

# A WORLD OF OPTIONS

The 18th Portland International Film Festival  
unreels from Feb. 17 to March 5

by Kelly M. Bryan

**P**roduction deadlines, a snow storm, and a particularly pernicious flu virus conspired to keep me away from screenings for PIFF 18—the Northwest Film Center's annual Portland International Film Festival. I only made it to one, that of the lone Irish film, which leaves me in the same boat as most people, having to rely on someone else's opinion or optimistic program blurbs written by someone who hasn't seen the film either. With 52

## Cinema

films from 34 countries to choose from, an international-cinema buff can get a little bleary-eyed around this time of year. My recommendation for the best overall plan of attack: Stick with the obscure and the ones you can't live without. Remember, many of the more popular films will be back for theatrical runs.

As an indication that the year of the queer may well be turning into the decade of the queer, this year's festival sports three films that focus on gay themes. The Cuban entry, also Cuba's submission



Albert Finney in *A Man of No Importance*

for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, is *Strawberry and Chocolate*, where the unlikely friendship that develops between a fortysomething gay artist and the straight arrow political science student he tries to pick up is set against a backdrop of political and social repression and intolerance. One of the three British films, *Priest*, takes on Catholic orthodoxy with the story of a young priest assigned to his first parish, who finds that his newly minted ideas of right and wrong are sorely tested in the real world of human suffering and desire. Things get pretty dicey when he admits to himself that he's gay and goes out and finds himself a lover; he also comes up against the dilemma of the confessional when he hears of a father's incest that he feels powerless to confront.

In the Irish film *A Man of No Importance*, Albert Finney plays middle-aged Alfie Byrne, a man who has spent all of his attention on aesthetics and not bothered with love. He is a bus conductor obsessed with Oscar Wilde, whose passengers are a rapt and captive audience to whom he recites poetry and of whom he has made an amateur theater group. One morning a beautiful and mysterious new commuter enters his bus, striking Byrne

as the perfect princess for his production of Wilde's *Salomé*.

Byrne encounters as much opposition to the steamy play in 1963 Dublin, as Wilde did in 1892 London. The production risks being booted out of the church theater hall, and Byrne's scandalized, moralistic landlord is fomenting disloyalty in the cast. And the play is, in a sense, dangerous. Its over-the-top sensuality sets a number of fuses alight, and one leads to Byrne's own epiphany. It turns out that he's hiding an Oscar Wilde-style costume in his closet—and a secret love for the handsome young driver of his bus.

With fine performances by all of the actors, *A Man of No Importance* is highly engaging, funny and touching. Directed by relative newcomer Suri Krishnamma, the film is a tad over sentimental at times, and treads some rather well-trampled lanes, but its several moments of fresh perception and its message of simple acceptance make it a winner.

For deadpan humor I'm counting on the Finnish entry, *Total Balalaika Show*, by Aki Kaurismaki. It's a sort of sequel to *The Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, which followed a band of low-talent, pointy-haired, would-be Elvises who come to tour in the U.S., because we'll listen to anything. This one is a concert film where the Cowboys—gigging with 100 singers, 40 musicians and 20 dancers (you may have seen them on the MTV Music Awards)—cover everything from "The Volga Boatman" to "Knockin' on Heaven's Door."

I'm also looking forward to *Kaspar Hauser*, a retelling of the story first filmed in 1974 by Werner Herzog, wherein a young man raised without human contact appears in a German town one day in 1828 and becomes a local curiosity. Herzog's movie, one of the first I saw that gave me hope of a cinematic world beyond the Terror of Tinseltown, left many questions and plot twists unexplored; the current version promises to delve into the political intrigue behind the wild child's bleak upbringing.

A number of festival films this year deal with the changing roles of women, usually, but not always, within the confines of traditional marriage. Look for Taiwan's *The Wooden Man's Bride*; Iran's *Sara*; China's *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker*, which features a woman who's been raised to live as a man to retain her family's hold on its fireworks business in the absence of a male heir, and *The Story of Xinghua*; Tunisia's *Silences of the Palace*; the United States' *Picture Bride*, about a Japanese woman who comes to Hawaii for an arranged marriage; and the Korean melodrama *The Story of Two Women*, in which the conflict of two women who must share a husband turns to an alliance.

And several films offer rare chances for insight into human struggles taking place in far-flung corners of the globe: love and war in the former Yugoslavia's *Vokovar Poste Restante*, and the Macedonian-British coproduction *Before the Rain*; the disappearance of pastoral ways of life in the Netherlands' *It's Been a Lovely Day*; and the ravages of cultural invasion on native populations in New Zealand's *Once Were Warriors*.

Advance tickets (\$6.50) and festival passes (\$90) are available from the Northwest Film Center, 1119 SW Park Ave., 221-1156; call 225-5555, ext. 4734, for festival schedule.

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