

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Film Festival Diary – TIFF 2014

Tod Hardin · Wednesday, September 10th, 2014

Cultural Weekly's Tod Hardin is on assignment in Toronto to offer his day-by-day account of what he's experiencing at the **Toronto International Film Festival**. Tod is attending the Festival through September 8 and will offer a glimpse of all the doings. New entries will be added to this page, so check back daily, through Tuesday, September 9.



TIFF Continues to Out Do All Others

[divider]DAY 1 – SEPTEMBER 4[/divider]

After spending four days with friends and family in Detroit, I'm grabbing a Greyhound bus and making a b-line for the creative mecca "north of the border" – Toronto, Canada, or TO (Toronto, Ontario) as the locals often refer to it.

It's been about five years since I've visited this grand city, so I'm excited to once again have the opportunity to do so. To see old friends. To feel the energy of the streets. To mingle among one of most scrumptiously diverse, intelligent and creative populations on Earth ... and to do so all while attending what I consider to be the very best of annual exhibitions of cinema – the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).

But first there was the matter of this five-hour Greyhound journey that was required in order to get there. It wasn't my preferred mode of transport, but at \$29, it was the obvious choice in a world ruled by increasing budgetary constraint. And besides, their website proclaimed that Greyhound Canada had been re-born, with updated vehicles outfitted with an abundance of power outlets, extra leg room and broadband-caliber wifi. In the words of Stevie Wonder, I proclaimed: 'Sign, sealed, delivered. I'm yours!'

So off I went. Step one: get over the border. No problem. A dear friend, Veronica Williams, took up the call of duty and quickly had me across the only US border crossing in which you actually go south in order to go north of the border to Canada. Yes, confusing, but we do things differently in Detroit.

After burning two hours at a local coffee shop that huge metal tube on wheels pulled up and off we went.

Re-born? LOL!! If this was a re-born motorcoach, please Greyhound Canada, take it back, cut it's throat and bury it deep in the waters of the Hudson Bay! Ok, I'm a baby. Having power outlets, extra leg room, and super fast internet was something to look forward to, but it just wasn't in the cards. Moving on.



“Scenery”

If you've never driven the route from Windsor to Toronto, what you've missed out on is perhaps one of the most uninteresting stretches of road you'll ever encounter. It's a semi-truck filled highway that is about as flat as flat can be, lined with corn field after corn field, and littered with hundreds of wind turbines. But hey, you could say something similar about thousands of miles US interstates, and I didn't really mind, as I was engrossed in my first viewing of Wes Anderson's *Bottle Rocket*, as well as few episodes of the Fox TV series, *Sleepy Hollow*.

Due to a one-hour delay in the city of London, I finally rolled into Toronto in the early evening, a bit weary, but ready to rediscover Canada's largest city and cultural mecca.



King Street is alive with the energy of TIFF 2014

It did not disappoint. Great city. Great people. And TIFF has certainly come a long way since I last attended the festival several years ago. Their new facility – the Bell TIFF Lightbox – is beautiful and King Street (one of Toronto's main thoroughfares) has been transformed into a pedestrian mall during the festival – providing a more condensed experience, and in turn one with more energy. I'll miss the old haunts of Yorkville and Cabbagetown, but this feels good. It feels right, and really compliments TIFF's long history of being a highly accessible event for the general public.

Day One was capped off with a wonderful Italian dinner with Tiska Wiedermann of [Raindance Canada](#), accompanied by far too many glasses of wine, cocktails and a stiff grappa nightcap.

Yeah, I miss this town. I miss this festival. And I can't wait to see what's in store tomorrow.

[divider]DAY 2 – SEPTEMBER 5[/divider]I log in to write this entry just 15 minutes before the witching hour.

It's been a long but rewarding day. An early wakeup, compliments of sleeping in a foreign bed, had me a bit dreary and grumpy, but I managed to pull myself together and make it to the TIFF Industry Centre by 9:00am, with the hopes of gathering my press credentials and catching the new James Franco flick. Of course nothing ever goes to plan.

