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The truth tellers: SPOTLIGHT: MOVIES

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By Elmer Ploetz

The two Hot Docs screenings, on Wednesday and Saturday, will be the only showing regionally until a screening is set up in Buffalo sometime later this year.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's film uses actors, including Peter Coyote and Tilda Swinton, to re-create scenes, as well as showing Kurtz himself in real footage.

If that sounds a little out of the stereotypical documentary mainstream, it is. But it also symbolizes what Hot Docs is all about.

"I think we want to show everything that documentary's doing right now," said Sean Farnel, Hot Docs' director of programming. "That includes political and social issue films, but also just a lot of really good human stories and films about pop culture.

"There's such a wide range of activity in documentary right now, and we just want to show all of it."

With 130 films screening, the festival comes close.

The films range from the politics of "Strange Culture" and "Your Mommy Kills Animals" (about how animal rights extremists have been targeted through the Patriot Act) to the just plain quirky - like "Hell's Grannies," a short on a 78-year-old who starts her own motorcycle gang.

If "The Monastery -- Mr. Vig and the Nun" wasn't nonfiction, it would make a great narrative film. It's the story of a young Russian nun and her effect on the 82-year-old Mr. Vig at his crumbling monastery.

The festival has been a launching vehicle for many films, including Morgan Spurlock's "Super Size Me," Werner Herzog's "Grizzly Man" and Patrick Creadon's "Wordplay."

They're the kind of films that you'll see at the North Park Theatre.

This year's favorites to break out, says Hot Docs Executive Director Chris McDonald, include "Manufacturing Dissent" (a look at Michael Moore and his films from within the progressive side) and "In the Shadow of the Moon" (which plumbs the memories of the only 24 humans -- U.S. astronauts all -- to have ever stood on another world).

" 'Manufacturing Dissent' was a no-brainer for us; we knew that was going to be popular," said McDonald. "However, films like 'Helvetica' -- a film about the 50th anniversary of a typeface -- is going crazy."

"Helvetica" is already "rush only," which means the only tickets available are at the door -- if there are empty seats counted 15 minutes before showtime."

"Out of the blue, always, there are films you don't expect," said McDonald.

One of the extras the festival offers is that the filmmakers are present at about 80 percent of the screenings, and they're available for question-and-answer sessions for about 20 minutes after the showings.

They've got some extra incentive. In addition to the festival itself, Hot Docs hosts one of the industry's major marketplaces -- with more than 1,800 industry reps registered.

So while viewers are attending the films, many of the makers will be making pitches to investors. In fact, there's a \$10,000 prize for best pitch.

The benefit for the nonindustry type is that three affiliated "Hot Docs Talks" are open to the public.

For many films, Toronto is the place where the deals are made that will decide whether films go to theatrical release, public television or cable, or simply continue on the festival circuit.

After making its festival debut at the Sundance Festival, "Strange Culture" is making its Canadian debut in Toronto.

Hershman said it has been screened at a few other festivals, at this point to all-positive reviews. It has yet to receive a theatrical release, which would be required for it to receive Academy Award consideration in the documentary category.

Hershman said that wasn't why she made the film.

"Well, I just heard about [the case], so I had to do the film. There was no question," said Hershman. "If it's happening to Steve, it could happen to anybody."

The catch was that Kurtz was limited in what he could say about his court case, and his wife had died. So Hershman chose to use actors to re-create scenes for the film. "It's a hybrid film," she said.

It will be screening at Lincoln Center on June 15 as part of the Human Rights Watch film festival.

The film presents Hershman's interpretation of the events involving Kurtz in a documentary form.

According to Bruce Kirkland, the president of the Toronto Film Critics Association and a critic for the Toronto Sun, films like Hershman's are finding a niche by filling an important need in society.

"It's almost hardwired into how people are entering the digital world," he said. "We're always looking for information, but ... the problem in our society now in the 21st century is it's all fragmented, scattered around."

"You can watch the most extraordinary things on YouTube, steal other people's artistic property, and we can blog and read endless reams of stuff.

"But we're desperate for people who we feel can be trusted to put it together. That's the challenge every documentary filmmaker has to face, to get us to trust you with your version of the story. There is no such thing as one truth; there's just an attempt to find a truth that's more or less reliable, depending on how you view how it's played."

So chances are viewers will be overdosing on truth -- or those truths -- in Toronto between now and next Sunday.