

The Victoria Film Festival begins

BY MICHAEL D. REID, TIMES COLONIST January 8, 2010



Winona Ryder resurfaces in *The Private lives of Pippa Lee*

Photograph by: Handout, Times Colonist

The Victoria Film Festival is pretty in pink again this year, which seems appropriate considering it just turned sweet 16. And, my, how this film feast often referred to as "the little festival that could" has grown.

When it premièred in 1995 under the auspices of CineVic, Cinecenta and Origins Theatre, the Victoria Independent Film and Video Festival was a three-day affair, with a few hundred filmgoers taking in 42 entries at Cinecenta and the Eaton Centre.

By last year, attendance had surpassed the 20,000 mark -- a 23 per cent increase over 2008 -- with 160 films from 16 countries unspooling. And the festival has since attracted dozens of high-profile guests, including Atom Egoyan, Richard Farnsworth, Don McKellar, Alan Rudolph, Keith Carradine, Beverly D'Angelo, John Waters, Laszlo Kovacs and editor Carole Littleton (E.T.)

The Victoria Film Festival, as it's now called, has also functioned as a launching pad for movie-making hopefuls.

"It will always hold an important and dear place in my career because it's the first festival that took a chance on me," said Warren P. Sonoda, whose debut feature *Ham and Cheese* premièred here in 2004. "It launched the career I have right now."

Sonoda, currently in Los Angeles editing his new romantic comedy *Textualizing*, will be back to participate in the festival's Springboard industry event uniting filmmakers with broadcasters and distributors, and to showcase his new film *Coopers' Camera*.

"It's because of [festival director] Kathy Kay and her amazing support and way of finding talent and getting the word out there to support Canadian films that makes the festival what it is today," he said.

"At the core of it, it still has that heart."

Kay is one of six paid staff, four supplied seasonally through Service Canada's Job Creation Partnership program, and 250 volunteers who ensure the smooth operation of the 10-day festival. This year's opens Jan. 29 with a glitzy Chanel-themed gala at the luxurious Parkside Victoria Resort and Spa after the screening of *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* at Empire Capitol 6.

The cosmetics queen and classical composer will compete with zombies, art snobs, drag queens, obscenely overpaid CEOs, lovelorn misfits and sex-trade workers who populate a robust roster of shorts, docs and features from 17 countries.

On the star-power front, actors Barry Pepper and Matt Frewer (*Darfur*), and Oscar-winning animator Chris Landreth (*Ryan*) have joined a guest list headlined by Kris Kristofferson, who will receive the festival's inaugural IN Award on Feb. 2.

This will be the third visit for Campbell River-born Pepper since he was honoured in 2007 for *The Snow Walker*. He returned last year for *Springboard*, hanging out with producer Rob Merilees and actor-director Charles Martin Smith, two collaborators who will be back for *Springboard*, hosted by Canada AM film critic Richard Crouse.

Pepper, 39, will appear at Saturday night's screening of *Like Dandelion Dust*, a heart-wrenching drama in which he plays an abusive steelworker who tries to redeem himself after a prison term by starting over with his wife (Mira Sorvino) and attempting to reclaim their child who she put up for adoption.

Kay says her biggest disappointment was that Mads Mikkelsen -- the Danish actor featured in past festival films *Flame* and *Citron* and *Adam's Apples*, but best known for playing *Le Chiffre* in *Casino Royale* -- had to cancel.

"He had to go to London to reshoot scenes for *Clash of the Titans*," she said, sighing.

There's no shortage of highlights in a slate of films that includes many Canadian entries and touches on themes of corporate malfeasance (*The Coca-Cola Case*, *Under Rich Earth*), gay pride (*Beyond Gay*), the ugliness of war (*Lebanon*) and genocide (*Darfur*), the requisite zombie flick reboot (*ZMD: Zombies of Mass Destruction*), culinary flair (*Food Design*) and, of course, sex (*Love at the Twilight Motel*).

Two that should hit close to home are *Who Killed Miracle?*, about the rescue in Campbell River of a baby killer whale that later dies under mysterious circumstances, and *The Brothel Project* (see story above).

As well as the increasingly popular *Springboard*, the 2010 festival includes two new curatorial programs, *Pleasure Paradox* and *Future Perfect*; more interactivity with pink USB thumb drives, included as part of a fresh spin on *Converge*, where shorts are showcased on hand-held projectors, portable DVD players and video Walkmans in non-traditional settings.

"It's such a great opportunity to meet broadcasters who might not have money now but will have in the future," said Kay.

Springboard, which includes talks, workshops and master classes on everything from social networking to the advantages of launching a web-based series, is one reason Harold Gronenthal, senior vice-president and general manager of program acquisitions and international development for Rainbow Media Enterprises, is coming back for the sixth time.

"I like to venture out to smaller festivals because you never know what you might find," said the New York-based executive responsible for the international management of AMC, Sundance Channel and WEtv, and the launch of IFC Canada in 2001.

He first came at the behest of Canadian Film Centre's director of special projects Sheena Macdonald, he recalled.

"It's not Cannes, it's not Toronto, it's not Sundance but it's a great little festival," he said. "It's very well programmed and they make a terrific effort to really reach out to filmmakers and producers."

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