After an hour of trying to sort out who I was – as I was mistaken for a reporter with a similar name – it was too late to catch the planned screening (sorry James), so I set up shop at a small table, charged up the cell phone and laptop and did some research on my next planned screening at noon.

Satisfied with what I had learned, I started my five-minute walk to the theater at 11:30am, but was soon distracted. I'm still a sucker for seeing a true movie star in the flesh, so when I stumbled across a mob of fans and paparazzi gathered on the side of the Bell Lightbox building, I couldn't resist planting myself firmly and awaiting that brief glimpse of super stardom – especially given that it would be Robert Downey Jr. and the legendary Sir Robert Duval gracing us with their

presence. Ok, I know he's not knighted, nor will he ever be, but that Duval chap sure as shit should be ... by somebody. And don't ask me what "sure as shit" means.

11:45am still offered no sign targets. Could I make the screening at noon – one in which I had committed to meet our publisher and film industry executive, Adam Leipzig, at?

11:50am and I'm really sweating bullets now. Tough decision. The "Secret Service-esqu" entourage, along with a harem of publicists, were now stirring like ants on a discarded popsicle stick, so something had to give.

And it did. At 11:52 there he was. The one I really wanted to see. Col. Kilgore, Tom Hagen, Gus McRae and Maj. Frank Burns (had to throw that in there) ... Bobby D! He strolled over to the crowd without much of any expression, but who cares. He was there, just ten feet away and my man crush was in full force.



Robert Downey Jr., emerges to greet fans and press. Shortly after, Iron Man followed suit and hats off

to him for coming over and signing autographs and saying hello to quite a few people. I admire the guy. When most have given him up for career death, he's put together one of the greatest comeback stories in Hollywood history. Perhaps even one worthy of film of its own.

It was short but splendid. 11:58am and I'm obviously going to be late. Hell I wasn't even sure if I would be allowed in, given that it was an industry screening, but I went for it, and with a smile on my face was allowed to enter the theater – laptop bag in one hand, and festival goody bag in the other.

With the film already under way, the house lights were down and my eyes were nearly useless having not adjusted yet. I scampered up the stairs, searching for an open seat on the end, and managed to trip only twice and fall completely down only once. Victory. Seat taken. Film to be enjoyed.

And enjoy it I did. It was a documentary called *Sunshine Superman*, an endearing story of Carl Boenish, father of the BASE Jumping Movement, and the great love shared between he and his wife Jean – and the love they both shared for jumping off cliffs and other fixed objects (with a parachute, mind you). Despite my late arrival, I instantly became engrossed in this wonderful tale crafted by director Marah Strauch. It's a story that will make you laugh, cry and sit in awe of the majestic beauty experienced by those brave enough to jump off of Buildings, Antennas, Spans and Earth. I'm no film critic, but in my humble opinion, you should see this film, and it's my sincere hope that it will make its way to theatrical distribution sometime in the near future.



Carl and Jean Boenish in *Sunshine Superman*

I was feeling great upon exiting the Scotiabank Theatre. The dreariness and grumpiness had dissipated and I was ready for nourishment. Adam and I grabbed a table at a nearby restaurant and exchanged thoughts on what we had just seen. He too came away with a very fond impression of *Sunshine Superman*, and a strong belief that the film deserves and will receive theatrical

distribution.

Late afternoon now and time to head back to basecamp to research Day 3 activities and get a little rest for the evening festivities with two close friends and a cousin. It's amazing how fast the days go, but my plan was to not over do it today, instead saving my energy for the next three, which are sure to take a great deal of fortitude.

Mother Nature didn't make things easy, as she decided to throw a nasty thunderstorm with gale force winds at us as we searched for the evening's culinary experience. Drenched to the bones, the local Hooters was the closest option with seating, but commonsense reigned and we trudged on one more block, settling into a nice German pub. Rich schnitzels, greasy German meatballs, and plenty of fine beers and cocktails made the discomfort of wetness fade away.

Dinner of course led to late night cocktails at the hotel bar, which was abuzz with festival goers talking about what films they had seen, what celebrities they spotted, what celebrities they didn't spot but hope to, and which other patrons in the bar had hair plugs, fake breasts, or bad wardrobe choices. Ah, the magic that alcohol showers us in.



