

Short Cuts

By David Bourgeois

As the 1993 Cannes Film Festival is remembered as the event of a thousand yawns, it's clear that this year's losers were the bloated studios that spent millions on grandiose hotels and fattening French pastries. The winners were a large and vocal group of filmmakers specializing in short-length films. No, you didn't miss them on the entertainment reports from the Riviera; they were totally ignored by the likes of *E.T.*'s Mary Hart and *E!*'s Michael Castner.

These filmmakers, primarily male, who work with budgets that only amount to pocket change, scan travel guides and blow a month's paycheck to attend a festival that will determine if their futures include owning swimming pools or cleaning them. Tossing aside their dreams of a two-hour, \$20 million epic, these mini-auteurs have projects ranging between three and 30 minutes that were principally financed through personal bank loans, credit-card overextensions, and a heaping dose of I-owe-ya-one's to friends and family. Their excursion to the French Riviera—where \$10 for a beer and \$100 per night for a one-star hotel aren't uncommon—kills any hope of balancing the books.

Some, like Bruno De Almeida, the New York-based Portuguese who directed the 12-minute film *The Debt*, aren't to be signing their names to a bar tab sans looking at the figures. "I'm staying about 20 minutes outside of Cannes with friends," he says, "but since I was fortunate enough to have been selected for the Critics Week, I had to do what it took to get here."

Another filmmaker, graduate student Andrew Shea, financed his film with the assistance of the University of Southern California, but the school hardly gave him a blank check. "They own the film," he says, "but I still had to come up with about half the money. As far as my trip here, I'm financing it myself. It was too big

to pass up."

Helping these filmmakers in their quest for recognition is the Critics Week. Underwritten by Mercedes-Benz, the films shown are feature- and short-length by first-time and little-known directors. This year only two American shorts made the selection for Critics Week: De Almeida's *The Debt* and Shea's *Take My Breath Away*. No one forgets it is a competition, but the prize is secondary to having your project screened to an entertainment-starved international audience, composed of journalists and buyers.

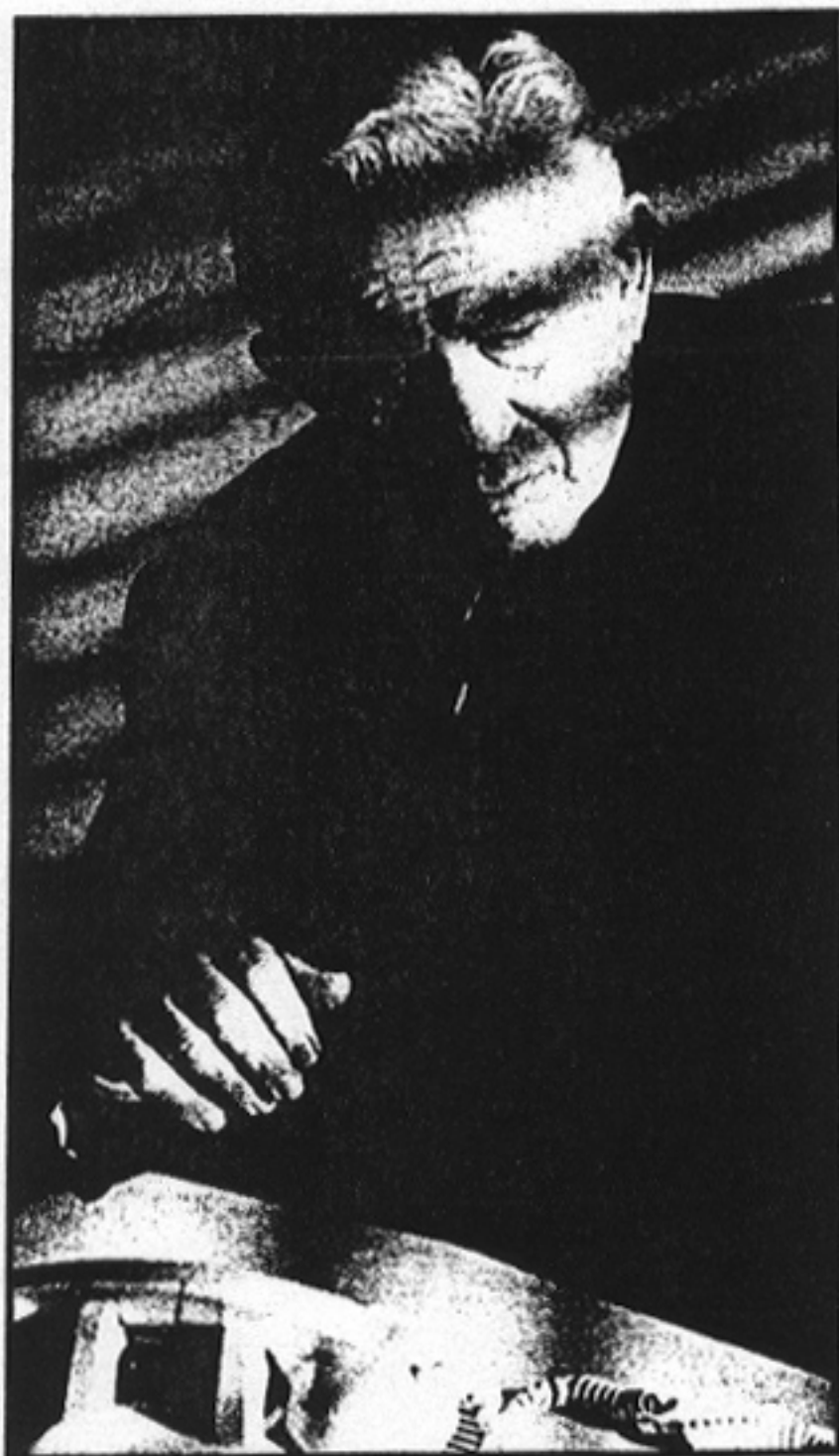
With the release of short films by well-known directors such as Mike Leigh (*A Sense of History*), Michael Moore (*Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint*), and most recently Jim Jarmusch [*Coffee and Cigarettes (somewhere in California)* featuring Tom Waits and Iggy Pop], it's likely that shorts will become more than just film school assignments. The shorts offer a welcome alternative to the overblown Hollywood studio picture, as they allow the filmmaker to use time and money in the best and most efficient manner. Although Cannes is hardly known as a festival of the undiscovered, if you look past the celebrity black ties, paparazzi, and back-stabbing producers, you'll find a group of talented filmmakers whose only hope of media exposure is in indie publications.

