

# HOORAY FOR INDIEWOOD!

## A Look At The Maverick Films of Fall

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This year's summer blockbusters left a sickening aftertaste, but a handful of indie and foreign stalwarts reaped small rewards amid faceless, front-loaded studio Goliaths. Counterprogrammed indie hits like *Sexy Beast*, *Baise-moi*, and *The Deep End* didn't generate box-office numbers like *Blair Witch*, but they reaped column inches, generated Oscar talk for Ben Kingsley and Tilda Swinton, and otherwise set the tone for fall's bountiful harvest of more mature-minded fare.

Like the two girls in *Ghost World* (another of this year's unexpected indie hits) sleepwalking through a morass of lousy pop culture before waking up to more adult realities, summer's juvenile ephemera leads to an abundant autumnal crop of specialty titles. Expect new work by Amer-indie mavericks David Lynch, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Richard Linklater; revel in the bold return of the soul-searching '70s-caliber adult drama; marvel at the continuing *success d'estime* of French cinema in America, after its own banner year back home. And finally, forget the moribund teen pic for a moment (*Summer Catch* felt like a chlamydia brochure) and embrace two square-peg coming-of-agers that don't treat teenagers like marketing tools.

David Lynch and Joel and Ethan Coen return to the screen after a shared Best Director prize in Cannes for efforts that, while far from career bests, still get mileage out of the noir-tinged milieu of their halcyon days. It took French money to bring Lynch's aborted TV pilot *Mulholland Dr.*, deemed too bizarre for American television, to the big screen. Lynch tacked on 20 minutes of some of his most startling work in years to the existing pilot, resulting in a freakish tale of the Hollywood starlet machine that plays out like *Day of the Locust* on acid. Easy to dismiss as *Twin Peaks* in L.A. (or *Lost Highway* in a Hollywood bungalow) *Mulholland Dr.* is another murky Möbius strip about a secret America rife with subversion and corruption. Don't expect to leave the theater with any firm grasp upon what you've seen — it left Cannes audiences wondering what the fuck had just happened.

As for the Coen brothers, their new film, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, is a vintage-style black-and-white noir, creamily lensed by Roger Deakins and starring Billy Bob Thornton as a stone-faced barber swept up in a small-town murder scandal. As technically astute and ravishingly empty as last year's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the film confirms Thornton's acting chops after his year of bizarre tabloid antics. It also once again demonstrates Scarlett Johansson's penchant for stealing a movie from more-established co-stars, in this case Frances McDormand (who's not quite working at Marge Gunderson levels of greatness). It's nice to see the Coens mining film noir again — even if *Blood Simple* and *Fargo* remain their most enduring works.

Slacker godhead Richard Linklater restores his riddled reputation in the wake of *SubUrbia* and *The Newton Boys* with two new works that break the mold of conventional celluloid filmmaking, ferrying him into a bold new experimental realm. *Tape* is a digitally rendered, single-location ensemble drama starring Ethan Hawke, Uma Thurman, and Robert Sean Leonard as former

high-school classmates reuniting in a seedy roadside motel room. It sounds like *The Breakfast Club* sequel that never was, and Linklater didn't pen the screenplay — a disconcerting notion, considering the Austin, Texas, native's flair for rich, ribald dialogue.

Linklater's second fall release, *Waking Life* (reviewed in this issue), left festival audiences agape with its intoxicating use of live-action footage modified by award-winning animator Bob Sabiston's painterly flourishes — he added digitally rendered brushstrokes to Linklater's images, creating a dreamy, fidgety wonderland of epileptic colorscales that might prove fitful to some audiences. But Linklater's soul-searching dialogue harks back to his earlier hits. *Waking Life* is a summation of the director's career to date, featuring cameo walk-ons by familiar characters from his previous films. It's also his most assured, adult film, certain to provoke existential discussion from the generation of young moviegoers who came of age in the era of such indie landmarks as *Slacker* and *Dazed and Confused*.

