

# PSYCHOTIC Reaction

What can I say? After about a decade of covering the Festival for various low rent rags (including my own) the only thing one can truly hope for is that my bum will be able to survive. Everything else is just gravy.

## satan's cheerleaders revisited

According to the press spew for Shimako Sato's *Wizard Of Darkness*, the film is based on a popular Japanese horror comic anthology titled *Eko Eko Azaraku*. That may be so, and I've certainly never seen one to say it's not, but I really think the true basis for the film is the onslaught of teen possession films that flooded the post-*Exorcist* grind house scene way back. Remember those old classics - *Satan's Cheerleaders*, *Jennifer*, *Carrie*, *Hell Night* and even *Kung Fu Exorcist*, which admittedly didn't have many teenage high school girls but was still a lot of fun anyway. As usual, *Wizard* takes place in a nondescript urban high school where students are beginning to explore the teen world of cigarettes, deviant sex, cuddly voodoo dolls and Satanism in between those boring classes they make you take. Right off the bat snotty kids begin to drop, unpopular teachers disappear and the class nerd is the only one who knows that one of their peers is cramming after hours in an attempt to conjure up Lucifer for an upcoming parent teacher night. It's all up to one other student, a recent transferee and an accomplished witch played by cute Kimika Yoshino, to defeat the powers of evil and make sure everybody is still around for mid-terms. On the technical side, *Wizard* contains the same catalogue of faux gore film effects of which we've seen one too many times in low budget domestic releases. It's interesting to see a foreign spin on our own home grown crapola. You'll find slow motion set-ups that don't always pay off, nubile lesbian overtones, a stock brooding young punk hero and the ever mysterious "new girl". As well as a hefty dose of the gushing red stuff. There's not an incredible overflow of Hershey chocolate syrup generated blood, but there is a fine decapitation scene and a rather prolonged shot of a young woman getting sliced in half all over the trig room floor. As for the lesbian subplot, we lewdly alluded to earlier, one of the young female students has a couple of rather graphic sessions with her beautiful and ultimately quite evil, home room teacher. Even though *Wizard of Darkness* was directed by a woman, the graphic, soft-core scenes probably owe more to pleasing the notoriously, misogynistic nature of the male Japanese film goer than the actual genre itself. There were a small number of idealized high school slash "coming of age films" on the slate this year. As with most current films and television shows, they usually deal with young females and are created by graying white males. While I don't think Todd Solondz is that old,

his fine black comedy, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, makes Clair Dane's existence in *My So-Called Life* look like a new kind of Barbie commercial. 11 year old nerdy girl Dawn Wiener (Heather Matarazzo) just can't get a break. Her classmates abhor her, her clothes are vintage, late seventies *Saturday Night Live*, circa the Gilda Radner/Lisa Lubner period (ironically this Festival screening was sponsored by The Gap!), and her mother really does like her little sister best. Forget what I said about these kind of films being made largely by males, 'cause I'm a male and as far as I could see (which isn't far A.C.), *Dollhouse* was painfully accurate from the overall gender, neutral loser point of view, one I can unfortunately identify with (give me a fucking break - A.C.). Similarly, but on a more conventional and less entertaining note, John Sullivan's first film, *sleepover*, deals with a group of high school kids who spend a night of drinkin', fightin' and, uh, you know - The First Time- before returning to school at the end of a summer.

## the truth about trash

San Francisco based film archivist Jenni Olson's terrific, trash trailer compilation, *Trailer Camp*, was, predictably, one of my favorite "films" of this year's festival. *Trailer Camp* is a collection of generally mainstream trailers from Hollywood films beginning with *The Lawless Breed*, a fifties oater starring Rock Hudson as a gunslinger, zooming right up to early eighties "classics" such as *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* and *Lust in the Dust*. Not surprisingly, given our current love affair with all things from the polyester decade, the collection contains a heavy dose of seventies nostalgia. Included are mini-homages to the trailers of once again hot John Travolta (*SNF*, *Stayin' Alive* and *Perfect*), Lily Tomlin (*The Incredible Shrinking Woman* and *Moment By Moment* - a hetro love story produced by a couple of dykes - no wonder it failed!), (like you should know A.C.) Faye Dunaway (*Mommy Dearest*, *Supergirl*) and all those sickeningly sweet cotton candy Alan Carr productions (*Grease*, *Can't Stop the Music*, *The Pirate Movie*) that people had just about managed to forget. There were also some nutty cameo's by Jeff Goldblum and Debra Winger (both in the pro-disco classic *Thank God It's Friday* - you can laugh smart guy, but this film actually did win an Oscar!), Peter O'Toole (*Super Girl*), Cindy Williams (*The First Nudie Musical*) as well as Keith Moon and Alice Cooper in Mae West's leering octogenarian comeback released in the age of full blown hardcore, *Sextette*. Of course, most of the actual full length films these mini-movies were meant to promote sucked big time and weren't worth the raw stock that was wasted on them. Yet, for some reason, when you boil all their inherent stupidity down into a

