

Crossover cinema

On Tuesday 13 March the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport opened the refurbished National Film Theatre – sorry, BFI Southbank. It was probably the best part of her week: by Thursday Ms Jowell would be on her feet in the House of Commons trying to explain why the 2012 Olympics were just as good value at £9.3 billion as they had been at the original £2.35 billion. Maybe they are; but you could get a lot of culture for the £6.95 billion in between.

Ten days later, with a budget so small it would hardly pay for the nibbles at the Southbank opening, the fifth Borderlines Film Festival got under way with simultaneous screenings in Hereford, Gorsley, Kingsland, Little Dewchurch and Leintwardine. I'm trusting *S&S* readers will have a rough idea where the first place is. The others are nearby.

There is no obvious link between these two events beyond the fact that they represent different aspects of film culture in the UK and they happened within the same month. In all other respects they are so far apart that if we are to understand the link between them, we need (as they say in the academic world) to unpick their meaning.

The BFI Southbank opening was an agreeable and surprisingly democratic event: film-makers such as Alan Parker and Terence Davies had to stand in line to get in like everyone else, with only Rita Tushingham apparently ushered through the celebrity stargate. The entrance, in fact, was one of the high spots: you now access the building through a new glass-and-steel hallway fronting what used to be a delivery area but has now been redubbed Theatre Avenue. Once inside, however, it was hard not to remember that the large empty space where we were busily networking used to house the Museum of the Moving Image. In 1999 MOMI shut its doors 'temporarily' (which soon became forever): an act of stealth forestalling the debate about its closure that should have taken place.

But that's all in the past. If March didn't rain on the Southbank's parade, neither (for once) shall I: the new facility is much needed and very welcome. Interesting, though, that what I could hear of the Secretary of State's speech seemed to place an emphasis on participation, on the new BFI Southbank being a place for doing rather than merely consuming. This, of course, is the leitmotif of government policy in this area: the



This small festival testifies to the power of an artform that can't be contained within the cool spaces of BFI Southbank

Olympics are worth £9.3 billion because of the numbers of people they will get doing sport. Just how well that idea works for culture is a matter of opinion, however – and Southbank's inaugural season offers two ways of answering the question.

On the one hand, there is a retrospective of the films of Terence Davies, a film-maker whose brilliance lies in his determination to put on screen the 'perfect' images he has in his head. Awe, rather than putting your oar in, is the appropriate response. At the other end of the spectrum comes a season called *Optronica* in which Peter (Cinema Is Dead) Greenaway mixed images from *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* to a soundtrack from DJ Radar, making him (I quote) a "realtime image conductor". "How long is it" (I quote again, this time from the tagline on the programme booklet) "since you explored a digital realm?"

So, while the rest of us are wondering how digital technology will transform the production and distribution of films, Greenaway is insisting its purpose is to replace cinema – the concept, plus the place you sit and watch a completed narrative – with something else entirely. In this realm, the Southbank's core – the three theatres that still bear the names NFT 1, 2 and 3 – will surely become redundant. Passive watching is so 20th century.

To the organisers of the Borderlines Film Festival such a notion would appear absurdly metropolitan, if not quite simply absurd. If cinema along

the Welsh border is dying, it's because the theatres have been converted first into bingo halls, then discos, then carpet warehouses – a process that in itself offers a social history of the past quarter-century. Cinema didn't die here and in many other parts of rural Britain because the artform no longer had any cultural credibility, but because the distribution system put the boot in some time during the 1970s.

The Borderlines Festival ran for the traditional span – from 23 March to 2 April – almost entirely in what used to be called the Marches, with a couple of sorties across the border into Wales. The programme ranged from crossover titles such as *Volver* and *Babel* (which never did cross over into the area's few remaining cinemas), via Bollywood movies and the best of world cinema, to new British films and work by local film-makers. The Courtyard Arts Centre in Hereford was the main venue, but village halls and other buildings were also used, some of them thanks to the travelling projection equipment provided by the wonderfully named Flicks in the Sticks.

For someone like me, saturated in cinema (and occasionally whingeing about the number of films I 'have' to see), the efforts of the festival's organisers are a reminder of the power of an artform that refuses to be contained within the cool curatorium of BFI Southbank – or certified dead by Peter Greenaway. Sticks, to subvert a famous *Variety* headline, no longer nix pix. **◆ Nick Roddick**

WORLD NEWS

● **Iran** 'The Expelled' is on course to become the country's biggest hit of 2007. Directed by Massoud Dehnamaki, the film follows a group of misfits sent to the frontline during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war and belongs to an increasingly popular genre known as 'Sacred Defense' films. Dehnamaki was previously best known as a right-wing agitator who took to the streets to break up student protests and ensure women were wearing Islamic headdress.

● **China** Banned director Lou Ye is travelling to Palestine to make his next project. Lou, who was forbidden to make films for five years after screening 'Summer Palace' at Cannes without official clearance, is adapting a play by Palestinian writer Mazen Saadeh about a man who is abandoned by his wife after being imprisoned for ten years. Lou aims to start shooting next year.

● **US** Tintin is finally set to hit the big screen following the successful completion of 25-year-old negotiations between Steven Spielberg and the Hergé Foundation. "We are delighted that finally DreamWorks have decided to take up their options," said Hergé head Nick Rodwell. Tintin was created in 1929 by Belgian artist Georges Rémi, whose centenary will be marked this year. Spielberg may not direct, and it is still unclear if the film will be animation, live action or CGI.

● **Israel** 'Beaufort' has become the fastest-grossing feature in Israel for the last 20 years. The film, about the Israeli army's withdrawal from the south of Lebanon in 2000 after an 18-year-long occupation, has surpassed 105,000 admissions in its first 13 days on release, already reaching a third of last year's biggest hit 'Aviva, My Love'. "Everyday I wonder when it's going to stop. It's phenomenal," said the film's director Joseph Cedar.

● **UK** The UK Film Council has stepped in to rescue a number of projects put at risk by changes in tax laws. Ealing comedy 'St. Trinians' and Julian Jarrold's 'Bridgeshead Revisited' were given additional financing to the tune of £1.3 million and £150,000 respectively. Both films had been due to receive backing through GAAP funds, which created an upfront tax loss that mitigated the risk for equity investors but were outlawed by the Treasury on 2 March.

● **US** The world's first indie Blu-ray film distribution and manufacturing company Edge of Light Media (EOL) has been launched by producer John Daly and DVD pioneer Erick Hansen to release indie and mini-major films, TV shows and music videos worldwide in the hi-def disc format. EOL has begun seeking Blu-ray arrangements for its new releases. *Compiled by Ali Jaafar*