

The life and work of Robert Crumb gets the documentary treatment in the International Film Festival.

## Return of the Film Festival

International Film Festival mania is almost upon the country again, and the indefatigable Bill Gosden is at the helm once more. He feels this year's selection has "more coherent lines running through it than was possible in the past", and is more relaxed this time around, knowing the festival has "a great deal more economic freedom". "Although this isn't to say we're in clover," Gosden says. "There are still far too few of us doing far too much work!"

Although Gosden has a penchant for French fare, he's dealing out some choice slices of Hollywood nostalgia. *Scary Women* offers six noirish femme fatale films of the 40s. It was occasioned by the popularity of John Dahl's *The Last Seduction*, a movie which Gosden dismisses as "simply not as good as the films it apes". The ladies range from Barbara Stanwyck in Billy Wilder's martini-cool *Double Indemnity*, to Maria Montez in Robert Siodmak's hysterically camp *Cobra Women*. Gosden swears all six movies are "the best prints available" (*Cobra Women*, in all its technicolour glory, has only survived in one 16mm print!), and even if *Double Indemnity* "is a little bit milky, it's better than no *Double Indemnity* at all, which is what we've had for the last 30 years".

Gosden enthuses over the series *Tous les Garçons*, in which nine directors contributed a film set in the year in which they turned 18. We see seven of these, spanning 1962 to 1991, with period soundtracks to swoon for (each film has a 'reunion party' in it). While praising the sheer energy of David O Russell's *Spanking the Monkey* (one of the films creating the most interest amongst Wellington punters), Gosden admits that first films by American directors often feel like "bright career moves, whereas, when you look at the French, there's a wonderful lucid expression taking place. They really speak to audiences".

Not all the speaking will be from the screens this year. A number of film-makers, including Anand Patwardhan from India, will introduce their movies. Gosden has wanted this for some time.

"It will be interesting to see how audiences respond to films that 'talk back'. I've thought that with some of the work, we show it in a vacuum — you can only present a certain amount of context in a programme note. The film-maker is going to be much more eloquent and respond to whatever response the film evokes from the audience. It's particularly appropriate that we've got a few more documentary makers this time."

Gosden and I talk about the lack of theatrical venues for documentary in this country. Although Gosden blames television for not doing more here, he admits that some docs need the big screen (*Atlantic* and *Mother Dao* are "spectacles on a grand scale").

Personally, of all the preview cassettes I've been working through over the last weeks, it's the documentaries that have given me the most consistent rewards. Films like the late Marlon Riggs' *Black Is... Black Ain't*, completed after the director's death from AIDS, is a rich tapestry of observations on ethnic and personal identity, in which an interview with Angela Davis jostles with flamboyant gay church services on the West Coast, and gumbo cooking in

Louisiana.

Many of the documentaries, fascinating in themselves, have fringe bonuses. In *Theremin: An Odyssey*, there's Brian Wilson, almost totally out to lunch, and an almost balletic Jerry Lewis sequence from *The Delicate Delinquent*. In *James Ellroy: Demon Dog of American Fiction*, the ghoulish can experience rare footage and photos of LAPD murder investigations. *Crumb*, a disturbing portrait of Robert Crumb, the maker of raunchy comix, and his dysfunctional family, is graced, often ironically, by the languorous rags of Scott Joplin on the soundtrack.

One film is an unequivocal gem. In *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, Deborah Hoffmann traces the development of her mother's Alzheimer's disease with wry humour and rare compassion. Much of the film is hysterically funny, as Hoffmann as presenter spiels with real schtick, but when it is moving, have a hanky at hand. With increasing amounts of people in the 90s finding themselves in the situation of being a 'care-giver', this is a film that deserves a wider audience than any festival could ever manage. Television, where are you?

Would there, I wondered, be another local hit like *Heavenly Creatures* this year? Gosden wouldn't be drawn out on this one. He sees Anna Campion's first feature *Loaded* as "a very strange and suggestive blend of 90s and 70s sensibilities", and quickly compares it with Olivier Assayas' *L'Eau froide* from the *Tous les Garçons* series, which also deals with the youth phenomenon: "They're an interesting pair." This really sums up the ultimate benefit of such a festival in the first place — providing the luxury (and rewards) of being able to make such comparisons, which is so good for our film-makers and audiences alike.

WILLIAM DART

### The Brady Bunch Movie Director: Betty Thomas

After the almost unmitigated disaster of bringing *The Beverly Hillbillies* to the big screen, classic TV sitcoms might well seem temptation for only the most foolhardy of producers. Surprisingly, *The Brady Bunch Movie* is a winner, its slick time-warp ploy pitting a terminally turn-of-the-60s family against the crims and dims of the nasty materialist 90s.

In Bradyville — ie. Los Angeles suburbia, 1995 — everything's bright, bright, bright, and everyone's happy, happy, happy. Well, almost everyone, as middle sister Jan (a scrumptiously manic performance from Jennifer Elise Cox) is consumed with sibling rivalry, prompted by ever-present, unseen voices.

Not having been a *Brady Bunch* aficionado all those decades back, I'm not tuned in to the network of references that are embedded in the script — apart from the obvious walk-ons (or drive-on in the case of Ann B Davis as a butch truckie) from original cast members. Florence Henderson, the original Carol Brady, reappearing as Grandma Brady, has been hardened by the 80s and 90s into a vintage grump.

The movie works without too much contextualising. In spite of the all encompassing technicolour brightness, *The Brady Bunch Movie* is a darkish comedy about an ultra-functional family. The deliciously wide-eyed Shelley Long is

perpetually positive, expounding a life philosophy in which "snitching" and "tattling" are the ultimate no-no, while hubby (the luxuriantly coiffed Gary Cole) cheerfully peddles the one ranch-home design to whatever client comes along. The youngsters, alas, with the exception of Jennifer Elise Cox and Christine Taylor as the sexpot eldest sister, are rather under-written. So much so that the androgynous Ru Paul, as a guidance counsellor, and Jean Smart's libidinous neighbour, trying to coax the two Brady lads to help her "make sandwiches", seem to be acting in another movie.