Happy Bill Murray Day!

On the way up to my room I grabbed a copy of the Festival Daily and was delighted to learn that today was officially Bill Murray Day in Toronto. Had I known this far earlier, my day surely would have been even better – for how could Bill Murray Day not be the best day possible?!? So with that, I wish you all a very happy Bill Murray Day and fond farewell until I can report further tomorrow.

[divider]DAY 3 – SEPTEMBER 6[/divider]

No screenings today, but one business meeting, one great panel discussion and more amazing culinary treats.

The morning got off to a quick start with an early meeting to discuss a potential project for a great non-profit organization. The head of this particular group is a well-intentioned man, but one with very unrealistic expectations, which required a “come to Jesus” type dose of reality to be delivered front and center. Success is possible on this particular project, but not at the grand scale that was expected in just a few short weeks. A more obtainable goal was presented, but no word yet on whether or not that will be agreed to.

From there it was on to an official TIFF discussion panel, which was moderated by our very own Adam Leipzig. *Disruptive Ways to Invest Profitably in Independent Film* was co-presented by our friends at Raindance Canada, and featured a stellar panel: Tara Parker, partner in the Entertainment Group of Goodmans LLP (and also Toronto's Entertainment Lawyer of the Year); Jessica Lacy, Head of Independent and International Films, ICM Partners; Joseph Woolf, Executive Vice President and Head of Media and Entertainment Finance, OneWest Bank; and Brian O'Shea, CEO of The Exchange.



TIFF Panel Discussion: Disruptive Ways to Invest Profitably in Independent Film

What an impressive group of people. Adam did a spectacular job in leading this discussion and the experts provided information that was easy to understand even for this film industry lightweight. Informative, entertaining and very well organized. Hats off to the TIFF and Raindance teams for a job well done, which resulted in a full-house (even the overflow room was full!), no snafus and extremely positive feedback from attendees.

The discussion was followed by mingling among the many industry folks eager to meet the panelists up close and personal, but after an hour I decided to grab a cab back to my hotel, get some writing done and rest up before going back out for dinner.

Ah yes, dinner. Yet another fantastic dining experience, this time at a quaint little Italian place over on Elm Street. We (joined by Adam Leipzig and a neurotic cousin of mine) had opted to avoid the Festival district for this one, preferring a more calm atmosphere in which you could actually hold a conversation. The ratings for this place on Yelp were really solid and I made the five minutes walk there eagerly awaiting what I was sure to be a full staff of Italians, right off the boat, accents in hand. Nada. Not to be.

Three factors gave me great pause as our group entered to put our names in: 1) Hostess: Russian. 2) Bus Boy: Chinese (I believe) and 3) Waitstaff: Indian, as in East Indian.

Oh boy. This had disaster written all over it, but my dear cousin, Susan (the neurotic), was intent on having Italian and it simply made no sense to start our search all over again. So, I figured what the hell. If nothing else the Russian was a knockout babe and place was clean. Seats taken and then there she was. A vivacious lovely Italian woman approached our table and delivered their list of special flawlessly. I kid you not ... this “specials” list was longer than the full menu and she spit it out with nothing more than her memory.

The food arrived and continued by perfect run of truly amazing dining experience. Butternut squash ravioli, with a touch of orange, along with my plate of gnocchi made the day complete.

No dessert tonight, but a fond farewell from our top-notch waitress, who graciously informed us that she was ... Brazilian.

[divider]DAY 4 – SEPTEMBER 6[/divider]

After three days, I’m feeling good and like I’ve got my TIFF feet under me. The size of this festival can be a bit overwhelming, but attending as a press delegate certainly has made things much easier.

I spent much of the morning over at the TIFF Industry Centre, which kind of becomes a home away from home for many press and film industry pros. It’s proven to be a great place to charge up those laptops and smartphones, and also mingle with fellow journalists and up and coming filmmakers.

The latter is what has most inspired me. I’ve come across story after story of people of all ages basically throwing themselves into their projects with a passion that I have probably lacked at many times in my life. I’ve often been a procrastinator, at times not following my dreams and those things that I’m most passionate about, so it’s exciting and inspiring to be among so many that have taken those dice and thrown them across the table – at times risking it all in order to follow the dreams they have, or to further a cause that they have deemed worth of expending their blood,

sweat and tears for.

