

BEHIND BLUE EYES

Don Malcolm "Swings From The Rafters" with MIDCENTURY**ECLECTIC!**

an interview with Anastasia Lin

A tiny but startling revelation noticed in the moment prior to our interview: with his glasses removed, Don Malcolm has vibrant, intense eyes of cornflower blue. "Just like the Lady Eve Sidwich," he laughs, demonstrating that the man who's created a mini-sensation with his pioneering revivals of lost French film noir (sold-out festivals in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, with more to come) is not a one-trick pony when it comes to cinephilia.

Man (and, to a lesser extent, woman) seemingly cannot live by noir alone, though some seem game to make the attempt. Malcolm rolls those blue eyes. "I think this is a problem that everyone who traffics in noir winds up dealing with," he notes. "There's been a critical backlash against film noir due to its popularity. Chris Fujiwara might be right when he says that a good bit of the hoopla about noir is an adolescent obsession."

WHICH is one reason why Malcolm is taking a ninety-degree turn this May, introducing a concept he'd been tinkering with even before he electrified San Francisco cineastes with his first FRENCH HAD A NAME FOR IT festival in November 2014.

"The company is called Midcentury Productions," he says (with emphasis on the penultimate word in the sentence). "This is the time of maximum energy in an increasingly focused world-wide effort to lift film out of the 'mass culture' trap that it found itself in prior to the start of World War II. The forties to the late sixties are the time when filmmaking is pushed toward social engagement, and begins to embrace a different usage of the cinematic language. I thought that if



we could collide these films—both the well-known and the obscure but worthy—together into various combinations of what I like to call ‘immersive festivals,’ we could explore that world of filmmaking in all of its dimensions.”

Hence MIDCENTURY**ECLECTIC!**, a vibrant, careening, high-speed collision of genres and slow-cooked thematic variations. Continuing to work with that brief, immersive festival strategy, Malcolm has fashioned a series of double bills that stab wildly at a series of themes that beckoned to filmmakers as they searched for ways to expand midcentury filmmaking’s horizons.

We probed the strategy behind the curatorial decisions in our interview, and got a much better sense of how the festival is structured (or, at least, how Mr. Eyes of Cornflower Blue *thinks* it’s structured). One thing is for sure: no one has ever programmed anything like this anywhere else. Whether you think him a kind of mystical rule-breaking curatorial genius or a daft poseur who’s in over his head, there’s no denying the fact that Malcolm is happiest when he is swinging from the rafters. And, amazingly, the films are all thoroughly fascinating, but in a way that’s completely different from his French noir series.

So let’s really try to get down to what you mean by “arthouse archaeology” and how that applies to this festival.

Archaeology is literally digging up the past. Think of “arthouse” in filmmaking as being the layers of individuality that were compressed into the worldwide post-WWII film industry. Film noir is one such layer, but there are many others in the time frame. This festival is where those “other manifestations” are excavated.

But this is not really a collection of arthouse films you’re showing.

Not in the sense of showing abstruse, self-conscious reflections of modernism, such as *Last Year at Marienbad*. Nor is it presenting the Gothic avant-garde, or films from the various “new waves” that proliferated in the mid-1960s.

If not those, then...

We’re talking mostly about films made by mainstream directors who found ways to stretch the genres they were working in, making films that expanded some aspect of the medium, either via use of narrative or visual innovations...or by engaging the characters in their stories in a way that pushed beyond the conventions of storytelling.

OK, let's apply what you just said to some of the films in the festival...let's start with the Friday night films—

Right. *Los Olvidados* is a social problem film transformed by a surrealist [Luis Bunuel]. It deals with living conditions so torturous that no mainstream filmmaker dared put those type of intense images on the screen, or at least not after the Production Code went into effect.

That sets up a theme of children in so much peril that they might not survive to adulthood, so I thought, how to show a variation on that in a similar situation...

And you thought of *Forbidden Games*.

Presto. Voila! A film that treats a harrowing turn of events with delicacy and hope, but doesn't stint on the danger. Made by a director [Rene Clément] who knew from noir and knew it was time for him to move past that into more intensely personal filmmaking.

So that's the process? Find a film more intense and personal in its filmmaking and then dial in a companion piece?

Yes, sort of an escort service for films that are neither fish nor fowl. (laughs) Really, though, the process is a jumping-off point to focus on the types of energy in filmmaking that led midcentury filmmakers to break the rules, to be subversive. It can even manifest itself in filmmakers whom you'd never suspect would lean in that direction.

And that, I take it, might lead us to your Saturday matinee—a couple of Brit films no one's ever heard of...

Sometimes when you go out into the dank cemetery of lost films, you stumble across something that had no business being forgotten. Somehow I've managed to do a lot of fortunate stumbling in the last few years—not without massive help from some fellow travelers in that graveyard. But I have to say that I found those Brit films—*No Love for Johnnie* and *Nothing But The Best*—on my own.

