

LIGHTS SHINE BRIGHT ON THE DIRECTOR'S PANEL AT SANTA BARBARA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

BY BIANCA BAGATORIAN



The sun shone brightly as I pulled up to the 26th Annual Santa Barbara International Film Festival which ran Jan 27th - Feb. 6th 2011, showcasing more than 170 films. What's the difference between this festival and all the others? In Santa Barbara you can smell the salt air and feel the ocean breeze as you exit one beautiful dark theatre and enter another dressed in Spanish Colonial revival style architecture. I was also fascinated to learn that this city housed the world's largest movie studio during the silent film era before the industry migrated to Hollywood. And here I was, driving back to Santa Barbara from Hollywood to watch films.

I was joining Terri Melkonian, a Vice President at Sunset Gower Studios, and actor Dave Alpay along with Larry Laboe, founder of NewFilmmakers LA, for a weekend of fun and films.

We arrived just in time for the "Directors on Directing" Panel on Saturday morning which was this year once again moderated by former studio head, now Variety columnist, Peter Bart. Directors in attendance were Darren Aronofsky (Black Swan), Charles Ferguson (Inside Job), Debra Granik (Winter's Bone), Tom Hooper (The King's Speech), David O. Russell (The Fighter) and Lee Unkrich (Toy Story 3). Quite an impressive bunch!

As the questions got under way, they wavered between the personal and the professional. At one point, Bart focused in on how most of the films were made on lean budgets, except for Toy Story 3! But the consensus among all seemed to be that the smaller the budget, the more freedom the directors are given. Ferguson noted that he had budget restraints for the Inside Job, however he was blessed with being given "final cut". He saw this as an invaluable facet because he was able to retain control over his vision for the film, regardless of budget. Hooper, who made "The King's Speech" for 14 million, a very good budget for a British production, noted that, "You're

under a lot of scrutiny when you're working with a good budget." This U.K. film is about the profound stammer suffered by King George VI before his accession to the throne. Interestingly enough, the idea to make The King's Speech came from Hooper's mother. "I happened to know about it only because my mother is Australian, and she was invited along by some Aussie friends to a theatre in London to see a reading of an unproduced play. It was called The King's Speech. And my mum had never been to a play reading in her life." His mother then called her director son telling him she found his next movie. In this case, it shows that mothers do know best!

Debra Granik, who shot the critically acclaimed Winter's Bone on an independent budget of \$2 million added, "In the independent film world there's a huge transformation. I don't think the same issues of dealing with huge sums of money and wondering if they're going to lose their shirt because someone is afraid that the story will only appeal to women apply. It gives you way more freedom. You've got your close colleagues - who's not supporting you? You have to go with people who want to go with you." David O'Russell told of his experiences of working with a tight crew and the added blessings from the citizens of Lowell, Massachusetts where the story is set. "These people's lives are changed by this. It's a beautiful thing for them and that's all I can ask for. I am so happy people like this movie. I am so happy the people of Lowell like the movie!" Initially, actor and producer Mark Wahlburg had given The Fighter to Darren Aronofsky to direct. After making The Wrestler, Aronofsky said he wanted to now make a different type of movie "something totally different, a story about ballet. The Fighter was too close to The Wrestler for me and I didn't want to do another film like that right away again" he added. He then passed the script on to David O. Russell and said "the movie that David made is different than the movie I would have made, so it all worked out at the end for David."

Unkrich, whose film "Toy Story 3," the third animated feature in the history of the Oscars to be nominated for best picture, said he was very honored

that the festival had the wisdom to put an animation director on the panel! He didn't always feel this way though, during the laborious production of the successful Pixar franchise, "I woke up for one and a half months throwing up every day because I was scared I was going to be known as "the guy who made the crappy sequel." Funny coming from someone who developed such a sharp storyline. Unkrich noted that he spent two and a half years working on the story. "I mean, we were designing the world and taking care of many other things too, but the story was the main focus. So when you have that much time, the little call backs, seeds that were planted earlier, the richness of the story, it happens slowly over time. If you want the audience to feel a lot of emotion at the end of the film, you don't get that for free. You have to go back and find the perfect scenes to insert the germs of the ideas and nurture them. On the other hand, the danger with working on something too long is also that it can become a mess!"

2010's best pictures also nurtured very memorable performances. When I asked Aronofsky if he was surprised by the success of Black Swan, he said he was absolutely thrilled. "I don't push actors. I remind them to remember why they started acting," he commented. Aronofsky was responsible for guiding Natalie Portman's physical and internal transformation in "Black Swan." With only half the budget he was looking for (13 million dollars) and a breezy shooting schedule, the director fought for the audience to believe that Portman, who trained for close to a year, was in fact a trained ballerina. This is no small feat. David O'Russell spoke about how he liked to go against type casting when it came to actors. "When casting Christian Bale, I knew that he had never played this type of outgoing persona. But Bale just disappeared into the character." We also discovered that originally, Matt Damon was to play Christian's character and he opted out due to a scheduling problem.

