
Freeze frame: film festival in Siberia; Organizers, primarily regional lumber and oil companies, hope the event's success is just the tip of the iceberg.: [HOME EDITION]

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Full Text (957 words)

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"I am telling everyone it is their chance to go to Siberia and to come back," said the Russian voice on the phone. It was my old friend Masha Zereva, once president of the Soviet Screenwriter's Union and now a hustling capitalist scribe like the rest of us. Would I be a member of the international jury at the first Spirit of Fire Film Festival in a place called Khanty-Mansiysk in western Siberia?

The festival was less than a week away, and I was obviously not a first choice (or third or fourth ... who knew?), it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

I had never heard of Khanty-Mansiysk, but by the time I flew to Moscow, I had learned it was the bureaucratic seat of an "autonomous region" roughly the size of Texas, in the heart of Russia's burgeoning oil country. No wonder they had the cash to fly filmmakers in from all over the world. The festival took place at a huge new multimillion-dollar cultural complex, replete with recital rooms, exhibition halls and several cinemas -- all for a town of barely 38,000 people. Where was the audience supposed to come from?

I stared out from the Mercedes bus I shared with my fellow jurors on the snowdrift-lined route to our hotel. Although it was almost 4 a.m., the cultural center was fully illuminated. Brilliant colored lights beamed through elaborate ice sculptures carved for the festival. Among them were the MGM lion, the socialist realist symbol of MosFilm (the Russian movie studio), French actor Pierre Richard (a Spirit of Fire honoree) in his role as "The Tall Blond Man With One Black Shoe," Charlie Chaplin and, inevitably, Oscar.

I was relieved to read on the building across the street that the temperature was only 10 below zero. I had been warned that the end-of-January temperature might be minus 50. I had arrived in the midst of a heat wave!

The next night, in spiffy new parkas emblazoned with the festival logo (a Siberian god extending a fiery torch through film sprockets), the other jurors and I ran a gantlet of several thousand fans (where had they come from?) and paparazzi along a red carpet into the cultural center for the opening ceremony.

Accompanying us were the elite of the Russian cinema who arrived in gleaming, late-model SUVs and wore the kinds of fur coats that often provoke a thorough spray-painting from animal rights activists in Manhattan. Inside, we were introduced to the audience as if we were household names in our own countries.

Not that my colleagues were undistinguished. Our chairman, Krystof Zanussi, has been for many years among the leading Polish writer-directors. The others were Russian director Sergei Bodrov, whose movie "Prisoner on the Mountain" was nominated for the best foreign film Academy Award in 1997, Italian producer Rosanna Seregni and German critic Klaus Eder, president of the International Society of Film Critics.

Zanussi, Bodrov and Eder had experience on festival juries (Venice, Cannes and Toronto), which helped as we began our work the next day in a private screening room. Most of the 12 movies in competition were not, to be generous, of the highest quality. (No doubt this will change when the international film community becomes aware of the first prize, \$150,000.)

On one particularly arduous day we slogged through three excruciatingly dull films, including a 183-minute Tibetan retelling of the Buddha story in reverse. Fortunately, our hosts were extremely generous in entertaining us on our off days. They took us reindeer and dog sledding and snowmobiling. They feted us with vodka and moksum (a fish) parties by frozen lakes and, most spectacularly, arranged for a ride over the taiga (the

coniferous forest that extends across sub-arctic Russia) in a deluxe leather-seated helicopter used by their lumber and oil barons. (We knew, of course, that this largess, and the festival itself, was in part a public relations gambit by these same giant lumber and oil companies that were despoiling one of the Earth's last great wildernesses.)

The grand prize, the Golden Taiga, was easy to award. We immediately agreed that "The Year of the Devil," a brilliant and original Czech rock opera about alcoholism and the devil, was by far the best film. Second prize quickly went to "Mostly Martha," a well-wrought but conventional German romantic melodrama already in release in the U.S. Third prize was more difficult, but with a slight nod of thanks to our hosts, was awarded to the gritty Russian film "Black Ice."

The prizes were presented at a glitzy, Vegas-like ceremony by slinky models in gold lame dresses and hairdos out of a Space Age version of Vogue. In his closing speech, the governor of the region pronounced the infant festival a success. Twenty-five thousand people had attended more than 70 screenings. (Some bused in over icy roads from oil towns three hours away.) "From here on in," he said, "Khanty-Mansiysk will be known as Cannes-Mansiysk!" I don't think he was kidding.

*

Roger L. Simon is an Oscar-nominated screenwriter ("Enemies, A Love Story") and mystery novelist.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: A GLACIAL PLACE: Jurors were flown over the tundra in a luxury helicopter belonging to oil executives.; PHOTO: COLD SHOULDERS: A Spirit of Fire Film Festival logo sculpted in ice greets filmmakers, jurors and audience members at Khanty-Mansiysk in western Siberia.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Roger L. Simon; PHOTO: COLD, WITH A CHANCE FOR COLDER: Jury members Sergei Bodrov, a Russian director, left, and Polish writer-director Krystof Zanussi prepare for a reindeer sleigh ride.; PHOTO: VEGAS-LIKE GLITZ: Models in gold lame dresses handed out awards. The grand prize went to the Czech film "The Year of the Devil."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Roger L. Simon

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