

Cinema Hampton

by Bettina Marks

The 11th Annual Hamptons International Film festival opened last October with the East Coast Premiere of Wayne Kramer's *The Cooler*, starring the darling icon of Hollywood East, resident of Amagansett and native of Long Island, Alec Baldwin, as an unhappy mob boss and William H. Macy as the unluckiest man in Vegas, whose luck starts to change when he falls in love with the new cocktail waitress, played by Maria Bello. The screening room was all a glitter with both the stars and the director in attendance on opening night, kicking off the beginning of five days of fervor for both the independent film community and some of the entertainment industry's heavyweights.

The Hamptons Film Festival was originally founded to celebrate the American Independent film – long, short, narrative and documentary, and to introduce exceptional films and filmmakers from around the world to its discriminating audiences. In its first year it included 30 features. This year there were almost 70, with half the entries in competition directed by women (!) and 140 films, including shorts, in total. Ticket sales have nearly doubled since then.

Because of its alliance with the Berlin International Film Festival, there was a strong presence of international films with provocative subjects of global, social or political conflict. Extraordinary films made by local Long Island filmmakers highlighting the creativity and resources in Long Island were featured in the popular "View From Long Island" section, along with films made by and about Native Americans (Southampton is home to the Shinnecock nation), along with student films, videos and a host of seminars and panel discussions.

On Saturday, I caught a very provocative made-for-TV documentary Marvin Anderson's *Nightmare: Stories Of The Innocence Project*, as directed by Nick Davis. Barry Scheck, one of the attorneys who founded the Innocence Project (also known to many from the publicity he received during the O.J. Simpson trial) was in attendance, along with Marvin Anderson himself – the latter quite an inspirational man.

The Innocence Project researches and hopes to exonerate wrongfully-accused and incarcerated individuals from the penal and legal system's incompetence's. Marvin Anderson served 15 years in a Virginia prison after being wrongly convicted of robbery, sodomy, abduction and two counts of rape in 1982, at the age of 17, and was sentenced to two hundred and ten years of imprisonment. Thanks to the advent of DNA evidence, and the fortitude of Mr. Scheck and Peter Neufeld, the co-founders of the organization – along with their team of law students – he was fully exonerated in 2001. Mr. Anderson's family, who he continued to thank for their unending support and love both in the film and in the discussion afterwards, accompanied him. As he walked through the aisle to the back of the theatre, the reference made by Mr. Schleiff, head honcho of Court TV, from *To Kill A Mockingbird*, created a chilling emotional experience for everyone: "There walks a great man." The film will premiere on Court TV on January 29th, 2004. It is unfortunate that viewers watching the story on television won't experience the emotion that I did while in the presence of the man, himself.

On Sunday, I attended the screening of the nine films included in one of the Short Films presentations. *House Hunting*, which won the Audience Award for Best Short, was my favorite, as well. Based on a short story by Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon, it was competently-directed by Amy Lippman and stars Paul Rudd and Zooey Deschanel as a couple whose already fraught with tension – new marriage is exacerbated by the process of their search for a new house. It is a perfect parable. It is both entertaining and poignant, with a twisted ending from the real estate broker, played by Terry Kinney of Oz fame.

What Are You Having?, as directed by Benjamin Meyer, is a wonderfully creative interpretation of "boy meets girl." Sam is trying to decide what to order for lunch when a mystery woman enters the diner and makes his heart jump. During several fantasy sequences of his attempt to pick her up, his anxiety is illustrated. The conversations of the fellow diners become more audible, revealing everyone's disconnected relationships.

Each year the festival presents *A Conversation With...* between a distinguished moderator and a surprise guest. This year, it was hosted by John Anderson of *Newsday*, with stage & screen legends Betty Comden, Patricia Neal and Fay Wray.

The festival gives away \$180,000 worth of in-kind prizes to winners of its Golden Starfish competitions (for features, documentaries and shorts). *Screen Door Jesus* – written and directed by Kirk Davis and winner of Best Narrative – is a series of interwoven dramas that center around the sighting of Jesus on the back-porch screen door in small-town East Texas. Meanwhile, the Spike TV Best Documentary Award was presented to Amy Morrison William's *The Morrison Project*, which documents the life of Jean Morrison, a brilliant writer and philosopher, who gets his head beat in by a jealous husband. Unable to recover, he turns to beating his six children. The film recounts the time of art, addiction and violence surrounding the childhood of the Morrison clan and their life during the 70's on New York's lower East side.

The Stella Artois Short Film Award went to Aimee Lagos and Kristin C. Dehnert's *Underground*, a heart-racing ride through a woman's day on a city subway with a shocking conclusion that challenges the audience to face themselves, their perceptions, prejudices and preconceived notions about people based on gender, race and fear. The Films of Conflict and Resolution Award went to Spencer Nakasako's *Refugee*, a lively and thoughtful documentary that follows Cambodian refugees raised in San Francisco on their trip to Cambodia to meet family members for the first time. Personal and political histories converge in a resonant tale of family, conflict and new generations.

Madness And Genius, a first feature as written, produced and directed by 22-year old Ryan Slinger was the recipient of the Sloan Foundation Film Prize in Science and Technology. The Audience Award for Best Long Island Film went to *Speedo*, directed by Jesse Moss. This documentary is a candid and intimate portrait of a working-class Long Island mechanic who pursues his dream to compete nationally in the demolition derby. Jon Favreau's comedy, *Elf*, with Will Ferrell, and Peter Webber's drama, *Girl With A Pearl Earring*, starring "It Actress 2003" Scarlett Johansson, were favored in the "Spotlight" section.

The Festival's closing film screening of *The Human Stain*, directed by Robert Benton – adapted from the Philip Roth novel – was absolutely brilliant, with exceptional performances by Anthony Hopkins, Nicole Kidman and rising star Wentworth Miller; the latter who plays the young Anthony Hopkins' character. Miller's striking good looks and captivating performance leave you with his lasting charm, which I'm sure will emerge in other films very shortly. Kidman delivers a remarkable "character actor" performance as a janitor and young lover to Hopkins' aging professor character, which reveals the depth of her enormous talent. This is a powerful film that touched me deeply with its haunting and evocative story.

The discriminating vision of Rajendra Roy, Programming Director, and Denise Kasell, Executive Director, brings exceptional films of merit and importance to both local and world cinema in an accessible and casual atmosphere where movie stars can mix with student filmmakers amidst the glitz and glam of the Hamptons' creative landscape.