hyper 3 minute blast, the result is hilarious, terrific and even briefly worthwhile. Because Olson has basically taken trailers and spliced them together, and is continually acquiring new ones, *Trailer Camp* will continue to evolve and get sharper. If she gets a better trailer she simply takes out a weaker one and replaces it, ensuring that the collection is strong. It was certainly a keeper for the Midnight Madness crowd I saw it with, because they hooted and howled non-stop through out the 70-oddball minutes of the collection. Besides *Trailer Camp*, Olsen has produced a few other compilation programs, including *Homo Promo*, *Jodie Promo* (a collection of Jodie Foster trailers) and the in-progress *Afro Promo*. This film is a promising two part look at mainstream blaxploitation ranging from the social problem films of the mid fifties and the "right on" flicks of the seventies to the new jack crack heads of the current black cinema. *Trailer Camp* was preceded by a big screen showing of pop group Portishead's self conceived and produced 10 minute James Bond outtake *To Kill a Dead Man*, which didn't make it any better but sure beat watching Golden Eye. *Trailer Camp* would have made an excellent companion piece to Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's fine documentary based on Vito Russo's ground breaking eighties book *The Celluloid Closet*. Instead of a collection of trailers strung together, *Closet* has a selection of boosted film clips dating back to a Thomas Edison experimental film from 1885 to neo-homo stuff like *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Philadelphia* in an attempt to outline film's skewered attitude towards homosexuals. Practically from the get go, these "mistakes of nature" were presented as the prancing and swishy butt of low brow jokes. Although these stereotypes are still in use, (uninspired and juvenile directors will still throw in a mincing Mary for a cheap laugh) "family value" trends in filmmaking have allowed pandering studios, brain dead screenwriters and hit hungry directors to project gays and lesbians in more menacing terms. Somewhere around the early sixties, gays began to be portrayed in a more "serious" light in films such as *Tea and Sympathy*, *The Children's Hour* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. They became pathetic and suicidal losers, unable to ever be truly happy within the confines of their "affliction". By the eighties they were still suicidal, but in films such as *Cruising*, *The Fan* and later *Basic Instinct* they were also shown to be dangerous psychopathic murderers who usually deserved to die the brutal death they met in the final reel. Besides the many clips, there's narration by Lily Tomlin and comments by Tom Hanks, Tony Curtis, Whoopi Goldberg, Susan Sarandon, Shirley MacLaine and that old misfit lit queen Gore Vidal. Nigel Finch's *Stonewall* is a fictionalized account of the events leading up to the Stonewall riots of 1969. Fueled partly by the inherent and intolerant machismo of the New York City police, partly by the increasingly radical and noisy gay rights movement and according to the film's screenplay, the unexpected death of Judy Garland. The Stonewall Inn, a lower Manhattan gay bar, was the location of a violent clash between dopest law men and a small army of fabulous lip syncing drag queens. Of course, the whole thing is serious, the whole gay rights movement being kind of informally broken down into "before" and "after" Stonewall categories, and the film's flip True Romance story

