

End of an era?

The 61st Edinburgh International Film Festival

John Huston once called it 'the only film festival worth a damn,' but times change and even before this year's distinctly lacklustre programme began, it was announced that the Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF) would be moving to June in 2008.

The official party line espoused by debutante Artistic Director Hannah McGill is that the move to June will enable the EIFF to emerge from the shadow of August's wider Edinburgh Festival and become 'the only show in town' allowing the EIFF the 'breathing space to expand and create our own distinct identity, allowing us to further develop our reputation as one of the more innovative, cutting-edge and challenging film events.' But apparently there's a deeper problem. You see, according to the EIFF board of directors, in recent years Edinburgh's been missing out on the big stars and the big films because of its proximity to the Venice and London Film Festivals and it's someone's bright idea that a move to June (closer to Cannes) will apparently help. As Mrs Olfactory used to say on BBC Scotland's *Chewin' the Fat* 'I can smell shite.'

Now, I love Edinburgh. Particularly in August. Sometimes, every now and then, the rain magically stops, the clouds part, and the sun puts his hat on. Sometimes it's even warm. But no matter how sunny it gets, you're never going to mistake Edinburgh's Royal Mile for Cannes' La Croisette. And I don't think your average Hollywood star is liable to make the mistake either. And there lies the problem. Who wants to eat vinegar-soaked chips from a newspaper on a wind-swept Portobello Beach when they could be squiring a topless starlet on the Cote D'Azur?

Edinburgh isn't Cannes or Venice, it's not just a cattle market where Hollywood parades its latest blockbusters and its lack of a competition like the 'Palme d'Or' means that it has always managed to retain an edge that many other festivals lack. It is still possible to see something weird,

something challenging, something transgressive, something shocking at Edinburgh (although not this year). Sure, there's the Michael Powell award for the Best British film (the words 'Michael Powell' on the award often being the best things about the winning films) but there's no big prestige award that Harvey Weinstein can put on the poster for dross like Tarantino's *Death Proof*.

Not that *Death Proof*'s going to be winning many awards. Hateful, misogynistic bilge, it's as if Tarantino's taken a Russ Meyer movie, shorn it of its redeeming features (the humour and celebratory but gratuitous female nudity) and given his terror of women free rein. Repellent and deliberately badly made (hey dude, it's, like, a homage), Tarantino's finally succeeded in making a boring movie, its only upside being Kurt Russell, well, because he's Kurt Russell, and the perky little Kiwi stuntwoman Tarantino uses as a hood ornament for most of the last half of the film.

For her first Festival as Artistic Director, Hannah McGill's programme was distinctly underwhelming; a clutch of big, safe Hollywood movies, some mediocre Brit flicks, and some foreign gems. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the Festival however was that the hottest ticket wasn't for Tarantino's new movie or Pixar's family friendly *Ratatouille* (which confirms the stereotypical image of poor French hygiene. They let rats cook in their finest restaurants for God's sake!) or even bonkers Russian fantasy *Day Watch* (sequel to *Night Watch*). No, Edinburgh's hottest ticket was for a screening of the Leith Agency's Irn-Bru adverts. And no wonder. The roster of talent appearing as part of the Festival this year was hugely disappointing (who really cares what Chris Cooper and Tilda Swinton have to say), devoting a retrospective to the largely forgotten Anita Loos (in case you're wondering, she wrote *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*), frankly smacked of desperation or someone playing a perverse joke (particularly after the Michael Powell and

'70s Mavericks retrospectives of recent years), the opening and closing night films lacked sparkle and the Night Moves (which used to be the hugely enjoyable, rabid dogs that were Late Night Romps) weren't really worth staying up late for.

Although *Teeth* did make me cross my legs. A smart, funny little black comedy, this feminist revenge movie effortlessly embodied the spirit and inventiveness of all those '70s exploitation flicks Tarantino wished he'd made. I was cheering for heroine Dawn (Jess Weixler) as she chewed her way through some of the most repellent specimens of masculinity committed to celluloid since *I Spit On Your Grave*. *Teeth* was everything that Tarantino wanted *Death Proof* to be. But it won't make him any less scared of women.

I don't normally consider myself squeamish. In fact, over the years, I've waded through buckets of gore and wallowed in the mire of celluloid psychosis in search of an evening's entertainment. But a strong stomach was required to sit through this year's UK offerings and not just because bittersweet rom-com *The Waiting Room* featured Ralf Little's (Anthony from *The Royle Family*) genitalia flapping around in what should have been a credited supporting role. While featuring good performances from its cast of British TV stalwarts (Little, Anne-Marie Duff, Daisy Donovan), the film was no great shakes and will no doubt find its true home on TV. Where it'll probably be about the time you read this. Little might think about changing that surname though. Little Anthony's all growned up.

