

NYFF 45: It Is What It Is

Yes, the New York Film Fest plays to its base, but what's so bad about that?

The 45th New York Film Festival

Presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center
September 28 through October 14
Venue info: filmlinc.com/nyff

BY NATHAN LEE

The 45th New York Film Festival is something of a family affair here at *The Village Voice*. Two of our own, the estimable J. Hoberman and the indefatigable Scott Foundas, sit on the selection committee of this proudly selective, stubbornly steadfast institution. When it comes to NYFF 45: This time, it's personal—to borrow the tagline from *Jaws: The Revenge*, a movie, irresistible to note, about a creature unchanged for millennia that must perpetually move forward or die.

"Once again, the New York Film Festival," sighed Jonas Mekas in his September 15, 1966, column in the *Voice*. "Once again, arguments against and pro. I, myself, I have no big complaints to make. By now, the fourth year, I have learned to take it for what it is: a potpourri of current films from all over the world; some bad, some good—I see them all. I used to complain that the festival doesn't really reflect what's going on in cinema. Now I know, yes, it reflects, but its mirror is pretty dusty. Its mirrors are the tastes and personalities of the people who run it. What else do you want? An underground festival at the Lincoln Center? The new millennium has only just begun. . . . There are some good people working for the festival. Their intentions are good. But

they are split between their own tastes and what the Lincoln Center stands for (its past, not its future)."

Four decades haven't drastically shifted what Lincoln Center stands for, even if the cultural landscape has altered beyond recognition. Pride of place goes, as it always has, to the type of formally bold, intellectually ambitious fare that mid-'60s Mekas could take for granted (lucky man!) as "the commercial cinema." Alexander Sokurov's *Alexandra*, Bela Tarr's *The Man From London*, Hou Hsiao Hsien's *The Flight of the Red Balloon*, Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Night*: It doesn't get *less* commercial than these NYFF 45 highlights. We can quibble all we want about who's

de Oliveira (*Christopher Columbus, the Enigma*)?—yet it seems churlish to do so given a year when "the death of cinema" has moved from the think piece to the obituary page.

Sir Ridley Scott has lately mouthed off about the crap state of the art, which would be hilarious coming from the director of *A Good Year* and *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Hannibal* and *Gladiator* if he wasn't such an intolerably humorless git. On the one hand, it's understandable that the NYFF would make space for *Blade Runner: The Final Cut (This Time for Real!)*, a movie as seminal as it is spectacular. On the other, why privilege a respected relic with nothing more to give over the vital,

unruly relevance of another visionary sci-fi film, Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*? OK, so I haven't actually seen it yet, but I'll eat every copy of this paper in Ridley Scott's kitchen if *Southland* doesn't have its eyes set squarely on where our moment, and our movies, are going.

Mekas thought, or at least dreamed, that the future belonged to the avant-garde. In a sense, he was right, given the pervasive influence of classic experimental techniques on music videos, commercials, and the credit sequences of Hollywood movies about serial killers. He must be pleased, at least,

to know that the personal, non-narrative, anti-commercial cine-poetry he so tirelessly advocated has had a regular home at the NYFF for over a decade—and probably peeved to find it shuttled off to a sidebar ghetto.

The view proposed by the



Before the Devil Knows You're Dead

Above: Will Hart; top: Scott Green

hot and who's not when it comes to the grand old men of the movies—why choose the latest from Rohmer (*The Romance of Astree and Celadon*) but not Rivette (*Ne Touche Pas le Hache*)? Why include a film indebted to Manoel de Oliveira (*In The City of Sylvia*) but not a film by Manoel

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annual "Views From the Avant-Garde" program is scarcely spotless; much of it is dull and derivative. Yet it also lays claim to many of the supreme masterpieces (and most of the significant world premieres) in recent NYFF history: Stan Brakhage's *Commingled Containers*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Origin of the 21st Century*, Ken Jacob's *Star Spangled to Death*, Peter Kubelka's *Poetry and Truth*, Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie*, and Luther Price's extraordinary series of found-footage *Biscotts*.

Nothing distinguishes "Views" more than its commitment to the work of the American master Robert Beavers, the former protégé of avant-garde legend Gregory Markopoulos, recent recipient of retrospectives at the Whitney and the Tate Modern, owner of one of the most exacting minds and singular sensibilities at work in the movies. *Pitcher of Colored Light*, his first film in half a decade, forgoes the geometric severity characteristic of works like his masterly ars poetica, *From the Notebook of...* (37th NYFF), without any loss of precision, and generates a subsumed aura of rapture nearly as potent as his sublime city/nature diptych *The Stoas* (35th NYFF). A portrait of the artist's elderly mother, *Pitcher* alights on various motifs (sun-dappled grass, household ceramics, a cat on a couch, silvery hair) only to pan, fade, lurch, or glide off subject in a continuous act of readjusted attention. One only needs to compare it to "Views" peer *At Sea*, Peter Hutton's spectacular yet vapid feature-length exercise in industrial-tableaux porn, to sense how deeply Beavers's mesh of images are impelled by emotional, not just formal, necessity.

The amazing thing about Todd

Haynes's ceaselessly amazing *I'm Not There* is how little nostalgia has to do with it. Just as Haynes used an obsolete style of melodrama to stir contemporary hearts with *Far From Heaven*, he now deploys the life and legend of Bob Dylan to mediate a huge complex of ideas and feelings about the soul of the artist (or any feeling person) *right now*. Biography is only the vehicle; hagiography is the last thing on his mind. Haynes says more about the impact of Iraq on his psyche by reflecting it through Vietnam than Brian De Palma manages to say by confronting Iraq directly in his misbegotten *Redacted*.

De Palma's stumble is the exception to the rule of American movies this year. The festival opens with the bittersweet pleasures of Wes Anderson's *Darjeeling Limited*, bristles to the acerbic domestic meltdown of Noah Baumbach's *Margot at the Wedding*, and highlights an even more astringent family crisis in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, a wildly contrived but ruthlessly tough-minded thriller from Sidney Lumet. Didn't know he had it in him, though I'm not surprised to find Gus Van Sant further refine the emotional precision of his abstract, experimental youth movies with *Paranoid Park*. As for the presence of *Mr. Warmth, the Don Rickles Project* on the program, my initial reaction went something like: a Tom Petty doc, a Dylan doc, and a friggin' Don Rickles doc? Way to lure the under-70 crowd, NYFF! And yet two different committee members have assured me it's one of the best of the fest, and legend has already spread through the halls of the Film Society of the unprecedented volume of laughter howling from the *Rickles* preview session. From Robert Beavers to Don Rickles: What else do you want?