And you find directors like Ralph Thomas and Clive Donner who were just bristling with filmmaking competence but who rarely if ever were handed a project where they could put a really personal stamp on the work.

The early sixties in England opened up the door a crack for everyone, I take it...

I'd say that's exactly right. A new form of cynical, well-observed realism came into vogue, and as it spawned new directors who'd take it into and out of the kitchen sink phase, it also left room for journeyman to throw in with it.

I'm especially impressed with the camerawork in *No Love for Johnnie*—again, by a journeyman cinematographer [Ernest Steward] who worked almost exclusively with Ralph Thomas throughout his career on silly, lightweight stuff like the Carry On! Series and Dirk Bogarde's "Doctor" comedies but who then turn around and give us this sweeping tale that oscillates between cynical politics and heartfelt romance, somehow turning all of its clichés into something astonishingly sublime.



And after watching it a couple of times I realized, it's how this unknown camera guy uses Cinemascope, the subtle moves with the wide frame, the way they walk Peter Finch through the field of vision—it's truly mesmerizing what they do with faces, alone or in groups.

Didn't Finch win a BAFTA for his performance?

Yes, which is another reason why it's so strange that the film just disappeared. But I think the women in the audience will appreciate how the female characters comport themselves...and the gender issues are nicely balanced in a kind of pre-feminist harbingers of things to come. That's likely due to the fact that Betty Box was the producer—she was sort of the Joan Harrison of Great Britain, only more accomplished.

And as for its companion film? I take it's not really the same process as you described for the Friday night films...

I think it's natural that the process would vary. When I tripped over *Nothing But the Best*, I saw that the male lead [Alan Bates] was grappling with a similar temptation to trample and throw away his moral compass in the pursuit of

success. Totally different tonalities in the filmmaking, different genres, to be sure, but these two swiny guys are both somehow immensely sympathetic.

And that's part of a relativism that only exists when filmmaking can crash through character stereotypes. That's definitely an arthouse impulse, even when the visual look of the film might not completely conform to what we expect when we apply that term.

But it turns out that Nicolas Roeg was the cameraman for this one...

Yes, and he does a wonderful thing here in that as Bates' character's bravado and chutzpah increases, he ratchets up his trick shots and the speed of his close-ups to show the increasing urgency with which the "game of success" is being played.

Clearly Roeg would go much, much further into the "arthouse" realm as it got crazy and wild and sex-besotted etc. but you can see where he is jumping off from when you watch this film.

So, from there...you jump back on the chandelier—

Whenever I can...(laughs)

—And we hurtle into what you call "the strange aftermath of war"...

We don't watch too many of these films any more, at least not in America, where none of the actual wars that have torn up the world in the twentieth century were fought. But in this time frame [50s/60s] filmmakers swarmed to this type of film—partly in hopes that they could depict it in so many harrowing ways that they might stop it from happening again.

A naïve thought...

Yes, but a noble one. And it spawned modernist variations, such as what we get with *Ashes & Diamonds* and the really strange one, *The Condemned of Altona*.

The latter film was another piece of detective work, wasn't it?

Yes. The grey-market sources that are available to us now via the Internet turned up a copy of *Altona* that I almost resigned myself to showing in the festival with the type of apologies that traffickers in obscurity have perfected over the years, but I was fortunate enough to discover that James Quandt, the very great programmer of the Toronto Film Festival, had found a copy of it when he was

putting together a Vittorio DeSica retrospective. But then it turned out that his print wasn't available to us, so we kept digging.

Whistling in that graveyard, were you?

Yodeling might be a more accurate description, actually. But all that noise and effort paid off when we found a digital source for a copy with the original aspect ratio, and were then able to superimpose an already-extant set of English subtitles to it.

But is the film worth the effort? The original author [Jean-Paul Sartre] disowned it, didn't he?

Oh, yes. But Sartre was a curmudgeon and had huge problems with the film adaptations made from most of his plays. I think he may have been OK with the version of *The Respectful Prostitute* that we showed in the first French noir series, but even that "just OK" was pushing things. There's no question that the genesis of *Altona* was problematic, but I think James Quandt is on the money when he says it's a seriously underrated film.

The aftermath of war—and in some cases, a perceived aftermath that seems to be developing, ushering in a new order that's worse than either the chaos of war that preceded it or the old order being discarded—is often more terrifying than the war itself. These two films deal with versions of that.

Ashes & Diamonds shows what happens when love replaces hate during the fragile transitional state between war and peace and how the lack of a proper foundation for such a change can lead to further tragedy. *Altona* deals with lingering ghosts, unexpiated guilt, and family secrets that take on a terrible life of their own. Again, we have male leads who are in the grip of something they can't quite process, either in a moment of truth needed in order for them to survive, or through the dark lens of elapsed time that estranges them from any kind of connection to a new reality.

So, then, back onto the chandelier, and we swing back to comedy...

But not just any comedies. These have edge: they have the type of mugging that allows room for acting nuance, they have speed and a range of attitude that admits cruelty into the tone of things without poisoning the humor.