leanings, between one of the D.Q.'s and a young beautiful thing fresh off a bus from the mid west, make *Stonewall* pretty entertaining, although perhaps a little too entertaining for some. I don't know if there's a soundtrack CD, but there oughta be one 'cause *Stonewall* contains a terrific girl group score, featuring those primo 45 rpm bad girls, The Shangri-Las, as well as a fine selection of their sassy sisters on vinyl. On a sadder note, director Finch, who had a long history of directing television shows including *25 X 5*, *The Continuing Adventures of The Rolling Stones*, *Hollywood Babylon* and the adaptation of *The Lost Language of Cranes*, died of AIDS complications shortly after *Stonewall* completed shooting. Speaking of queen's - we were, weren't we? This is the Toronto Film Festival after all - Agnieszka Holland's *Total Eclipse* is all about the relationship between a pair of poetry's biggest literary queen's, Arthur Rimbaud (played by goofy grinned Leonado DiCaprio, fresh off his portrayal of another great writer, Jim Carroll, in *The Basketball Diaries*) and Paul Verlaine (another prick in the repertoire of *Naked* star David Thewlis). These two 19th century French poets fight, fuck, antagonize, intimately inspire each other, and, in Rimbaud's case at least, can be held partly responsible for Bob Dylan becoming a "singer". If I can drop the high art pose and revert back to being an exploitation addict for a second, Romane Bohringer, as Verlaine's long suffering and usually naked wife, looks like a cross between a Maya fertility goddess and Uschi Digard around the time she did *Truck Stop Women*. In *Butterfly Kiss*, Amanda Plummer stars as Eunice, a volatile serial killer who haunts the motorways of England in search of a mythical ex-lover named Judith. During a particularly nasty highway run, Plummer's character is befriended by Miriam (Saskia Reeves), a drab, naive and morally ambivalent young woman who is basically an empty and somewhat cracked cup waiting to be filled. Miriam is willing to stick with Eunice no matter what, always willing to hold out "for the good in someone", suffering through heaps of abuse, violent mood swings and ultimately assisting in the murder of a slew of diner waitresses and Eunice's discarded romantic flings. Plummer, who is usually cast in supporting roles as a colourful and usually harmless eccentric in mainstream films such as *The Fisher King* and *Needful Things*, is riveting and in this intense and demanding role. In the film Plummer's character is usually covered from head to toe in a variety of thrift store semi-rags, but when she disrobes we see that her body is covered in bruises, ritualistic tattoo's and a variety of chains and locks that restrict and confine her body, all symbolic of her inner turmoil. Brutal.

#### abel ferrara: it's nice (you fuck)

As usual, there were a lot of celebrities at this years Festival. Included on the big ticket guest list were Peter Weller, Diane Keaton, Jennifer Jason Leigh and even that love-him-or-hate-him pop cult superstar Quentin T. and his entourage of *Four Rooms* co-op dwellers including Robert Rodriguez, Allison Anders, Alexandre Rockwell and for some reason, Drew Barrymore. But out of everybody who was there who was "somebody", the celebrity I most wanted to meet was "outlaw" director Abel Ferrara. I was hoping to get



an interview with the man responsible for a whole immoral slew of totally unredeemed exploitation films but since he was only in town for a day and was primarily doing only X-tra large US media, the chance of getting him alone seemed slim. I approached the publicist of film he was in town to promote, a feisty B&W vampire flick called *The Addiction*, and while I couldn't get an interview, I did get invited to a small reception for Ferrara and the film's star, Lili Taylor. The reception was being held in a small suite located in the Sutton Place Hotel, the Festivals official headquarters, and I arrived just in time to pass Harvey Keitel on his way out. Keitel was at the Fest to promote a couple of new films he's in, *Blue in the Face*, Wayne Wang's sorta-sequel to *Smoke*, and Athens born director Theo Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze*, a beautifully shot but predictably lethargic three hour epic in which Keitel plays a film director who wanders around the Balkans looking for a few old cans of film. This may not sound exciting but the film won the critics award at last years Cannes orgy, so there. Ferrara was holding court in the center of the packed room and, as you might expect, he was dressed completely in a seedy black outfit. Note book in hand I was able to pull him aside to get a few answers and when I say a few, I really mean a few 'cause getting Ferrara to actually mutter something in his raspy Brooklyn accent is a task in itself. Most of the time he just kinda nods his heads, shrugs his shoulders or stares at the ceiling, lighting rocking back and forth and clutching his sides as if he was trapped in a very narrow freezer.

Q: Not many people who start off on 42nd St. end up at these kind of film festivals.

A: Well, they're the same films basically, just different venues. But it's nice. It's always really a genre...*King of New York* was a gangster film, *Bad Lieutenant* was a cop film and for this one we chose the vampire film.

Q:Nicholas St. John has written most of your films, including *The Addiction*, how come you two work so well together?

A: Well, we've known each other since we were fifteen. I guess we just work together well and feel that, you know, why should we work with anybody else.

Q:You seem to be more highly respected in Europe than here or in the US.

A:Yeah, it nice, but really they're so far behind American audiences.

Q:Are there ever retrospectives of your work?

A:They're having one in Brooklyn next month...I don't know if I'll go.

Q:In terms of mainstream recognition, was *Bad Lieutenant* your breakthrough film?

