

MADE IN CANADA: Seventy homegrown films will be showcased at TIFF

Lineup includes world premieres by Egoyan, Mehta and Nadda

Gayle MacDonaldFrom Wednesday's Globe and Mail
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The Toronto International Film Festival will feature 70 Canadian films at this year's 10-day event, including world premieres of Atom Egoyan's thriller *Chloe*, Dilip Mehta's New Delhi-based comedy *Cooking With Stella* and the much-anticipated romantic drama *Cairo Time* from Montreal's Ruba Nadda.

At a packed press conference yesterday at Toronto's Fairmont Royal York hotel, TIFF organizers also announced that American director Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (with co-stars Johnny Depp, Jude Law and Colin Farrell, filling in the lead role vacated by the untimely death of Australian actor Heath Ledger) will be a North American premiere gala.

In special presentations, the festival will also showcase the feature-film directorial debuts of Vancouver-bred Peter Stebbings (*Defendor* with Woody Harrelson, Kat Dennings and Sandra Oh) and 20-year-old Quebecer Xavier Dolan's English-Canadian premiere for *J'ai Tue Ma Mere (I Killed My Mother)*.

"This year we had 804 submissions and 200 were feature films," TIFF co-director Cameron Bailey said, adding that the volume is a strong indicator of just how vibrant this country's film industry currently is. "For the past few weeks, we've been sitting mostly in dark screening rooms ... and I can't tell you how happy I am today to be surrounded by so many Canadian filmmakers."

Montreal writer/actor/director Jacob Tierney's *The Trotsky*, starring Jay Baruchel as a Montreal high-school student channelling his inner Red Army hero Leon Trotsky, also scored a special presentation, along with Oscar winner Brigitte Berman's biopic of Playboy's founder, *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel*. (Berman took home an Academy Award in 1987 for her documentary *Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got*).

Nadda's \$4-million film *Cairo Time* features an international cast, including Oscar-nominated Patricia Clarkson (*Pieces of April*, *Far From Heaven*), Sudanese-born actor Alexander Siddig (*Syriana*, *Kingdom of Heaven*), Spain's Elena Anaya (*Savage Grace*, *Sex and Lucia*) and Winnipeg's Tom McCamus (*The Sweet Hereafter*, *Shake Hands With the Devil*).

Written and directed by 36-year-old Nadda, whose earlier work includes 2005's *Sabah*, it's the story of Juliette (Clarkson), a woman in her late 40s who arrives in Cairo to meet her United Nations-employed husband (McCamus) for a vacation, only to be told that he has been delayed in Gaza. He sends his friend Tareq (Siddig), a retired Egyptian police officer, to pick her up – and the romantic tale unravels from there.

Cooking With Stella, distributed by Toronto's Mongrel Media, is a warmhearted social satire about a Canadian diplomat (Lisa Ray) and her chef husband, Michael (Don McKellar), who are posted to New Delhi, where they inherit a household of Indian servants, including the wily cook Stella (Seema Biswas).

Egoyan's *Chloe*, shot in Toronto and filmed during the tragic death of Liam Neeson's wife, Natasha Richardson, after a ski accident in Quebec, is the story of David (Neeson), whose wife, Catherine (Julianne Moore), is convinced that her husband is cheating on her. She hires a young woman, Chloe (Amanda Seyfried), to test his infidelity.

Stebbins's original script for *The Defendor*, written four years ago, follows Arthur Poppington (Harrelson), a mentally challenged guy who fantasizes about an alter-ego – a superhero known as Defendor, who combs the city streets at night in search of his archenemy, Captain Industry, with an

unlikely sidekick, a young prostitute, Kat (Dennings).

The festival also announced yesterday that the closing-night gala will be a feisty portrait of Queen Victoria from French-Canadian filmmaker Jean-Marc Vallée (*C.R.A.Z.Y.*) called *The Young Victoria* . Based on a script from British-based Academy Award-winner Julian Fellowes (*Gosford Park*), the film chronicles the queen's (Emily Blunt) ascension to the throne, focusing on her early, rocky years of her reign, romance and marriage to Prince Albert (Rupert Friend). The cast also includes Paul Bettany (*The Da Vinci Code*).

Bettany also stars in the opening-night film *Creation* , a non-Canadian film about the life of Charles Darwin – a TIFF pick that sparked debate among this country's filmmakers who sought assurances that the giving of the opening-night slot to a foreign film will be the exception, not the rule.

Yesterday, Bailey defended the decision, saying after the press conference that “the film we chose for opening night is a separate decision and it had to do with a film we fell in love with this year. One we thought would start a conversation we wanted to get going at the beginning of the festival.”

He acknowledged that opening with a Canadian film “has been a kind of tradition the last many years ... but it's never been a hard, fast rule. As Canadians, we're always very protective of our culture – our film culture in particular – as there are a lot of things that threaten it. So I think Canadians rightly want to make sure that we're still looking after Canadian film. That we're still committed to Canadian film. And we are.”

Billed as part ghost story, part psychological thriller and part love story, *Creation* stars Bettany as Darwin and Jennifer Connelly as his wife, Emma (the actors are also a couple in real life).

The 70 Canadian films and co-productions included in the 34-year-old festival's lineup are an increase from last year's 64 features. Musician-actor Rob Stefaniuk's fang-bang film *Suck* (which he also wrote and directed) made it into the Contemporary World Cinema program and features performances from Iggy Pop, Alice Cooper, Henry Rollins and Moby. It is Stefaniuk's second feature film after *Phil The Alien* .

“As soon as Iggy Pop came on board, he gave the project street cred,” Stefaniuk said yesterday. “We wanted to do a kind of psychedelic comedy that feels like a band ... and instead of hanging out with a bunch of druggie people, you're hanging out with a bunch of vampires. I thought that might make it a little more fun for the audience.”

The festival's Open Vault program will feature William Beaudine's *Sparrows* , starring Toronto-born silent film star Mary Pickford, as well as a new print of Egoyan's 1991 *The Adjuster* , about an insurance adjuster (Elias Koteas) with a bizarre family.

The Short Cuts segment will showcase 41 documentary, dramatic and comedic titles, including Guy Maddin's *Night Mayor* (about an inventor from Winnipeg), Peter Wellington's *Pointless* (two men haggle over the price of a used futon), Ed Gass-Donnelly's *Sixty Seconds of Regret* (a character study of an elderly man's reflections), and Sonya Di Rienzo's *The Translator* (about a translator of French whose work has overtaken her life).

New homegrown talent included in Canada First! are Sook-Yin Lee's *Year of the Carnivore* , Philip Hoffman's *All Fall Down* , Sherry White's *Crackie* , Rob King's *Hungry Hills* , Corey Adams and Alex Craig's *Machotaildrop* and Alexandre Franchi's *The Wild Hunt* .

Denis Côté's *Carcasses* and Reg Harkema's *Leslie, My Name is Evil* will screen in the Vanguard program, while three new Real to Reel additions include *Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould* , *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands* and *Reel Injun* .