They each have a great European comic actor [Totó in *The Passionate Thief* and Fernandel in *The Sheep Has Five Legs*] known solely by their single name—a curiously modernist phenomenon in the annals of fame, one that's pretty much

exclusive to Europe, as far as I can tell—who were both revered and reviled for the lengths they would go to in order to milk a gag or recycle a comic situation. “Too much! Too much!” vs. “More! More!”—now that is sort of the problem of modernism in a nutshell...

I think in these two films we see how comedy can work against its narrative conventions to be subversive. You have two alternate tones here—elegiac in *The Passionate Thief*, and manic in *The Sheep Has Five Legs*. They are both reacting to and digesting the envelope-pushing that was occurring in American comedy, but polishing the rough edges. Mario Monicelli [director of *The Passionate Thief*] channels Billy Wilder, while Henri Verneuil [director of *The Sheep Has Five Legs*] channels Preston Sturges.

Didn't you tell me that these two films were the only two films that [famed New York Times curmudgeonly reviewer] Bosley Crowther actually liked?

I think he may have liked one other one as well. But yes, it was beyond astonishing to see the great sourpuss light up like a Christmas tree over these two. I think he was a depressive type...he seemed to like comedies much more than dramas.

From there it is an eye-rolling shift to hysterical “arthouse kitsch” (as you call it) followed by “arthouse noir”...

I wanted my friend Foster Hirsch [film historian-author-interviewer par excellence] to handle the American portion of the festival, and he wanted to show *The Bad Seed*. How could anyone say no to Rhoda Penmark? Plus we have the incredible good fortune and pleasure to have the great Patty McCormack



coming to talk with Foster and help him either bundle arthouse with kitsch or find a way to separate them at birth right there in front of the audience.

Seriously, no self-respecting arthouse archaeological expedition should be bereft of hysteria. And clearly *The Bad Seed* has that in spades. But I think that *The Savage Eye* is one of the most intriguing low-budget experimental films ever made in America, and while it is often lumped in with noir due to its highly formalist use of alienation effects, it is the first wholly successful American arthouse film and is something that every self-identifying cinephile needs to see...and see more than once.

Finally, then...back on the chandelier to Sweden and before the beginning of "arthouse" with Ingmar Bergman, who delivered the devil's baby to our door and left it mewling in a basket on the porch...

Holy iambs, lady-o...someone should interview you, so the best lines won't be in the questions instead of the answers! Monday night was the first double bill I thought up for this idea, right after seeing *Rapture*. No more full-blown an example of "arthouse" anywhere in 1965, right at the cusp of when independent filmmaking threw away the rule book forever. With another director [John Guillermin] who would never be confused with the extremities of the auteur theory, but channeling all of the valuable aspects of that rebellion.

And I then remembered *Torment*, which is Bergman before he became an auteur—perfect for the notion of "arthouse" emerging from the older industrial model of filmmaking, covering a perilous transition from adolescence to adulthood, straitened by the fact that it's 1944 and modernism has not yet permeated the visual landscape.

THE PERIL IN COMING-OF-AGE...

MAI ZETTERLING

TORMENT

RAPTURE

PATRICIA GOZZI

THE ULTIMATE DOUBLE BILL.
ONE NIGHT ONLY.

MIDCENTURY ECLECTIC!

The poster features two black and white photographs of women's faces. The top photo shows Mai Zetterling, and the bottom photo shows Patricia Gozzi. The text is arranged in a vertical and horizontal layout, with the movie titles in large, bold, red letters. The overall design is reminiscent of mid-century modern graphic design.

There's not yet a "medium is the message" construction to vaporize into a vapid consumerism—and so we get this startling contrast of films with similar themes and analogous plot twists inhabiting the pre-arthouse world where the forces are just beginning to gather and the almost "in our face" rush to hyper-modernist sensationism that is exploding everywhere in the mid-60s and that would be able to conceive of such psychological peril and loveswept danger as, well, *Rapture*.

People who find they're not keen on all this should finger Bergman and Alf Sjöberg and John Guillermin, because without them knocking me to the ground and kicking off all these reckless ideas, I would have never have grabbed hold of that chandelier.

You love the lead actresses in these films, don't you?

Yes, yes! I think folks will be mesmerized by the actresses here—the young Mai Zetterling before she took the full arthouse plunge—yikes!—and Patricia Gozzi, so incredible here at the age of only fifteen, who probably had the great good sense to retire before the demons of arthouse hyper-modernism made her into another cinematic casualty.

We are out of time and space. Please sum up the festival in ten words or less.

Something wickedly eclectic this way comes...please don't miss it!

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MIDCENTURY**ECLECTIC!** opens at the Roxie Theatre on Friday, May 13, 2016 and runs for four nights, with separate matinees on Saturday and Sunday. Discount festival passes available to the general public through April 15. For more info visit roxie.com and midcenturyproductions.com.