

# Getting to grips with reality

Documentaries in competition take a resolute look at the contemporary world

Filip Šebek

A record 695 documentaries were entered for this year's KVIFF. As is often typical of the genre, many of these films took an unflinching look at topical issues. The 16 movies that were finally selected for the Documentary Films in Competition section also pull no punches in terms of their subject matter.

Helena Třeštková helps fly the flag for the Czech Republic's proud documentary-making tradition with *René*. Spanning two decades, this searingly authentic film looks at the tumultuous life of habitual criminal and eccentric author René Plášil on his journey from prison to prison and his short spells of freedom in between. By contrast, Spanish documentary makers Xavier Baig and Óscar Moreno had less time to paint a portrait of their equally fascinating protagonist in *Today, the Same Day Is Different*. Their visually stunning film follows terminally ill drug addict Toni during the last six months of his life.

Slovak director Juraj Lehotský's *Blind Loves* offers a less bleak portrait of the visually impaired, whose world is often brighter and more colorful than that of those who can see.

Several of the competition documentaries feature very strong female personalities. In *The*



Living in a dark but happy world – Slovak documentary *Blind Loves*.

*Ladies* we meet two elderly Hungarian sisters who have earned their living for decades as seamstresses in America. 87-year-old Vali and 93-year-old Mimi still remain spirited and vibrant in old age despite a lifetime of hardship. New Zealand director Vincent Ward's *Rain of the Children* also features an elderly lady – 80-year-old Puihi from the Maori Tuhoe tribe. This intriguing character, who has borne 14 children, was a renowned beauty in her youth and was chosen by the tribe's shaman as the wife for his son. Lyuba, the central character of the award-winning documentary *The Mother* "only" has nine kids. This film is a raw but power-

fully poetic portrait of a woman who manages to love her children and lead a dignified life despite the difficulties she faces in contemporary Russia. Argentinian-based Czech director Jana Boková's *Bye Bye Shanghai* takes a very personal look at the fates of several Czech emigrés who fled communism.

The documentary film section also presents films about outstanding personalities whom few people remember today. These include Lithuanian-born Ladislav Starewitch (1882–1965) who is considered to be one of the most inventive personalities of world cinema. In *The Bug Trainer* Donatas Ulvydas and Linas

brates the life of painter Jamshid Aminfar, who fearlessly exhibits and sells his darkly expressionistic paintings on the streets of Teheran. The star of the Spanish documentary *Heroes, Wings Are Not Necessary to Fly* is a well-known trance DJ and caring father, who was born without arms.

Some of the shorter documentaries on display are also imbued with a specific sense of place. German director Bettina Timm's *Cosmic Station* explores the lives of six people, who have been studying cosmic rays for decades on a remote Armenian mountain in complete isolation from the outside world. The Hungarian film *Lost World* charts the disappearance of a Budapest community that falls foul of progress. In *Just Like Heaven* a Dutch-Polish couple go to a farflung corner of northern Poland and try to adapt to life in a harsh but beautiful environment. In *Everything Is Relative*, Danish filmmaker Mikala Krogh sets off to different corners of the world to try and discover the extent to which supposedly universal human characteristics depend on people's living conditions. *Bigger, Stronger, Faster\** is an entertaining documentary by the producers of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which explores Americans' obsession with physical perfection.

## WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Milan Gagnon  
New York, USA



### ■ What are you doing here?

I'm working in the press center. I guess the title is English editor, or assistant. It involves editing, translations and writing stuff to be translated. It goes onto a website. This is my very first time at the festival, and in the city.

### ■ Have you been to the Czech Republic before?

Yes, I worked two years as a copy editor and entertainment reporter at the Prague Post.

### ■ How is being a journalist different in the United States and the Czech Republic?

You don't get your phone calls answered as often here, and the same goes with e-mail. Of course, you can drink beer with lunch and the people you talk to are usually interesting and quotable.

### ■ What are you most looking forward to?

Free movies. I've been in grad school and I didn't have a chance to step out of school and take in too much culture.

## REVIEWERS RECOMMEND

Richard Mowe

Film Critic – The Scotsman/Irish Examiner



### In the City of Sylvia

Director: José Luis Guerín, Spain, 2007  
July 4, 2pm, Karlovy Vary Theater

Spanish director José Luis Guerín who has scored a reputation from documentaries, revisits his past preoccupation with urban atmosphere and demonstrates his instinctive grasp of cinema in this fictional film that is almost entirely free of dialogue. A young artist (Xavier Lafitte) returns to Strasbourg, the city of Sylvia - whom he met there four years ago. In the climax of the film, the young man's determined pursuit through the backstreets of an ethereal beauty who may or may not be the woman in question, is mesmerising.



### Of Time and the City

Director: Terence Davies, United Kingdom, 2008  
July 4, 6.30pm, Cas Cinema

Described as a "visual poem", Terence Davies focuses on his love/hate relationship with his home town, Liverpool, this year's European City of Culture. "Cut it as if it were fiction", Davies says, with "images which speak" and a layered sound track of popular and classical music, voices, radio clips and a powerful commentary by Davies himself creates a very personal study of the city beyond the Beatles and its football clubs.



### What Just Happened

Director: Barry Levinson, USA, 2008  
July 4, 10.30pm, Grand Hall – Hotel Thermal

Anyone with even a remote love of celluloid can hardly fail to warm to Barry Levinson's affectionate and insightful sortie into the biz. Based on producer Art Linson's book *What Just Happened?* Bitter Hollywood Tales from the Front Line, the film tells of one highly successful Hollywood producer and the ways in which he juggles a myriad of professional crises, as well as some awkward domestic issues at the same time. Robert De Niro, one of the festival's special guests, plays the movie producer, and gives a sardonic and knowing-comedic performance.



### Days and Clouds

Director: Silvio Soldini, Italy, 2007  
July 4, 9.30pm, Small Hall – Hotel Thermal

Silvio Soldini, who made the delightful *Bread and Tulips*, astutely looks at an increasingly familiar nightmare: an upper middle-class family whose comfortable lives suddenly disappear. He's powerfully aided in creating this poignant social drama by two superb lead performances from Margherita Buy as Elsa and Antonio Albanese as her husband. When Elsa's husband Michele becomes unemployed, she realises he has lost more than his job. It feels as if all the energy has been taken from him, and he appears increasingly helpless, all of which soon takes a toll on their marriage.

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