

Zombies, space cowboys and not so heavenly battles:

the 2005 Edinburgh International Film Festival

Mixing edgy, experimental fare and foreign art house, low/no-budget gems and the best big-budget blockbusters Hollywood has to offer, the Edinburgh International Film Festival has always tempted the most creative, exciting talents in cinema to come to Scotland's capital, engage with an audience and offer an insight into their work, playing host this year alone to talents as diverse as writer/director Paul Schrader; *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon (receiving the kind of hysterical reception usually reserved for George Clooney, one fan paying £210 for an £8 ticket to attend his Reel Life talk); horror maestro George A Romero; and documentary pioneer Albert Maysles.

With his fine, cine-literate appreciation of the art of cinema and his geeky, fan-boy love of movies (how many other artistic director's seem equally as excited at the prospect of George Romero's first zombie flick in 20 years as they do at the return of Ingmar Bergman after a similar two decade break?), Shane Danielson this year crafted the finest programme of his tenure as artistic director and one of the best Festivals in years.

It's ironic then that in a year when the Festival celebrates the genius of British director Michael Powell with a comprehensive retrospective, that the best thing you can say about the crop of British films in competition for the award that bears his name is that they are a triumph of mediocrity.

Stoned, producer Stephen Woolley's smug, derivative directorial debut that gives us the life and death of Brian Jones, the Rolling Stone who sank like one in his own swimming pool. Keith Richards once said that troubled Jones was 'the nicest bunch of guys you could meet.' The same could be said of the film, which 'borrows' (steals) from *The Doors* and *The Servant* to present Jones as a child-man whose

friendship with his builder has fatal consequences. Shot like a pop video, *Stoned* ticks boxes rather than employs anything so complex as a decent script. Hot naked chicks shot in soft focus? Check. Soft-core sex and vanilla S&M? Check. Copious drug abuse by beautiful people while working class oiks looking on enviously? Check and double-check. At one point while watching this hymn to pop's most disposable prince I found myself idly thinking 'What this film needs now is a hippy, dippy LSD trip to a soundtrack of Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit*.' Guess what turned up approximately 7 minutes later? Check.

Elsewhere, Elijah Wood's Hobbit turned Yobbit, discovered the joys of ultra-violence in Lexi Alexander's *Green Street*, Richard E Grant shared the pain of growing up a pampered ex-pat in his autobiographical egotrip *Wah Wah* while *Kinky Boots* and *On A Clear Day* provided the familiar life-affirming plucky-underdogs-banding-together rubbish the UK has churned out to audience apathy ever since *The Full Monty*.

As ever the Late Night Romps skipped the pubic hair-thin line of palatability with their graphic often gruesome depictions of sex, violence, horror and more sex and violence. This year, South Korea gave us Kim Jee-woon's innocuously titled *A Bittersweet Life*. With it's brutal, nihilistic violence, this rabid hyena of a movie made last year's *Old Boy* look positively sedate, our gangster hero surviving bone-crunching beatings, stabbings, shootings and premature burial to mete out vengeance on the boss who betrayed him. Eschewing the style and visual excesses of familiar Hong Kong directors like John Woo, Derek Yee's *One Night In Mongkok* gave us a claustrophobic game of cat-and-mouse between a burnt-out cop and a sympathetic (if naïve) hitman

played out on the mean streets of Hong Kong's Mongkok district, the most densely populated area in the world. Downbeat and grimy, Yee's gritty vision of Hong Kong captures both the threat and allure of the city, of any city, perfectly and could almost be a companion piece to France's *36 Quai Des Orfevres*. A hardboiled update of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* crossed with Michael Mann's *Heat*, *36 Quai Des Orfevres* plays out the bitter rivalry between two cops (former friends turned deadly enemies) over a decade with tragic results. Written and directed by former cop Olivier Marchal, the film brought a distinctly Gallic flavour to it's tale of corruption and revenge and offered us the dream pairing of Daniel Auteuil and Gerard Depardieu (the French De Niro and Pacino) as the two rivals.

Traditional horror fare was on offer from Welsh-set *The Dark*, which saw American mom Maria Bello's sanity slowly disintegrate as she searched for her missing daughter. Throwing in sinister sheep (I kid you not!), mass cult suicide and spooky ghost kids, *The Dark*'s unsettling atmosphere of slow-building dread was in sharp contrast to the hysterical desire to shock that infused Bernard Rose's *Snuff-Movie*. A reclusive Machiavellian director (equal parts Roman Polanski and Stanley Kubrick) hires actors to recreate the brutal Manson-style slaying of his wife, secretly broadcasting the results on the internet. With it's graphic nudity and bloody scenes of torture, murder and sexual violence (finally culminating in the crucifixion of the film's naked leading lady), *Snuff-Movie* was like a small child exposing itself at a party; determined to shock you, but ultimately harmless.

Far more unsettling was Fruit Chan's Hong Kong-set *Dumplings*, which saw

Miriam Yueng's aging soap actress try to recapture her lost youth with the help of slutty chef Bai Ling's extra special dim sum. Wickedly satirising the beauty industry and relations between Hong Kong and mainland China, *Dumplings* is a genuinely transgressive confection that satisfies and horrifies in equal measure. Just don't ask what's in Bai Ling's dumplings.

