

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Film heavyweights head to Toronto as Telluride fest wraps

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John Malkovich stars in Joel and Ethan Coen's dark spy comedy, "Burn After Reading," a featured film at both the Toronto Film Festival, which ends Sept. 13, and the Venice Film Festival. ( Focus Features )

TELLURIDE — "A girl in Korea saw the movie 28 times," says Kim Ji-Woon's translator on the gondola from the boomtown of Mountain Village to the burg that lends its name to the Telluride Film Festival.

"Is that freaky or good, or both?" I ask, and she repeats the question to the director of the buckwheat-noodle/Western homage "The Good, the Bad and the Weird."

"Oh, no, it's great," she says back. Kim is wearing dark glasses, a baseball cap and gray canvas sneakers, which he laces as we begin the 13-minute ride to the valley floor.

Then the translator adds, "Oh, I'm not going to say that."

"What?"

"He's being humble. He says the movie's popular because of the stars."

Well, that may be, but it couldn't quite explain why a young American girl was going to see the flick twice when screening time was at such a premium. Only movie love could provide an answer.

Monday night's final screening of the Irish coming-of-age film "Kisses" brought the 35th Telluride Film Festival to a close shortly before midnight. Almost immediately, a handful of the movies and their filmmakers would head to Canada, where Thursday night kicked off the Toronto International Film Festival, which ends Sept. 13.

Memorial Day has long lost its stature as the start of the summer movie season. But Labor Day remains a fine demarcation of the end of tentpole time. Sure, there will be exceptions to the rule of blockbusters in summer, serious fare in fall. But the back-to-back salvos of Telluride and Toronto (Venice is there for the jet-set) always suggest a change in the movie-watching weather.

Highlights of this year's Telluride festival include tribute interviews with director David Fincher, who previewed 20 minutes of the holiday release "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"; the miraculously tender work of Kristin Scott Thomas and Elsa Zylberstein as a just-released convict and her younger sister in Philippe Claudel's "I've Loved You So Long"; and Danny Boyle's fleet, fantastic and hands-down audience fave, "Slumdog Millionaire."

### **Tale of two movie fests**

The mood in Telluride is always infused by the spectacular San Juan Mountains. Toronto, though, is marked by the amusing spectacle of a first weekend in which the Four Seasons Hotel becomes a temple for texting, cellphone- and camera-wielding star-gazers.

Studios as well as indie distributors market their films this weekend, bringing the "talent" in for the hamster-wheel rituals of print-radio-television roundtables as well as one-on-one interviews. This doesn't mean the performers aren't gifted. It's just that during the carnival, they are constantly spoken about in ways that invite smirks.

Who's due in Toronto? Democratic National Convention gaslight Spike Lee and the cast of his World War II pic, "Miracle at St. Anna"; the Coen Brothers, Brad Pitt, George Clooney and Co., fresh from the canals and red carpets of the

Venice Film Festival for "Burn After Reading"; Ed Harris and Viggo Mortensen for "Appaloosa," directed by Harris; period-piece maven Keira Knightley and Ralph Fiennes for "The Duchess,"; unlikely (and all the more dear for it) heartthrob Michael Cera for the romantic comedy "Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist"; and the aforementioned Thomas in "I've Loved You So Long." Consider that a much-abridged list.

Telluride is not without stars. Some are even actors, like Jeff Goldblum, Greg Kinnear and Lauren Graham. Performers like Felicite Wouassi of the French dramedy "With a Little Help From Myself," and "American Violet" lead Nicole Behaire are quasars in the making. But the celebs there are just as often directors.

At an intimate meal for "Happy-Go-Lucky," Mike Leigh generously offered his delicious hamachi-jalapeño appetizer to his neighbors, including Miramax president Daniel Battsek. A vibrant departure for the director of such wonderful but grim works as "Vera Drake" and "Naked," "Happy-Go-Lucky" floats on Sally Hawkins' joyously idiosyncratic performance as Poppy, whose happiness is nearly as mysterious as it is wondrously unshakable.

In Telluride, stardom can be embodied in cinemaphiles such as Slovenian thinker Slavoj Zizek, who, as guest director, became something of the fest's rock star. His books, "The Parallax View" and "In Defense of Lost Causes," sold out at the Between the Covers bookshop. (To borrow from the New York Post's Cindy Adams, "Only in Telluride, kids.")

"His mouth could not keep up with his thoughts," said Sy Grossman, a veteran Tellurider from the Bay Area. Mike Leigh was just as impressed, though the owlish director said he'd stick to talks over the books.

Praise for Goldblum's turn in Paul Schrader's film, based on Israeli author Yoram Kaniuk's novel about a Holocaust survivor and former circus clown being treated in a mental institution, was vociferous and nearly unanimous. (I opted to see "Adam Resurrected," along with Kim Ji- Woon's volatile tale later in Toronto to view works peculiar to Telluride.)

### **Looking back, forward**

Kinnear and Graham flew into town with the sneak preview of "Flash of Genius." In a few weeks, Marc Abraham's film about windshield-wiper inventor Robert Kearns, who went up against the automakers, will open the Aspen Filmfest 2008

(Sept. 24-28). That festival's executive director, Laura Thielen, was seen walking along Telluride's main street, fairly relaxed for a person on the eve of her own fest. "We're locked," she said of her program, then asked the question at the heart of every festival: "What have you liked?"

And so, some parting glances from Telluride:

- Danny Boyle's "Slumdog Millionaire," set in Mumbai, India, tells the story of Jamal, a youngster poised to win the jackpot on the nation's version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" The funny-sad-funny film is so boldly entertaining, it's easy to downplay the artistry the Brit director achieves. But all his fine and compassionate work in films as disparate as "Trainspotting," "28 Days Later" and "Millions" has found fullest expression here.

- The collaboration of director Cathal Black and Thomas Lynch, undertaker and poet. The "Learning Gravity" duo could be seen queuing for a variety of movies between screenings of their poignant, visually lovely documentary about "the dismal trade," the beauty of language and the wonders of identity.

- On the gondola the first day, Tim Disney wasn't being coy. Really. He just wanted to know what movies had received buzz already. Then he confessed he was the director of "American Violet," based on the story of a young African-American woman who fought back with the aid of the ACLU when an overzealous Texas D.A. rounded up black folks in a housing project on drug-dealing charges.

It was stirring to see that the truest star of Telluride might have been Regina Kelly, the real woman the moving film is based on.

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