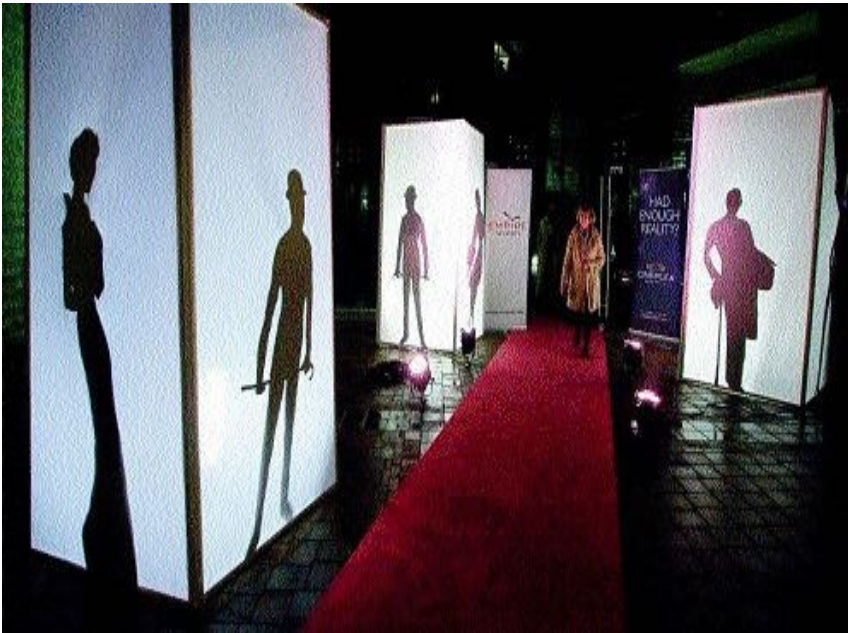

A celebration of cinema

Glitzy gala at new venue honours stars, directors and producers

BY MICHAEL D. REID, TIMES COLONIST January 31, 2010



Guests walk through the entrance to Friday night's Victoria Film Festival gala at the Parkside Victoria Resort and Spa.

Photograph by: Photos by Darren Stone, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

"Wow!" was the operative word Friday night as the Victoria Film Festival's 2010 edition blasted off with a glitzy gala amid the stunning pools, fountains and tropical plants adorning its new venue, Parkside Victoria Resort and Spa.

Indeed, there were moments you half-expected Hugh Hefner to walk in.

"I feel like I'm at the grotto at the Playboy mansion," quipped guttersnipenews.com correspondent Rachel Fox.

Opening nighters, many weary after spending hours on airplanes, were jubilant. The festival is a homecoming of sorts for Vancouver Island native Barry Pepper, former Glenlyon student Matt Frewer of Max Headroom fame, UVic grad-turned-producer Nicholas Tabarrok and Richard Crouse.

Who knew Crouse, the jovial Canada AM film critic, lived in a \$350-a-month McLure mansion apartment in Rockland 25 years ago and ran the long-defunct jazz club The Alhambra? "I remember Victoria being really vital and having a great arts scene," Crouse said, reminiscing about the "most intimate concert I've ever been to." It

was when he found himself alone with Dr. John when the legendary musician came in to do a sound check.

He asked if Crouse had any requests, and then played New Orleans Christmas songs for him.

Oscar-winning animator Chris Landreth (Ryan) gamely mingled despite feeling the effects of a head cold and a long flight.

"It sounds like everyone's talking underwater," he said, smiling.

Coincidentally, two gala guests were star athletes who overcame life-threatening health issues and are now in showbiz.

"I'm back to support the festival because I'm a Canadian boy and an Olympian so it coincides with Vancouver," said Howard Dell, a former Olympic bobsledder, pro football player and actor (Totally Blonde).

Dell, 47, recently received a liver transplant after being diagnosed with a terminal liver disease.

"I planned for an end, and now I've got to plan for a new beginning," he said.

Meghan Mutrie, who played for Canada and England's national rugby teams, has also made an incredible comeback after she was knocked out for 18 minutes during a Nation's Cup game two years ago.

"My brain was bleeding and I was handicapped for six months," she said. "I couldn't walk or talk and I was drooling." After recovering at her parents' home and completing her graduate degree in journalism in Wellington, New Zealand, Mutrie, 25, covered rugby during a brief internship with CHEK.

Now a rugby broadcaster for Australia's heavensgame.com, she's returning to Wellington in May for her grad ceremony.

Other guests included new film commissioner Jo Anne Walton, filmmaker Charles Martin Smith, producer Rob Merilees, Beyond Gay director Bob Christie and producer Morris Chapdelaine. Industrial FX studio chief Simon Game waxed enthusiastic about his feature film -- "a Sam Raimi movie meets the Beachcombers" -- slated to roll this summer.

Christie was pumped about last night's enthusiastically received Beyond Gay premiere at the Odeon.

"Victoria's a great place for this film," he said. "It's a political capital and this is a political film." There are two more intriguing documentaries on today's schedule.

Director Alison Rose says the most interesting part of making hers, Love at the Twilight Motel (review below) was the editing process.

"It was something akin to alchemy," she said, noting it brought out the "amateur social anthropologist" in her. "The interviews that you see were all surprising to me." All the motel users interviewed, with the exception of Mr. R, answered her ads seeking stories.

"I offered them whatever degree of anonymity they required." A tougher sell is Boyhood Shadows: I Swore I'd Never Tell (tonight, 9:45, Cap 6), a powerful, ultimately hopeful documentary about childhood sexual abuse as told through the eyes of "Glenn," a survivor who will attend tonight's screening.

"We've been fighting to get audiences, but it's been difficult because of the subject," said Monterey, Calif.-based director Steve Rosen, noting while it has played in Wales, Ireland and England, only one U.S. festival -- Tiburon -- is showing it.

"Americans are a force of quintessential ostriches," he said. "They don't want to hear about something unless it affects them directly, right now. But childhood sexual abuse is reaching epidemic proportions, so people need to pay attention."

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