

Seven Reasons to Love Hot Docs

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Tom Roston



A.J. Schnack with directors Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker at the special 20th Anniversary screening of *The War Room* at [Hot Docs](#) in Toronto, Canada. (Credit: Adriano Trapani/ Hot Docs)

Call it, “film festival high;” that early morning sense of excitement when you wake and not know what the day will bring, while attending a festival. Toronto’s [Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival](#), which just concluded this weekend had so many films, so many intriguing people (be they filmmakers or subjects of the films), and so much to do, that I was high as a kite, as they say, each morning. I had it good at Hot Docs, and here are seven reasons why:

World Premieres

The docs that first showed at this year’s festival were an eclectic, admirable mix: steeped in doc history (*Caucus*; on the GOP campaign trail, was a love letter to 1960’s *Primary*), cerebral yet compelling (*The Unbelievers*; about evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss) or highly provocative (*Unclaimed*; about a man in Vietnam who claims to be a POW. See my story about it in [The New York Times](#)).

The International Flavor

I met a woman who claimed to “run documentaries” in her small European country. And I actually believe her. You can’t turn without meeting someone who runs a festival or a grant-giving entity from some overseas nation. And they’re all state-funded so there’s no stress or desperation in their eyes as they sip wine, toss bocce balls and discourse on documentaries. The films themselves are equally sourced from disparate places around the world. Accents run thick during Q & A’s, and as we Americans lean in to hear better, we get a well-needed reality check that there’s so much more in the doc world than what’s in our backyard.

It’s the Curation, Stupid

Each film festival is only as good as its films. I’ve [already indicated](#) how many great films were showing at Hot Docs this year, among them; *12 O’Clock Boys*, *Big Men*, *Kill Team*, *These Birds Walk*, *The Machine Which Makes Everything Disappear*, and on and on. But there’s more than just cherry picking great films; you have to get the right balance. For example, pairing screenings of *Caucus* with a special showing of 1993’s Clinton campaign doc, *The War Room* (with directors D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus in attendance), was particularly brilliant.

Toronto in the Spring Time

I used to say, “nothing is better than Toronto in the late summer,” but it turns out this town is pretty special in the early spring as well. I was totally enthralled by the new TIFF Bell Lightbox theater, with five state-of-the-art screening rooms that provide what’s probably the most comfortable seating with the best sight lines in the western world, and the new

jagged, modern addition to the Royal Ontario Museum, which also hosted Hot Docs screenings. It's been seven years since I've been to Toronto, so to see both of these architectural triumphs, both of which help serve the filmmaking community was very exciting. I've always loved the food, the night life, and the people of this town, but I was especially happy to meet the proprietor of Dumpling Queen, an awesome hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant on Yonge street. They've got the best veggie dumplings this side of Mott Street.

The Doc Shop

This might be becoming the new standard at festivals, but it's the first time I've been able to appreciate it. Two dark rooms filled with 40 or so computer screens might seem like anathema to the festival-going experience, so let me explain myself. Hot Docs set up a library of most of the 205 films that showed at the festival so that industry and press people could watch what ever they wanted on the computer screens equipped with headphones. Festival schedules are so difficult to maintain, that it's essential to give viewers a way to make up what we miss. And, the truth is, so many documentaries are now seen by audiences (and critics) on small screens, that it's not exactly a disservice to the experience of watching the film.

Sheer number of films

This may be a backhanded compliment, but I was terrorized a number of times by what I was *not* doing at the festival. Which is why the above-mentioned Doc Shop was so invaluable. No one could watch all 205 films during the festival, but not getting to see it all is a great problem to have. Of the ten films I said I most wanted to see at the festival, I literally saw just two. Two! But I was still so impressed with what I did end up seeing, which brings me to...

Surprises

I had more happy accidents in a four-day period than I thought possible. The first night, I stumbled into a party for *The Unbelievers* at my hotel, where I met Richard Dawkins whose awesome intellect almost blew me into a corner. But, fueled by beer and olives, I was able to have a conversation with the man. Another day, I stumbled into an early morning panel where I heard *Lucky* Director Laura Checkoway reveal the gem that Albert Maysles once told her, "All you need to do is love," which I found quite stirring. The next day, with a hole in my schedule, I stumbled into *Menstrual Man*, a film title I can't entirely say with a straight face which is the very reason I should have been seeing it (as the director told me, afterwards). This film is about a man in India who makes it his mission to get poor, rural Indian women to use sanitary pads. It was my greatest discovery at the festival; it sounds small, but it's really quite miraculous. Shot on site with incredibly compelling characters including the main subject, Arunachalam Muruganantham, and some of the women he works with, *Menstrual Man* is an engaging, funny, heart-breaking story of the power of what one ordinary man can achieve. It's an attack on those of us who worship sophistication and intellect (see me fawning over Dawkins, above), as well as a concise appreciation of a micro-economic model. With slick insight and analysis, and well-produced graphics, the film recalls *The Corporation*. But, at the same time, it's a gritty, third world verite doc. In other words, it's a hybrid unlike any other, and it should not be missed.

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