While kids foam at the mouth in anticipation of Harry Potter's inevitable November reign, grown-ups can seek solace in the return of the well-made, emotionally frank adult drama. Conveying a raw honesty unseen since *Last Tango in Paris*, French director Patrice Chereau's English-language debut *Intimacy* (recipient of the Golden Bear for best film at the Berlin Film Festival) stars Kerry Fox and Mark Rylance as London sexpots who meet once a week for some of the most explicit on-screen lovemaking in memory (reviews in this issue). Continuing the erection vogue sparked by *Romance and Baise-moi*, *Intimacy* manages to elude exploitation while still maintaining a priapic dramatic thrust. It packs the emotional wallop of Cassavetes' chatty classics — but with unstimulated blow jobs.

Actor-turned director Todd Field (see "The Players" in this issue) marks his directorial feature debut with the brooding family drama *In the Bedroom*, starring Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson as a rural Maine couple grappling with a shocking domestic tragedy. Spacek turns in another Oscar-caliber performance in this classy, sobering Miramax weepie that raises our esteem for the mini-major following the unrelenting saccharine overkill of *The Cider House Rules* and *Chocolat*.

Miramax might well have the movie of the year with *Amélie*, the romantic confection from Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Delicatessen*, *The City of Lost Children*) that helped raise French box office figures to the highest level in 20 years. (It's also been a banner year for French films on these shores). The charming account of a young café waitress (played by gamine newcomer Audrey Tautou) and her fortuitous search for love in a stylized — some say oversanitized — City of Lights, *Amélie* triumphs as a valentine to the proverbial Paris of quirky neighborhood locals and swooning lovers scootering down the cobblestone streets of Montmartre. Deploying a Rube Goldberg-esque intricacy to its feverishly imagined plot, it channels the wistful spirits of Jacques Prévert and Jean Vigo and stands tall as the most heartfelt movie of the season.

A more modern depiction of French urban life, Robert Guédiguian's unflinching masterpiece *The Town is Quiet* opens up a Pandora's box of social upheaval in Marseilles as a handful of disparate characters come together in an Altman-esque swathe of simmering racial and class tension. Guédiguian's wife, Ariane Ascaride, delivers the performance of the year as a night-shift fishmonger struggling to support a junkie whore daughter. And while *Brotherhood of the Wolf*

might portend the end of French cinema as we know it, with its computer-generated special effects and *Matrix*-inspired chopsocky, Christophe Gans' garish 18<sup>th</sup>-century costume drama nevertheless delivers great mindless fun.

Francophile purists should make a beeline instead for new-wave veteran Jacques Rivette's *Va Savoir!* (reviewed in this issue), a nourishing ensemble piece that enchanted Cannes audiences and opened the New York Film Festival with a Gallic frisson earlier this month. In a year that's included critical darlings *Human Resources* and *Under the Sand*, the French continue to churn out some of the most satisfying movies in the business. Like those perfect Parisian baguettes, these films somehow can't be duplicated in America.

Forget the market-tested-to-monotony 'N Sync teen-pic aesthetic and check out two alternative-minded adolescent coming-of-agers that manage to be at once brutally forthright and gleefully left of center. Michael Cuesta's searing *L.I.E.* is the *400 Blows* of the Long Island teens-in-trouble set, replete with a somewhat sympathetic chicken hawk character who subversively threatens to steal your heart. First-time director Richard Kelly's delirious *Donnie Darko* — executive produced by Drew Barrymore, no less — pays homage to '80s disillusionment as its overmedicated teen protagonist (Jake Gyllenhaal, in a star-making turn) manipulates the space-time continuum to save the world from imminent destruction — it's *American Beauty* meets *Back to the Future!* *Darko* will perplex anyone who didn't come of age in the MTV era, and you'll never listen to "West End Girls" in the same way again.

Summer may have been a *Ghost World* of fleeting pleasures, but this fall's fecund film calendar builds on that sleeper hit's reminder that some of the most exciting movies right now are coming from specialty divisions of major Hollywood studios. *Mulholland Dr.* is a Universal Focus release — a division of the vast Vivendi-Universal conglomerate; *In the Bedroom* harks back to Miramax's edgier, less commercial days but remains a dark domestic drama in Disney drag. Renegade indie distributors, including Lot 47 Films, continue to take daring financial risks by releasing offbeat, inflammatory fare like *L.I.E.* in limited markets, leaving the multiplexes wide open for *Harry Potter*, the hobbits, and their hefty opening-weekend hauls. The margins and the middle ground are alive and kicking in their own right — a heartening *Memento* of better things to come.