

Guy Maddin's Berlin Blog

Monkey Business

Sunday, February 18, 2007 | 05:50 PM ET

Film critic Lisa Schwarzbaum once wrote that if she died and went to heaven, she hoped it would be art directed by Guy Maddin. With delirious, stunning films like Tales from Gimli Hospital, Careful and The Saddest Music in the World, the Winnipeg director has cemented his reputation as one of cinema's great visionaries. His latest work - a silent movie spectacle called Brand Upon the Brand! - is screening at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, which runs until Feb. 18. Maddin will be documenting his Berlin adventures in a blog for Arts Online.



Saturday, Feb. 17

Last night was the big [awards](#) ceremony here at the Berlinale. All the Golden, Silver and Teddy Bear trophies were dealt out to an extremely heterogeneous array of directors and actors from round the world who, owing to their identically empowered smiles of victory, suddenly resembled members of the same family. They were beaming and well groomed siblings and parents in a complicated, interracial Brady Bunch.

Strange that, as competitive as I am, I never determined whether my film was in competition. It probably wasn't because I didn't win anything. Anyway, all the winners were gracious and beautiful and full of poise – all those things winners are.

Ebullient Esther Robinson nabbed the Teddy for her unconventional doc *A Walk Into the Sea*, her account of Danny Williams, onetime lover of Andy Warhol and resident filmmaker at the Factory. Before suddenly killing himself in 1966, he produced hours of zeitgeist-defining experimental silent films only recently discovered. Esther wears her victory graciously – hard to resent I suppose. I was happy to congratulate her.

Then, as if to sate whatever vestiges of competitiveness I might still have, my wonderfully intuitive hosts designed a pleasant surprise for me. At a venue far from Hitler's airport, where thousands sat in attendance at the glitzy awards show, Berlinale programmer Stefanie Schulte Strathaus contrived a mischievous tribute to me for a couple hundred beer-drinking patrons of her Cheap Gossip salon – a kind of beauty parlor and bar installed just for the festival.

My informal fete started with a screening of a new film by New Yorker Marie Losier, who stunned me by creating a delightful and gorgeous fantasy in which she becomes belly-tumescent with a mysterious illness which passes only when she gives birth to a pair of hands – the hands of Guy Maddin it turns out.

After the film, Stefanie urged me to tell the audience the story of my traumatic third birthday party, when my parents hired an arthritic old Hollywood chimpanzee, who had recently retired and come to live in Winnipeg, to entertain. The grizzled primate showed up in a cowboy hat, chaps and a holster with a pair of six-shooters tucked inside. The first thing it did at the party was glug down an unattended highball of scotch and beeline for the piano to pound out a cacophony of moronic notes. I was totally smitten and joined the chimp on the piano bench to tinkle out a few notes of my own. Jealous of the attention I was now stealing from him, the alcoholic simian pulled out a six-shooter and pistol-whipped me, tumbling me to the floor where I cracked my head loudly. (This was the first time I made an entire room laugh, and the humiliation was life altering.) The chimp went berserk, leaping onto the dining room table where it placed its footprint in my birthday cake, tried to find more scotch in a pitcher of Nestle's Quik, of which it took a distasteful, hairy-lipped swig. Then, sensing it was about to be corralled by its handler, leapt onto our curtains to escape, tearing them from the wall.

While I was narrating this self-piteous tale to the house, I heard a piano start playing. I thought at first Stefanie had arranged a live score for my story, a nod to the live score of my movie here. Then I looked at the piano, it was being played by a man in a chimp mask. Then things got strange. [Vaginal Davis](#), whom I had just met, rose to her full two-metre height in the theatre's back row, hoisting before her cantilevered chest a massive birthday cake, with the number 3 and three sparklers stuck in its icing. Vage sang a version of Happy Birthday substituting my endlessly repeated name for the lyrics. She kept the melody close to the famous tune, but just different enough to make me think that she must have hired lawyers to advise her just how close she could come to the melody of this famously litigation-bedeviled song.

I was hypnotized with discomfort, completely unsure of what was expected of me during this dreamy re-enactment. Another, smaller, chimp appeared, dressed as a cowboy, complete with toy holster and guns. Soon, I found myself at the piano – this was once Marlene Dietrich's piano, by the way, which now belongs to the theatre space. I was encouraged to play alongside the larger, more frightening chimp-masked performer, whose identity was a complete puzzle to me. Vaginal kept up the mellifluous loops of her songlike thing: my name over and over again!

Tentatively I pecked at the keyboard, no better at piano as a bulky 50-year-old than I was at three. As expected, the monkey beside me turned and attacked. I fell to the floor in a pantomime swoon, feeling this was what was hoped for from me, and a little eager to see this to its end – ASAP! The smaller chimp jumped on my birthday cake, which Vaginal had left on the floor, precisely for this purpose. This seemed to bring an end to the ritual proceedings, or at least everyone stood around staring at each other as if there could be no more.

Then, an old archery bull's-eye was produced from nowhere and the chimp performers peeled their chimp faces off and hung the rubbery things over pins stuck in the centre of this target. I was then given mini-cakes to toss at the masks. The idea was for me to humiliate these now-empty faces with smeary blows from pie projectiles. Within seconds I completed this cathartic mission, then fell back to the floor in an exultant faint, completely cured of my chimp terrors. Or perhaps my old traumas were merely now buried and forgotten beneath new ones – because now, after this discombobulating and honorific episode, I feel I can never appear in public again without stammering and blushing.

But after this week in Berlin, which really has been the most exhilarating highlight of my filmmaking career, why would I ever need to appear in public again?