

Foreign features: Montreal's film festival

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue



Headed for disaster: In Pieter Kuijpers's *Off Screen*, John R.'s supervisor (l) and co-workers are unaware of John's mental trouble.

Movies shape perceptions. We can read about bombings in London, hostage taking in Amsterdam or moral crises facing a community, but the film artist can create a work that changes how we think about the events that the mass media have presented.

There were many such films at Montreal's 29th World Film Festival in August. I had feared that the quality of this year's offerings would be diminished because of a struggle between two rival festivals in the city. Sponsorship had been split between the festivals by the two major financial supporters, and some established film directors chose to stay away because of the conflict.

But those who avoided this year's festival made way for films that might otherwise have missed the cut. There were 180 features from 70 countries, including 80 international premiers. Veteran festival president Serge Losique remains as daring and creative as ever. I may be biased: Losique is the only North American festival director to have recognized and supported an ecumenical jury (since 1980). This year's jury of religious critics awarded its top prize to ***Kamataki***, a Canada-Japan production about a young Japanese Canadian who is sent to Japan to live with

relatives after a suicide attempt.

For the relevance and flavor of Losique's choices, consider ***Off Screen***, a film from 37-year-old Netherlands director Pieter Kuijpers that is based on a hostage crisis in Amsterdam in March 2002. The film opens when 59-year-old bus driver John R. walks into the lobby of the Rembrandt Towers and pulls a pistol from his bag. He demands to see the building's owner; otherwise, he says, he will set off a bomb. The police, aware of 9/11—which occurred only six months earlier—treat the threat as the arrival of terrorism in Amsterdam.

But John R. is no terrorist. He has become convinced that his television set is sending out coded messages. He has written to the company president and was, of course, ignored. He continues to drive his city bus. His colleagues and superiors, not realizing the degree of John's paranoia, tolerate his complaints about his television set. His wife, however, knows something is wrong, and refuses to allow him to visit the family. John R. is a troubled soul headed for disaster.

No one acts to deter John's journey into darkness, and director Kuijpers suggests that there is plenty of blame to go around: John's wife, colleagues, bosses and even the communications company bear some responsibility for letting this otherwise mild-mannered man take matters into his own hands. Kuijpers made the film on a limited budget, persuading some of the top stars in Netherlands cinema to participate. John R. is played by Jan Decleir, best remembered as Farmer Bas, the longtime lover of Antonia in the 1995 Academy Award winner *Antonia's Line*.

Off Screen had no American distributor when it came to Montreal, but with well-known performers Decleir and Jeroen Krabbé (often seen in U.S. films as a European villain), it will probably find one, especially since it was named best film of the festival by the secular jury and Decleir was chosen as the festival's most outstanding actor for his role as John R.

Red Mercury, a British picture directed by Roy Battersby, stands a better chance of making it to American screens, especially since it features Stockard Channing (the president's wife on *The West Wing*) in a delightful portrait of a Greek restaurant owner, complete with accent. The film was made and released in Britain before the recent bombings there, but its narrative is prescient. Three educated, British-born Muslim men (none from the Middle East) are part of a cell in London that's preparing a "dirty bomb" to use in blackmailing British authorities and forcing them to leave

Iraq and to make other concessions toward the world's Muslims.

When their hideaway is discovered, the three dash into Penelope's restaurant and decide to hold her, the staff and the diners hostage while they complete assembly of the bomb. As they work, the hostages and the three men, Asif, Shahid and Mushtaq, debate the treatment of Muslims in the world and particularly in Britain. They also eat some of Penelope's Greek cooking. Outside, the British police discover that the three hostage takers are all from established immigrant families. Inside, the hostage takers draw up their demands (Penelope helpfully adds a demand that the Elgin Marbles, which the British took from Greece, be returned). The film's outcome is gripping and insightful.

In 2002, Italian director Alessandro D'Alatri won a Montreal ecumenical award for *Casomai*, a film that examines marriage through the wisdom of a village Catholic priest. In ***La Febbre*** (The Fever), D'Alatri examines a young man who cares so much for others that he undermines his own ambitions. Set in Cremona, Italy, *La Febbre* focuses on Mario, who discovers he has to learn to live with both love and the desire to succeed in a culture driven by conformity and greed.

An Enemy of the People, a Norwegian update of Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play of the same name, shifts details a bit—Ibsen's spa becomes a bottled water plant, and Tomas Stockmann is a nutritionist, not a doctor—but the conflict between brothers and the issue of truth telling at a cost remain true to Ibsen's original vision. Set in a small Norwegian village where the local springs are the source of healthy and lucrative water, the play turns dark when Tomas informs village residents that tests show their water is polluted.

The people of the town could shift to an unpolluted spring, but that would take time and money, so they refuse. In a hasty meeting, they declare Tomas to be "an enemy of the people." Ibsen's vision remains timeless in this 21st-century version of his play.

The theme of an honest man confronting pollution and greed emerges again in Robert Connolly's ***Three Dollars***, an Australian film that received a commendation from Montreal's ecumenical jury. *Three Dollars* is a whimsical tale about a chemical engineer who loves life and his family and is also dedicated to the truth. This dedication costs him when he discovers that a major housing project is to be built on polluted land. When he exposes the project's danger, he risks losing everything.

This was the 25th anniversary of my first visit to the Montreal festival. I plan to return whether the festival is run by Serge Losique or Montreal newcomer Moritz de Hadeln, whose New Montreal FilmFest opened two weeks after Losique's closed. Corporate sponsors are not likely to support two competing festivals in 2006. My hunch is that Losique, who has always been in Montreal, will be back again.