A:Well, really it was *King of New York* that first got me a lot of attention from the mainstream press. That's away good, it's nice.

Q: Okay, well thanks for talking with us...

A:

As for the film itself, lots of Goth types were up at the undevilish hour of 10am for the screening that I attended and I was surprised at how tacky that they all look in the daylight. Unfortunately, I had heard a few bad things about *The Addiction* from other

journalists. A critic I knew who saw it in Berlin told me that about a third of the audience there walked and another dismissed it by saying that the last thing people needed was a "pretentious vampire film". Why not? As much as Ferrara has indeed turned out a few duds, including *Driller Killer* (Okay, so it was his first), *China Girl*, *Body Snatchers*, his little seen gun-for-hire Elmore Leonard adaptation *Cat Chaser* and that god damned film with Madonna, *Snake Eyes* or *Dangerous Game* or whatever it was finally called, *The Addiction* happens to fall into the category of Ferrara's more worthwhile efforts - *Fear City*, *King of New York*, *Bad Lieutenant* and my all time favorite, *Ms. 45*. Basically *The Addiction* is the story of Kathleen Conklin, an intense NYC doctoral candidate played by Lili Taylor, who gets bit one dark night by a dykey looking vampire played by Annabella Sciorra. Because Kathleen has moral objections regarding violence - she's basically a left wing liberal pacifist with a thing against brutality - she begins her reluctant decent into the dark side by using a syringe to draw blood from sleeping vagrants. As her "addiction" goes on, Kathleen's methods become increasing violent, and, using her philosophy course reading list as a guide, her rationalizations become more existential. Between bites, the film manages to drop references to at least a dozen cool pop philosophers, from Nietzsche and Sartre to Beckett and Burroughs, include footage of the Holocaust, the My Lai Massacre and Bosnia for added gross out effect, and feature a fun cameo by Christopher Walken as a hip vampire who has managed to keep his jones on a short leash and live a semi "normal" life. On a positive note, from a students point of view at least, the film ends with the ultimate - and bloodiest - student/staff mixer imaginable. Fun.

### madness as hell

As usual there were several, huh, *fine* demented film's ringing in the witching hour during this years Midnight Madness programme. Shinya Tsukamoto, the director behind the left field hits *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* and its mind numbing sequel *The Body Hammer*, returned with his latest, *Tokyo Fist*. Ironman formally established Tsukamoto's obsession with melding flesh and machine into some kind of high speed urban apocalypse of cyber-human spirit. In a nutshell, *Tokyo Fist* is your basic charming love triangle concerning a limp insurance salesman (played by the director!), a mysterious boxer and a heavily punctured female out to assert her right to kick ass. The film climaxes with a terrifically visceral, bone crunching fight scene that I'm sure will remind many viewers of similar scenes in Scorsese's *Raging Bull*. However, Tsukamoto's got all the brutality down pat but none of the grace, not that he's particularly interested in it anyway. There is actually a big social statement punched into *Fist* but I really don't care because, like all of Tsukamoto's films, quick and pounding violence is the real, and practically only, point. I got a chance to meet Tsukamoto when he was here and he told me that his favorite films include *Blade Runner*, *Videodrome* and *Taxi Driver*, all films that display the stylized and sometimes bleak futuristic approach to violence that inform his work. Like a lot of artists who specialize in creating brutal art, he's

actually a gentle and reserved man with a soft speaking voice and no hint of being the creator of such mayhem. Basically Tsukamoto is the kind of nondescript personality who ends up being a mass murderer or has human heads stuffed with triple chocolate fudge ice cream preserved in his ice box. Then, when the cops finally nab him, his neighbors will always look surprised and claim that he was such a nice man. Richard Sears miserable short film, *An Evil Town*, was one of my favorites in this years program, and not just because it's twenty two minute running time matches the length of my attention span. Based on a Charles Bukowski short story, this impressive (and gory and sexually perverse) bit of business recently won Best Short Film prize at Cannes and was voted best best short in the '95 New York Underground Film Festival. Most of the film takes place in a squalid rooming house in a dark mid western town. A middle aged, road weary drifter, played matter of factly by dead pan Keith Phillips, is set upon by the advances of the hotel's gay night clerk and the anonymous carnality of the clientele of a local porno theatre that he ventures into one evening. The film ends in a visceral and quite visual explosion of righteous Biblical wrath that made me feel really great. Mike Kuchar, of Kuchar brothers fame, puts in a cameo as the ticket seller at the porno theatre. The night I caught it, it was being teamed with a documentary called *Synthetic Pleasures*, directed by new comer Lara Lee, a film n' philosophy student. Although I found this electronic road movie to be poorly assembled - for instance, you would often have sound bites with no clue as to who they were coming from - I have to admit it a pretty all encompassing primer on fin de sec culture and the "packaged consumer society". Virtual reality, cyrogenics, cosmetic "mutations", raves, synthetic environments (massive indoor beaches and ski mountains, mostly located in Japan) and internet sex all get a general going over. One other thing that also threw me off was the appearance of session musician Jeff "Skunk" Baxter, giving his thoughts on computer culture. If you want to throw in a pop musician, why not make it Todd Rundgren? He's already had some kind of primitive VR rock tour and probably had a lot more interesting observations on the subject. Or is it because no computer would ever really be able to come up with the intro to *Reeling in the Years*?

