Hitler, while in *Twelve And Holding* he's a suicidal ex-fireman who becomes the focus of a 12-year-old girl's awakening sexuality. In both films Renner gives subtle, expertly judged performances that hint at the vulnerability and humanity of such disparate characters. Get used to him, he's going to be around for a while.

Post 9/11 paranoia cast its dark shadow over two very different French films, *Hotel*

Harabati and *Them*. Reminiscent at times of Michael Haneke's *Caché*, *Hotel Harabati* was a sedate, measured examination of a middle-class couple's mental unravelling after a chance encounter with a Middle Eastern-looking gent who never poses any real threat. By contrast, the terrors plaguing the nice bourgeois couple in *Them* are all too real, a point hammered home by the fact that the events portrayed in the film are based on a true story. They might be selling Al Gore's eco-documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* as 'the most terrifying film you'll ever see' but trust me; it's *Them*.

Which isn't to say that *An Inconvenient Truth* isn't scary. It is. Without resorting to cheap effects or Michael Moore-style buffoonery, Al Gore (who jokingly refers to himself as 'the man who used to be the next President of the United States') makes his case for the dangers of climate change and global warming in a cool, rational manner, presenting his evidence clearly and concisely, his low-key but relaxed delivery lending Gore an everyman quality that he so sorely lacked during his doomed Presidential campaign, making him a persuasive champion of some bitter truths. The US Presidency's loss may yet prove to be the world's gain.

David Watson



An Inconvenient Truth,
Paramount Pictures
2006.