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# Cinequest Corrals Maverick Filmmakers

by Lily Ng

Film critic and author Chris Gore named Cinequest as one of the Top 10 Film Festivals in the world in his *The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide* (2001). "Cinequest represents a trend of great regional film festivals that have garnered acclaim for their bold programming choices," Gore explains.

Based in San Jose, California, the film festival had a 17 percent increase in box office receipts over its 2002 earnings. "This is really significant," says Jens Hussey, Cinequest's public relations director. "We were operating in a weak economy where many other arts organizations have had a very difficult year, and the war was on people's minds quite a bit. Having those two odds against us, and the fact that we had additional box office and broke our attendance records just goes to show how much support people in Northern California have for Cinequest!"

"One of my personal programming missions is to highlight first-time filmmakers," says Michael Rabehl, Cinequest's program director. "We program a lot of films from established ones too, but primarily, this year, between shorts and features, I think it was somewhere around 86 [first-time filmmakers]." "Our theme is 'Maverick,'" Hussey adds. "So the festival entries have to fit into that theme in some way."

"The term 'maverick' is something that is specific to our mission statement," Hussey continues. "But at the same time, it also evolves. The root of it is creating visionary and personal stories which highlight that. We turn away a lot of films that I would love to have at the festival—they're high quality films; there's just not enough space for them. We have to make really tough choices."



Laura stands in her room next to her healing rocks and crystals. From Sevan Matossian's Audience Choice-winning *Our House*.

Lee Miller garnered invitations to festivals after his film, *Real Time*, screened in San Jose. "We got invited to the Boston Film Festival. It's a testament to the reputation that Cinequest has secured."

The maverick quality also applies to the documentary selections. From *Bitter Jester*, director Maija Di Giorgio's very personal and hilarious account of the moment she choked on an HBO stage, to Jeff Blitz's Academy Award-nominated *Spellbound*, which chronicles the nail-biting competition known as the National Spelling Bee, the dozen documentaries at this year's Cinequest never failed to shock and surprise.

The winner of the Audience Choice Award, *Our House*, takes on the bold subject of developmental disabilities as embodied in the residents of one Santa Barbara home. The traumas and joys of three residents are so starkly and intimately portrayed that the films' director, Sevan Matossian, is facing flack from the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) and the California State Capitol from which DDS gets its funding. "They thought the film portrayed negative stereotypes," says Matossian. "The residents in the film are portrayed clearly as real people, with real habits—both good and bad. Most films on this subject never come from an honest place." Matossian, who is the supervisor of Sueno House, both lives and works on the premises, and is part of a 24-hour staff that supervises the eight long-term residents. Cinequest marks Matossian's second film festival screening, after its rousing reception at Park City's NoDance Film Festival. Because of both of these showings, the invitations to multiple festivals are pouring in.



From Maija Di Giorgio's *Bitter Jester*.

Lee Miller garnered invitations to festivals as well after his film, *Real Time*, screened in San Jose. "We got invited to the Boston Film Festival. It's a testament to the reputation that Cinequest has secured." Miller's first documentary took him and five members of his filmmaking class into O.H. Close Youth Detention Center (California) to teach 10 inmates how to make films. He filmed the entire process, so the resulting work is a film within a film. "The kids in Close were very motivated to work together and set aside rivalries," Miller maintains. Yet, *Real Time's* unblinking approach also put the filmmaker at odds with the bureaucratic California Youth Authority (CYA), of which O.H. Close is a part. "The CYA directors said that the film was damaging and promoted gang activity! But we get the greatest compliments and belief in the film from people who work at CYA—the counselors."

The invitations to other festivals that result from a Cinequest screening boggle Michael Rabehl. "When I hear filmmakers come in and tell me that they've been called by three other festivals because they screened at Cinequest, that's weird to me. I don't think of how much impact I'm gonna have on their film. I try to get them the experience they want to get while they're here. I don't get it!"

Jens speculates on Cinequest's steady rise to prominence: "Word-of-mouth is extremely good. I can't tell you how many



Lee Miller (right) with a student from a filmmaking class at O.H. Close Youth Detention Center in Miller's *Real Time*.

times I've talked to people on the phone who say, 'I've heard such great things about your festival.' Then you know you're doing something right."

Lily Ng is the co-producer of *Confessions of a Burning Man*, which screened at Cinequest 2003.



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**Grand Jury Award**  
*Etre et Avoir*

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*Wedding in Ramallah*

**Charles E. Guggenheim  
Emerging Artist Award**  
*Onibus 174*

**CameraPlanet/Full Frame  
Jury Award for Best Short**  
*The Luckiest Nut in the World*

**Audience Award**  
*Speedo*

**Honorable Mention**  
*Black Picket Fence*

**Honorable Mention**  
*Ocularist*

**MTV>News:Docs:Prize**  
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