### more madness

Although it's true that the MM program is the natural home for wholesale depravity at the Festival, general interest sleaze can actually be found most places if you look hard enough. In this year's Canadian Perspectives program, documentary film maker Holly Dale's first fictional attempt, *Blood And Donuts*, offered the best twist on the modern urban vampire story since Barry Atwater's brutal blood sucker gave Darren McGavin the chills way back in *The Night Stalker*. However, Dale's vampire is an awkward and soft spoken undead romantic who just isn't cut out for stalking humans in the modern world. Director David Cronenberg, on a break before he began production on his adaptation of J.G. Ballard's cult novel *Crash*, appears as a gangster who really knows how to give great evil. Another Canuck flick that was really well

received was *Rude*, first time feature Director Clement Virgo's riff on contemporary inner city living that owes practically nothing to those empty TV sitcom's about "friends" and other kinds of lame white bread shit. The film is actually three stories in one, tied together by a cool female DJ that Virgo ripped off from one of my favorite films. According to Virgo, "When I was 15 or 16 I went down to Yonge Street, and there was a film called *The Warriors* playing at the old Coronet. The image of the woman talking into the microphone stayed with me all this time, even before I knew I wanted to make films. That turned the image of the DJ into a woman." As one local critic said, it the only film that allows "the influences of Walter Hill and Krzysztof Kieslowski." Also, its got a real lion in it. Like most big cities, Toronto's got its fair share of "urban legends" and one of the best concerns a deranged lesbian who allegedly castrated a cabbie so she could have her own dick to impress her girlfriend. This little bit of mischief took place in the late seventies and while the facts of the case were not publicized at the time, the details (as well as tawdry exaggerations and straight out lies) have gone down in local infamy. While Director Midi Onodera doesn't make this bit of nasty business the center of her latest effort, *Skin Deep*, she manages to weave it into her story of filmmaking, cross dressing and tattoo art. One of the coolest and most sought after promotional pieces at this years Fest were button's that simply read "NOT JUST ANOTHER FEEL GOOD MOVIE". Predictably the button was not for the latest Bruce LaBruce film, but for Gary Allen Walkow's screen adaptation of Dostoevsky's novella *Notes From Underground*. Updated to modern day Los Angeles, Henry Czerny plays a self confessed creep unable to relate to anyone on even the most basic human level. Czerny's nameless central character spends the film relating the painful details of his pitiful existence into a video camera while flashbacks show us his catalogue of failures. Ex-*Twin Peaks* cherry bomb Sheryl Lee plays a depressed and somewhat chubby prostitute who grows to care about Czerny's character until he manages to alienate her with the skill of a born loser.

### a happy ending

Somewhere in the late seventies, near the end of the Sex Pistols brief, sputtering sonic assault, Malcolm McLaren seized on the notion of hiring American sleaze director Russ Meyer to helm a low budget film starring his spiky haired fab four. Together they conspired to make something called *Who Killed Bambi?* and while we never did end up learning who actually would have done the deed, mostly due to McLaren's lack of experience and Johnny Rotten's hatred of yanks, Theodore Thomas' heart warning documentary, *Frank And Ollie* at least let us know who offed his old lady. Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston were two of the "Ten Old Men", a group of animators at Disney who not only drew and plotted the old gals demise but helped create some of Walt's classic gems including *Snow White* (the first full length animated film), *The Lady and the Tramp*, *The Jungle Book*, *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*. In other words, it was so sentimental, heart warming and life affirming that I coulda puked blood. (hk)