My schedule only permitted for one film screening today and it's one that I nearly walked out of five minutes into it. Boy am I glad I did not.

It was *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, Julie Taymor's latest foray into filmmaking. Taymor, best known for her work on the stage, has done something that I thought would never be possible ... which is to fully mesmerize me with two-and-a-half hours of Shakespeare. Yes, I'm not a huge fan of Shakespeare – neither reading it, nor seeing it on the stage. But that all changed on this fine day in Toronto.



Kathryn Hunter as Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I was captivated. Fully amazed by the skill Taymor's cast exhibited in delivering the extremely difficult dialogue inherent of any of Willy S's work – especially that of British actress Kathryn Hunter (who steals the show in my opinion) – and captivated by the way that cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto, captured the beauty and grace of the artists at work. I say bravo to this fine effort, with the hope that it manages to have the same impact on others that may not yet have found an appreciation for Shakespearian offerings.

Great film, a little rest at the hotel, and then it was on to my first TIFF party. Or was I?

A colleague and I showed up for the BBC party ... but apparently the BBC did not show up from London. Doh! We had the invite with date, time and location, so there was either incorrect information or the event was simply cancelled. Luckily a brand spanking new bar had just opened a few doors down and their stiff drinks were enough to make me forgive my friends from across the pond and be ok with missing out on what I was certain would be my opportunity to meet Sherlock himself, Benedict Cumberpatch.

After a brief round of handshakes at the Guild of Canadian Directors, it was on to the Netflix soiree, which proved to be overcrowded, super hot and full of rather uninteresting and non-film industry attendees – which, by the way, could be said for the majority of parties thrown. Tom Green was there, as were some group of guys referred to as the Trailer Park Boys (who were actually quite nice), but the highlight of the evening as I exited the party and stumbled across a man and a woman sitting on the outdoor patio of a nearby pub.

Quirky, funny and very down to earth. I sat down with them at about 10:30pm and ended up closing the bar with them. They weren't in the film industry, they weren't stars ... but by far they provided me with the most interesting conversation since arriving Toronto.

A day to remember.

[divider]DAY 5 – SEPT 8[/divider]

My fifth and final day has arrived. It's come so quickly and I'm deflated by the notion that I can't stay through the entire festival. There are so many amazing films to see, so many filmmakers to speak with and so much more that this city could offer over another five days.

Alas, it is what it is, so I'm going to go out with a bang. Two film screenings, two parties and a

fond farewell to family and friends.

The film screenings didn't get off on the right foot, as I was not able to get into two of my most desired films I had on my docket. But Hal Hartley's new offering, *Ned Rifle*, had a few seats left, so I managed to squeeze in – sitting in the VERY FRONT ROW for the first time since I was in high school. Never a good idea for a middle-aged man who gets stiff necks rather easily. It wasn't comfortable but I did manage to suck it up and survive a the uncomfortable physical position I was in, as it was a cake walk compared to the disjointed effort of the film.

Ned Rifle completes a trilogy of films started with Hartley's best career achievement, *Henry's Fool*, in 1997 – which was a well received production, and rightfully so – with the followup, *Fay Grim*, coming in a decade later, which in my opinion was completely unwatchable. There surely were positives throughout my 90-minute investment, so not a complete fail, but I'll offer more details in an upcoming review of the film.

One screening down, one to go.

Villa Touma was next up and it was a respectable first-time directing effort from Suha Araf, an established screenwriter who has come under fire from Israeli officials. The film was made with primarily Israeli public funding, but Araf, who is an Israeli Arab, registered the production as a Palestinian film, resulting in the Israel Film Fund demanding that its \$400,000 contribution be returned. No idea where this fiasco will end up, but overall I would say the film is worth your time if you happen to come across it. But don't go out of your way to seek it out.

I had aspirations of returning to my hotel room for an afternoon nap prior to closing out my TIFF visit, but it was not to be so. The clock was ticking, with too many hellos and handshakes to make.

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