Coffee and Cigarettes (somewhere in California), (Jim Jarmusch, U.S., 12 minutes): Although the idea of Iggy Pop and Tom Waits talking about medicine, music, Abbott and Costello, and coffee and cigarettes sounds like a great setup, this film falls flat. The tension between the two opposite rockers has Jarmusch going for straight comedy, but the resulting dialogue is neither funny nor well written (or ad-libbed). Nevertheless, he won the Palme D'Or for best short.

Charlie and the Doctor (Ralph Parsons, Great Britain): With a frighteningly keen sense of

the lackadaisical and sometimes maniacally humorous trailer-park lifestyle of the American West, Parsons tells the story of a seemingly happy wife who has an affair with a Marlboro Man. The result is an ironic rub of the cowboy lifestyle.

The Debt (Bruno De Almeida, U.S./Portugal, 12 minutes): Twelve minutes of film noir, with a Manhattan backdrop, puts a New York couple at the receiving end of a series of telephone messages that reveal financial as well as marital ruin. Paul Lazar stars as the door-to-door savior caught at the wrong place at the wrong time.



The Norm: Mailer in *The Obit Writer*

Take My Breath Away (Andrew Shea, U.S., seven minutes): If more dialogue existed other than a grunt here or there, it would have immensely helped decipher a confused plot that places a soon-to-be executed murderer as a wannabe celebrity. Through his agent the killer arranges for a singer to shoot a music video while he is gassed. It starts out strong but leaves the viewer with a heaping dose of "Huh?"

Falstaff on the Moon (Robinson Savary, France, 23 minutes): With brilliant cinematography that must have caused financial malaise to the film's producer, this short wins the Peter Green-

way gluttony award. Pretension is the main problem as the story of a dying French boxer is too precious with its use of dreamlike fairy-tale images.

The Obit Writer (Brian Cox, U.S., 23 minutes): Cox's film about a newspaper intern assigned to writing obits stars Norman Mailer as—you guessed it—a reclusive writer who's involved in a game of murder and deception. If the film had run 10 minutes longer it would have ironed out a few plot inconsistencies, but a well-written screenplay ends (too quickly) with an off-center zing.

Der Sortierer (Stephan Puchner, Germany, nine minutes): As nuts, bolts, nails, and screws spew out of a humanlike machine onto a conveyor belt, a hapless factory worker is to sort the hardware and box it properly. Puchner takes a story reminiscent of Lucy Ricardo at the chocolate factory one step further, and the result is a hilarious examination of the mistreated blue-collar worker.

A Kid From Bensonhurst (Carlo Sparanero, U.S., 16 minutes): A fiftysomething Italian American dressed like Tony Bennett returns to his Brooklyn neighborhood to find that the racial landscape isn't what it used to be. While at times preachy, with documentary-style intercut of an NBC news report on racial violence, Sparanero's film gives an accurate portrayal of the troubled Brooklyn neighborhood.

Robochick (Rudolf Mestdagh, Belgium, six minutes): As a man sits down with his wife for breakfast, his soft-boiled egg thinks differently. Although the shots of the shelled egg jumping off the table, desperately trying to return to its nest are comic, the real comedy proves to be the extreme close-ups of the wife's lips—slathered with hot, runny yolk.

The Singing Trophy (Grant Lahood, New Zealand, 12 minutes): As a hunter downs his ale, he gazes at his wall of taxidermy and wills all but one of his prized animals to sing. Just as Parsons's films introduce us to the American West, Lahood's film—cartoonlike in its cat-and-mouse theme—proves that Elmer Fudd is alive and well and living in New Zealand.

PAULINE ST. DENNIS/CANNES FILM FESTIVAL