Above all, *The Brady Bunch Movie* boasts some delightful set pieces, from the family showing flair and flares in the talent quest to the closing credits in which a *Hollywood Squares* grid of the Brady family (together with the eldest daughter's lesbian admirer) offers a piquant deconstruction of an American family.

WILLIAM DART

### Batman Forever Director: Joel Schumacher

In which Bruce Wayne (aka Batman) fights fresh villainy in the form of the leering Two-Face (Tommy Lee Jones, with an acid two-tone) and the Riddler (Jim Carrey, spending much of the film in a lime green lycra body suit, with an orange Annie Lennox coif).

Tim Burton has handed this instalment of the Gotham City Chronicles to Joel Schumacher, and Schumacher's done a slick job. He knows how to make the most of an opening shot — remember the traffic jam in *Falling Down*, or the children in the forest in *The Client*? — this time round it's stylish fetishism, as Batman dons his rubbers. Indeed, *Batman Forever* may well be the campest instalment since the 60s TV series: from Two Face's mini army of pierced, masked menacers, to the flamboyant Riddler.

Schumacher himself started his career in the art department, and *Batman Forever* is a stunning visual experience. There are a number of fantastical scenes, like the expressionist Gotham Circus which provides the setting for the assassination of Robin's family, ending with a marvelous overhead shot as the orphaned Robin looks down on the three sprawling bodies. Schumacher's design team includes Barbara Ling, whose talents lay behind David Byrne's

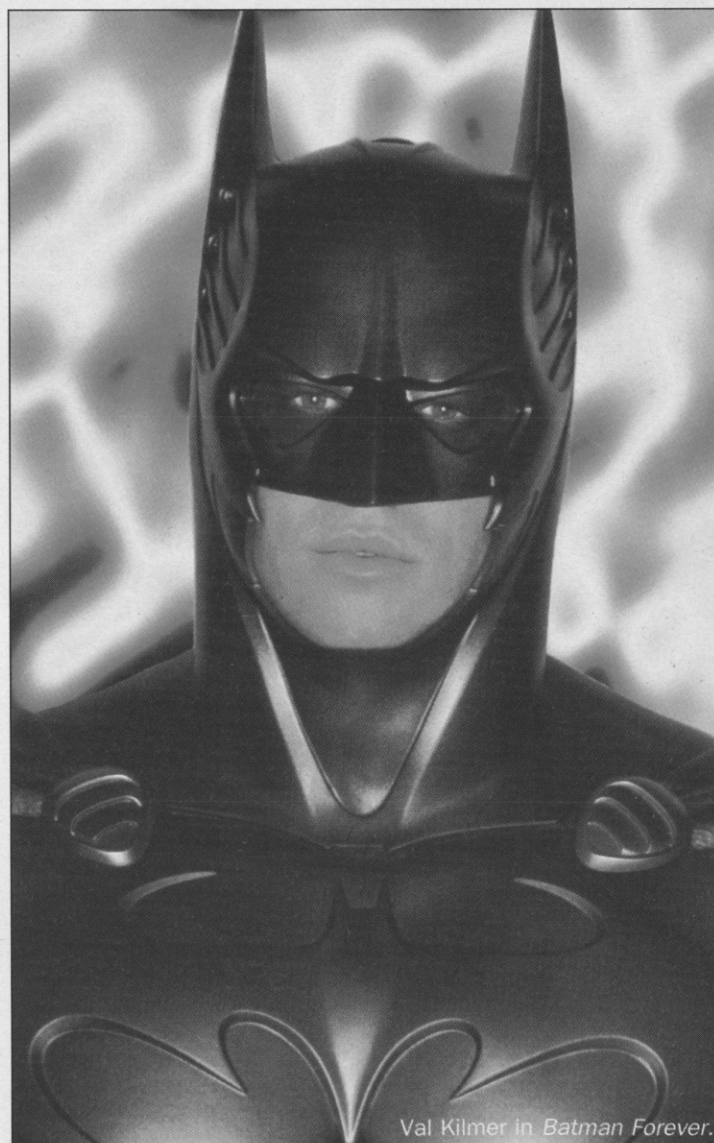
quirky *True Stories*, and they magpie their way from Russian Constructivism to dizzy psychedelia — when Robin has a scuffle with a street gang, it's a riot of day-glo and blue lighting.

No choreographer is credited, but much of the action has a touch of the ballet — I'm thinking here of Batman's entrance at the Nygmata party, or the scene in which the villains invade the Wayne mansion. In his spy demolition of the Batcave, Jim Carrey seems to be making a play for being seen as the Ann Miller of our time.

It's not all visual chic, though. A crisp script makes for some scrumptious repartee when Batman first meets up with Nicole Kidman's glamorous criminal psychologist, Dr Chase Meridian, and the first encounter between Jones and Carrey is deliciously manic.

Perhaps, after the ceaseless inventiveness of the first 90 minutes, enlisting every high-tech device known to FX, the climax is strangely disappointing. However, the dethroned Carrey, disconsolate in his spangles, like a drag queen who's weathered a thunderstorm, is a brilliant touch. At the end, in a scene at Arkham Asylum, a short appearance from René Auberjonois as Dr Burton (cute touch this) is perhaps more significant than it seems, but vital questions remain unanswered — certainly Chris O'Donnell's Wonder Boy is just too cute to be left partnerless at the end.

WILLIAM DART



Val Kilmer in *Batman Forever*.