Towards the end, Bart asked a funny question about the length of Oscar speeches and the endless names that get mentioned to which Charles Ferguson, director of The Inside Job, quipped, "I must give thanks to Sony Picture Classics for not being loose with the dollar which kept our crew very small which makes it very easy to thank people because there's not that many people to thank!" Debra Granik pointed out that "collaborative" might be the operative word "A film by -" I don't appreciate that term. One time I saw a film where in the credits it said "Film by" and then there was a colon after which appeared the names of everybody that had been involved in making that film. That felt appropriate. That felt real. There's not a filmmaker that makes a film alone. When asked about award speeches, Granik added, "It's a gratitude that hurts. You spend a year trying to give it back. The thanks comes from this kind of desperate attempt to pay it back. Your emails are always scrambling for the right words. It's an awkward position to be in." Hooper felt it was appropriate to thank so many people as there are those that never get the chance to be on stage. And O. Russell concluded with, "I want to thank a gazillion people. Even though when I'm watching, I know I glaze over that part. I just want to speak from the heart and let those people know that I love them. I always try to remember that but end up having more of a spontaneous reaction."

As the questions came to a close, it occurred to me what a grind it must be for some of these guys to appear on panel after panel, answering the same questions during awards season. In fact, a running joke emerged between Aronofsky and Hooper. Aronofsky said that he and Hooper had been on so many panels together that they can play each other and answer one another's questions! And they made jocular quips throughout, impersonating each other.

Later that evening, the big event took place at the Lobero Theater with it's

gorgeous interior reminiscent of a classic Opera House with cozy box seats overlooking the stage. If you looked above, there was even a painted sky with sparkling stars - giving you a feeling you were sitting in the outdoors! And when I looked ahead, it was pretty amazing for me to see Nicole Kidman walking down the red carpet, looking as beautiful as she does on screen. Although she looked incredible in her dress, I felt bad that she had to juggle a swarm of reporters in the brisk, Santa Barbara night air. With the festival recognizing her with the Cinema Vanguard Award and riding off her acclaimed, heart-wrenching performance in "Rabbit Hole," I asked Kidman what it was like to work on a film that was adapted from a stage play and how the process was different. "We were very fortunate in the way that David Lindsay-Abaire had written the play so that it made it easy to adapt and he knew exactly how to open it up for the cinema, which is unusual that it would happen so fluently. He had it in his body, his mind and his soul. So whether he was doing it for the stage or the screen, it didn't matter. He knew how to do it."

At the final awards breakfast on Sunday morning at the famed Fess Parker Doubletree Resort, eleven winners were announced, each taking home \$2500. Added to the six celebrity-night tributes - which included Annette Bening, James Franco, Geoffrey Rush, Nicole Kidman, 14-year old Thousand Oaks acting phenom Hailee Steinfeld, and director Christopher Nolan, the festival really out did itself in the rich and multi-faceted line up this year.

Before I left, I had the opportunity to speak to some spunky new filmmakers, Molly Stroud and Lauren Parsekian, whose film "Finding Kind" had a world premiere at the festival. This film was initiated through their middle school experiences and they thought the documentary format was right for this project. They traveled around the country and went to High Schools to talk to girls about women issues and female relationships, bullying, and how girls treat one another. "Our film definitely focuses on girls and the feeling that goes on between females. Our hope is that people walk away, both men and women, with a broader message for human beings to be kinder. We're living through some tough times right now and we really need to band together and realize we're not as different." What a great message! You can learn more about their fascinating project at: www.findingkind.com.

A common thread of advice given to new filmmakers was that like "Finding Kind," the story you tell must be a personal one for it to stand out. Darren Aronofsky said it best, "As a first time filmmaker, make a film that only you can tell. That's the big secret, tell your own stories. Because that's all you have to offer. Each time you try to tell a story from the middle it rarely works." Debra Granik, director of "Winter's Bone" suggested that New Filmmakers "should be doing something in a place you know well or a place that intrigues you. Just go for a story that you can use a huge amount of a physical environment to fill out the richness and the details of the story."

The festivals closed with the world premiere of Georges Bizet's popular opera 3D viewing of "Carmen in 3D" directed by Julian Napier, the first time an opera has been filmed and shown in state-of-the-art digital 3D, co-produced by the Royal Opera House. The film was shown in the historic Arlington Theater, yet another beautiful theater in the heart of historic Santa Barbara. For more information on the festival, visit www.sbiif.org. For information on New Filmmakers go to: www.newfilmmakersla.com

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