Equally stomach-churning with its depiction of serial murder, lovingly-realised torture, rape and even more lovingly realised torture, was Tom Shankland's *WΔZ*, a dark, brutal little thriller which I rather enjoyed despite its nasty aftertaste. Owing a huge debt to David Fincher's *Se7en*, the grimy and downbeat *WΔZ* was one of the few British films this year that looked like it belonged on the big, rather than the small, screen. So of

course it lost out on the Michael Powell award to photographer Anton Corbijn's *Control* which charted the rise, decline and suicide of Ian Curtis, lead singer of Joy Division, ground already covered by Michael Winterbottom in the superior *24 Hour Party People*.

Romantic comedy *Sparkle* was anything but sparkling despite the presence of Stockard Channing as the American MILF who first employs then seduces a naïve young Scouser before he 'hilariously' falls for her daughter. Didn't see that one coming. *Sugarhouse* was yet another unconvincing Brit gangster movie whose stage origins were obvious, one of two films featuring Britain's most over-appreciated actor, Gollum, I mean Andy Serkis. In *Sugarhouse* he chews the scenery as a drug-dealer with a dodgy Ulster accent; in Jim Threapleton's *Extraordinary Rendition* he tortures and interrogates a middle-class London academic suspected of terrorism all the while sporting a Russian accent so dodgy at any moment you expect him to say 'Ah, Mr Bond, shaken not stirred?'

A far more satisfying crime flick than *Sugarhouse* was Greg Loftin's *Saxon*, a blackly comic urban Western which saw professional weasel Sean Harris in a rare sympathetic role as one-eyed ex-con turned sleuth Fast Eddie, making good on his debts by searching for a missing millionaire and bringing justice to the lawless Saxon housing estate. Again, a strong stomach was essential, particularly when the nail-gun makes its appearance. Far gentler fare was offered by Justin Edgar's *Special People* and Simon Miller's *Seachd* – The Impossible Pinnacle. *Special People* is a gentle comedy with a deceptively subversive streak about a pretentious film maker's attempts to make a film with a group wheelchair-using stropky teens while *Seachd*, the first Scots Gaelic feature film, is all about tall tales and the telling of them. Visually stunning, *Seachd* mines a rich seam of myth to captivate the audience.

As ever though the best films were from further afield. Frat pack rom-com *Knocked Up* was amusing even if it was half an hour too long. Low-key spy movie *Breach* was as chilling a depiction of the wilderness of mirrors as I've seen since the last time the Beeb re-ran *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. And if you got past the fact that they'd blacked her



JUNG Ji-hoon as Il-Soon in *I'm a Cyborg but That's OK*.

up to play Mariane Pearl in Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*, you'd have seen Angelina Jolie give her best performance since her Oscar-winning turn in *Girl, Interrupted*.

The best films on offer though were complete opposites. Fresh from winning the International Critic's Week Prize at Cannes, Argentinian film *XXY* was a sensitive, intelligent, coming-of-age drama about a teenage girl's blossoming sexuality with a difference. The main character, Alex, is a hermaphrodite and may not be a girl at all. Featuring a stunning performance by Ines Efron as Alex, *XXY* is a subtle moving film that lingers in the memory. *I'm a Cyborg but That's OK* (Korean wild man Park Chan-wook's follow-up to *Lady Vengeance*) on the other hand is just plain bonkers. An insane romantic comedy featuring a heroine who looks like a human Manga character and thinks she's a killer robot and a kleptomaniac hero sporting bunny ears, *I'm a Cyborg but That's OK* is a playful vision of love whose quirkiness never tips over into sickening cuteness.

So, moving to June is going to make up for this year's disappointing Festival. Isn't it?

Film doesn't exist in a vacuum, it's a vibrant and important part of our wider cultural life. The great thing about the EIFF in August was it may have been the only time some people in the film industry experienced anything deeper than a Chris Tucker movie. For me, one of the joys of the Edinburgh International Film Festival and a major reason for its popularity has always been

that it takes place during the wider Edinburgh Festival, the world's biggest and best arts festival.

While some people may eat, sleep and breathe film, sometimes it's good to get out of the cinema and go see a rising comic, some burlesque, or a Japanese Noh version of *Sense and Sensibility* being performed round the corner in a Baptist church. This year for instance I managed to see wheelchair-using comedian Laurence Clark's *12% Evil* show, a post-apocalyptic Polish *Macbeth* with machine guns, motorbikes and stilts, the 1927 company's funny and scary cabaret *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, Nine Inch Nails and the Foo Fighters at Meadowbank Stadium and the divine Amanda Palmer (one half of the Dresden Dolls) play her solo show at the Spiegeltent. You can't see a post-apocalyptic Polish *Macbeth* with machine guns at most other film festivals. Probably not even Warsaw's. And that's the beauty of Edinburgh. The EIFF wants to carve out its own distinct identity by distancing itself from the very thing that set it apart, destroying the identity it already enjoys. I worry that the move to June will destroy the character of the Festival, gutting the magical goose, making next year, the 62nd, its last. In order to survive, 2008's Festival will have to be a more eclectic, edgy, risky programme while still retaining films that attract a mainstream audience. Fingers crossed.

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