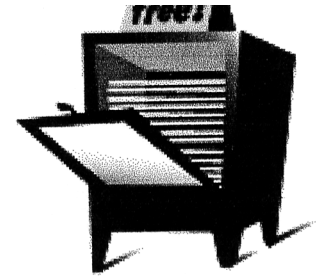


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This week's film

2003 SXSW Conference and Festival

Austin plays host to non-Hollywood fare

By Devin D. O'Leary

The 2003 South By Southwest (SXSW) Film Conference and Festival, which took place March 7-15 in Austin, marked the tenth-anniversary of the still-hip-enough-not-to-be-considered-venerable film gathering. Initially labeled a "warm-up" for the world-famous SXSW Music Showcase, the SXSW Film Festival has, over the last decade, become a valuable showcase for indie film. While bigger festivals like Sundance have been co-opted by money-hungry film buyers and publicity-crazed studios, SXSW Film Festival remains dedicated to the kind of lo-fi, do-it-yourself ethic that helped the popular SXSW Music Fest launch indie label bands like And You Shall Know Us By The Trail of Our Dead, Whiskeytown and Hazeldine.

This year's SXSW Film Fest paid tribute to past years by bringing back old favorites like George Huang's *Swimming With Sharks* (1995), Tim McCanlies' *Dancer, Texas Pop. 81*, (1998), Aviva Kempner's *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg* (1999) and Tony Shaloub's *Made-Up* (2002). Local Austin boys done good, Robert Rodriguez (*Spy Kids*) and Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused*), were, of course, on hand to share their memories of years past.

Those who prefer to look into the future, however, had plenty to choose from. There were workshops on film festival programming (how self-referential), panel discussions on film journalism and conversations with luminaries such as Peter Fonda and Joel Schumacher. ... And, of course, there were the movies.

EvenHand is the kind of film you go to a film festival to see. It's witty, original, well-acted, well-made and will probably never see the light of day in your local cineplex. Shot in San Antonio with a local crew and a New York director (Joseph Pierson), **EvenHand** is a riotously funny buddy cop comedy. Unlike typical Hollywood cop movies, **EvenHand** follows the adventures of two rather realistic police officers, the principled young rookie (Bill Dawes) and the short-tempered, smart-ass veteran (Bill Sage, combining equal parts Charles Bronson and Jim Carrey). Instead of fighting drug lords or busting up international smuggling rings, these cops spend their days doing all the dull, routine tasks that ordinary patrol officers do: rousting drunks, harassing motorists, answering the same domestic dispute calls day after day. To combat the mind-numbing boredom, our elder officer has developed a snarky, mean-spirited view of humanity. ("The problem with people is, you talk to them, they answer you back--I fucking hate that.") The cast displays exquisite comic timing and Pierson handles the film's subtle shift from comedy

to drama with a perfectly assured hand. Sadly, the film has none of the requisite elements to make it as an art house hit (pretension, angst, subtitles) and none of the requisite elements to make it as a mainstream hit (Brad Pitt, a U2 song, a giant explosion).

Representing the Asian contingent so popular in film festivals these days was *The Eye*. Writing-directing-producing duo The Pang Brothers (Oxide and Danny) are the hot Asian filmmakers right now. This breakout film, shot in their native Thailand, has already been snapped up by Tom Cruise's production company for a remake. It tells the story of a young blind woman who gets a cornea transplant and starts seeing what she believes are ghosts. Though it shares certain narrative similarities with *The Sixth Sense*, *The Eye* proves to be a wildly inventive and visually spectacular little chiller.

SXSW poster Director Don Coscarelli (*Phantasm*, *The Beastmaster*) was on Texas soil to unveil his long-awaited horror comedy *Bubba Ho-Tep*. This cult-film-in-the-making features Bruce Campbell (*Evil Dead*) as an aged Elvis Presley stuck in an East Texas rest home who meets up with an elderly black gentleman (Ossie Davis) claiming to be J.F.K. The two, naturally, join forces to battle a soul-sucking mummy bent on killing off the local retired population. The film is filled with snappy dialogue and low-budget laughs.

Both the jury and the audience chose Alex Holdridge's twentysomething romantic comedy *Sexless* as the best narrative film of the festival. Cutting out the sappy stuff and going straight for the funny, sad, self-delusional heart of modern relationships, Holdridge has crafted a fresh and poignant film--another little gem deserving of a wider audience.

On the documentary side, *Flag Wars*, about an inner city Ohio neighborhood being gentrified by a newly rich homosexual population, and *girlhood*, a clear-eyed look at two girls in a juvenile detention center from Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Liz Garbus, split votes for the jury and audience fave.

Celebritywise, Robert Duvall was on hand to premiere his latest acting/writing/directing effort, *Assassination Tango*. The film introduces us to a seasoned hitman (Duvall) sent to Argentina on a mission. Due to a delay, our protagonist gets stuck cooling his heels in Buenos Aires and soon finds himself drawn to the local dance scene. Beautifully shot and marvelously acted, the film is damaged only by a meandering script.

If you weren't able to make it to this year's SXSW Film Festival, you can still catch a handful of the films (including the Jewish con flick *The Burial Society*, the Australian crime flick *The Hard Way*, the mock-documentary *A Mighty Wind* and the sci-fi anthology *Robot Stories*) when they make their way to the Taos Talking Picture Festival in April.