

The Toronto Star
November 3, 2005

Fantasy gets its close-up

One of the world's most popular film forms finally gets its own Toronto showcase

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Long and short and gay and real and Jewish and native and crazy and Latin and experimental and Italian and youth-oriented and digital and dancing and Super8 and environmental and Asian and teenaged and homeless and pornographic and Tibetan and comedic and feminist.

There's no lack of film festivals in Toronto and, as of tomorrow, when the Fantasy Worldwide International Film Festival rolls into the Bloor Cinema, we have another. Do we need it?

Johanna Kern, a filmmaker who is the founder and director of the new venture, is so sure she sounds positively giddy.

"I've loved the genre ever since I was a little girl and now it's like a little girl's dream come true," she says during a phone interview. "Now we can play with the entire world and have fun."

Kern says that as she began exploring bringing a fantasy fest to Toronto, she found that most of the 16 existing such festivals in the world focus on horror or sci-fi. (The Worldwide will feature sci-fi, but no horror.) She notes that many of the most popular movies (by box office take) of all time can be considered fantasy. Think *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*.

"We were swamped by submissions from all over the world. It just shows the huge demand. No one knows where to put those films unless they're huge Hollywood productions and mainstream. There was no event, no celebration of the genre."

How does she define that genre? "Fantasy usually involves either magic or some super powers. As opposed to pure sci-fi genres, which emphasize actual speculative science and empirical matters, fantasy is a genre that uses magic and other forms of the supernatural for setting, plot, theme or all three.

"There is the sword & sorcery genre where the example would be *Conan the Barbarian*; there's the fairytale which would be *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*; contemporary fantasy, which is *Harry Potter*, and then there is high fantasy, which has an epic struggle between good and evil and that would be *The Lord of the Rings*. All of them are based on archetypes. There's always wisdom of nature or gods or humans involved that overcomes a struggle ... and everyone arrives at a new awareness of what we are about."

I'm not sure what kind of new awareness the opening gala film *G.O.R.A.* will give the audience. The big-budget Turkish film is a slick and silly send-up of everything from *The Fifth Element* through *Kill Bill* to *Star Wars*, which somehow manages to balance the

parody and the storytelling. The tale about a carpet seller, who gets abducted by aliens and has to find a way home, has the hero wondering why all the aliens speak Turkish, is rife with homo-eroticism, features an android and an abductee who thinks he's Bob Marley.

There are 31 films in the festival: feature lengths, shorts, documentaries and animation. One of the loveliest is a seven-minute animated gem called *Moongirl*, a tale of the girl who guards the moon with her cat.

Three of the documentaries deal with those guys who bring fantasy to life on the page: the illustrators. The best of the bunch is *Frazetta: Painting with Fire*. Frank Frazetta famously did the covers for the *Conan* books, was the first to use the now fantasy staple of the pyramid composition and has influenced the visual sensibilities of movie directors. Most remarkably, when a stroke left him unable to use his right hand, he taught himself to draw with his left. Another illustrator is Harry Clarke, a turn-of-the-century Irishman whose stained glass works and creepy drawings for Edgar Allen Poe and H.C. Andersen stories were rooted in his own weird obsessions, and whose life is chronicled in *Darkness in Light*.

The closing gala is *Lord of the Brush*, an hour-long film about Canadian John Howe, the definitive Tolkien illustrator. The film is visually pleasing, deftly conveying Howe's amazing talent. Unfortunately, it's not very gripping as a story, because there doesn't appear to have been any great drama in the artist's life nor obstacles to overcome. We get no sense of where his darkness may come from and, ironically, the tale of one of the great fantasy artists bears none of the hallmarks of fantasy.

If enthusiasm is enough for success, Kern should have no trouble making her festival a hit.

"People ... feel disintegrated because there is so much going on around us that is so unsettling; we're trying to find the points that will balance and ground us. And that's the legends, the old truths, the wisdom we're rediscovering.... There used to be storytellers sitting around the fires and sharing their wisdom with the tribes. Now it's filmmakers."

Tickets available at the Bloor Cinema, 506 Bloor St. Cost: \$9; student/senior, \$7. Full weekend pass: \$50; student/senior, \$40. More info at <http://www.fwiff.com>