Among the documentaries on offer were Albert Maysles acclaimed, hugely influential *Salesman*, Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (nutty eco-activist loves bears a little too much, bears eat him), *Gunner Palace*, which tracked the tour of duty of a group US soldiers occupying one of Saddam Hussein's pleasure palaces and the excellent *Our Brand Is Crisis* that documented the involvement of a firm of US spin doctors in the ill-fated 2002 Bolivian election and boasted the funniest line of the Festival as fast-talking James Carville (the man who got Clinton elected. Twice) explains that 'running a campaign is a lot like intercourse. You don't have a lotta say in when you peak.'

Perhaps the best documentary though was Paul Provenza's *The Aristocrats*, which in essence asked around 100 comedians to tell the world's dirtiest joke their way, proving that the punchline's not important, it's the journey to it that counts. Funny and downright offensive, *The Aristocrats* is not a film for those of a timid disposition but like the best comedy is refreshingly politically incorrect and downright transgressive.

As usual the Festival played host to both bold, innovative new voices and those more established and mature. Danish thriller *Murk* (Danish? Thriller?) sees a journalist investigate the suicide (or is it murder?) of his disabled sister and the complicity of her husband who's moved to a new town and become engaged to a disabled woman. The US's *Police Beat* was a dreamlike, understated study of an immigrant policeman's sexual jealousy. Australia's *The Magician* was a low-budget (just \$2000) witty retread of *Man Bites Dog* while the mounting paranoia of *The Moustache* (Frenchman shaves off his moustache, no-one notices, the fabric of existence unravels) and the unlikely romance at the heart of

Les Yeux Clairs presented two very different visions of French life.

Two of the most important American writer/directors of the seventies came to Edinburgh bearing very different films. A thoughtful, mature meditation on the nature of faith, guilt and evil in a seemingly godless world, Paul Schrader's *Exorcist* prequel *Dominion* proved too damned smart ultimately for it's producers who wanted projectile vomiting and CGI jackals and shelved the film. Idiots. Boasting a brave, raw performance from *Scream* star Neve Campbell, James Toback's *When Will I Be Loved* drew the audience in with it's meandering, anecdotal style before revealing itself to be a chilly portrait of the conflict between the sexes.

Fans of cult cinema were well served by the return of George A Romero and the debut of Joss Whedon. Whedon, creator of TV's *Buffy* and *Angel*, served up the world premiere of *Serenity*, a slice of kick-ass sci-fi hokum based on his ill-fated TV series *Firefly*. A Western set in the final frontier of space, *Serenity* pitches it's rag-tag heroes against cannibal mutants and a tyrannical government in a battle for the future of mankind. Learning from the mistakes of other big-budget TV spin-offs that required a knowledge of and affection for the show, Whedon's created an adrenalin-fuelled stand-alone work that satisfies fans old and new, though there were gasps and tears among *Firefly* devotees in the audience as beloved characters were killed off. Completely unfamiliar with the TV show, I loved the movie so much I ordered the series from Amazon that night. All I need now is 14 straight hours to watch it.

After years in development hell, George A Romero's *Land of the Dead* didn't disappoint. With it's gated community of privileged haves, it's huddled mass of have-nots and the constant threat of attack (by zombies not terrorists), the film's city under siege is Fortress America right down to Dennis Hopper's sharp-suited politician spitting soundbites like 'We don't negotiate with terrorists' and 'Zombies — they creep me out'. And

the film has more brain-eating zombies than any other in this year's Festival.

The most controversial films of the Festival, Mexico's *Battle in Heaven* and the UK's *The Great Ecstasy Of Robert Carmichael*, both made use of non-professional performers in scenes that would have made the most committed Method actor question their career choices. The best of the UK films on offer, the unlikeable *The Great Ecstasy Of Robert Carmichael* charts a nice middle class boy's bored drift into recreational drug use, gang rape and murder. In one of the film's less shocking sequences our bored drug-addled hero watches Tony Blair drum up support for the war in Iraq while his friends rape a girl in the next room, turning up the volume to drown out her anguished screams. The scene is both horrifying and overtly political, Clay's restless camera making us complicit in both crimes.

Using a cast of non-professional actors, opening and closing with a scene of fellatio that made me want to gag and featuring explicit sexual content and graphic violence, *Battle in Heaven* is one of the most boring controversial films I've ever seen. Funereally paced, I'm fairly sure I nodded off for about 10 minutes in the middle of this tale of a chauffeur's guilt over a child kidnapping gone wrong. While the untutored performance, in the hands of a great director, can come closer to the truth than that of a more nuanced, trained actor, *Battle in Heaven*'s main point of interest lies in trying to figure out if the blank-eyed protagonists are retarded or have just been given absolutely no direction. I'm still not sure.

Battle in Heaven is a nasty, sleazy little film that exploits both it's actors and, more importantly, it's audience. And films this controversial and explicit just should not be so soporific. It's ironic then that the film was one of the big hits of the Festival. Thankfully it's the roller coaster ride of *Serenity* that's still playing in my head.

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