Distressed families

reviewed by James M. Wall in the September 25, 2002 issue

Families in spiritual crisis was such a dominant theme among the 26 films in competition at the Montreal World Film Festival that one suspected the selections committee was composed of zealous social workers. An Italian film, *Casomai*, directed by Alessandro D'Alatri, was especially appealing to the festival's ecumenical jury--three Protestants and three Catholics. It didn't hurt that *Casomai* features a wedding homily in which a priest brings judgment against forces that undermine family life--naming names, no less. Marriage, the priest insists, should be a community experience, not just a private union. The film's title, *Casomai*, can be translated as "almost never" or "an escape clause," suggesting the less than binding nature of modern marriage.

The festival's main prize went to another Italian film, *The Best Day of My Life*, directed by Cristrina Comencini. It features a widowed grandmother with three adult children. One of them is worried that her teenage son may be gay; another is married but having an affair; and the third child is afraid to tell his mother that he is gay. The gay uncle's counsel to the nephew who is uncertain about his sexuality is masterfully presented. Another grandchild provides the source for the title; she receives a video camera as a gift for her first communion, an event that brings the family together in church even as it exposes its divisions.

A different kind of family appears in the ecumenical jury's main prize-winner, *The Last Train*, from Uruguay and directed by Diego Arsuage. In this picture three men and a boy rescue a 19th-century train locomotive. The train had been sold to an American film company, and the three men, members of the Friends of the Rail Association, want it back. They blast through a garage door to start the engine on its escape route.

The Last Train is a caper picture with a heart. The script provides some wonderful observations on the limits and wisdom that accompany aging. Federico Luppi, as Pepe, a retired train engineer and union activist, insists on taking the 11-year-old along on a train journey from Montevideo, north to the Brazilian border. His reason?

To give the boy an adventure. And besides, his two older companions have arthritic hands and couldn't possibly shovel coal fast enough without the boy's help.

Insults among the older trio mask the affection they feel for one another. Pepe is a mentor to the boy, and when danger threatens he sends him away to safety, "on a mission," so that he can notify the media of their adventure.

A Spanish film that should earn a North American audience is *Carol's Journey,* set in the time of the Spanish civil war and featuring Carol, a 12-year-old who has been living in New York and has reluctantly come back to her mother's home village in rural Spain. The mother is dying of cancer and wants her daughter reunited with her grandfather. Carol's relationship with three village boys, which begins as an inevitable preteen battle of the sexes, evolves into a tender romance. The interaction of the children echoes the style of François Truffaut, the French director who so effectively captured the joy, ambiguity and pathos of childhood.

Religion is introduced in the film when the local priest insists that Carol take Catholic instruction though she has arrived from America as a Protestant. To everyone's surprise, Carol agrees to become a Catholic but only if she can wear a boy's "sailor suit" to her first communion, rather than the "bride's dress" normally worn by girls. The priest agrees for the sake of family harmony.

Not every family-oriented film at the festival ends well. Karen Moncrieff's *Blue Car* was one of only two U.S. films shown in competition, and it is typical of American films in having absolutely no reference to religion or spiritual hope. David Stratham, best known for his work in John Sayles's independent films, is a high school teacher who befriends an alienated teenager searching for a father figure to replace her divorced parent. She finds one in her teacher, who appears at first to have the proper scruples to handle young crushes.

The other U.S. film in competition, *Igby Goes Down,* also makes a bleak assessment of American culture, which is shown to be rootless, immoral and weak at the core. Kieran Culkin, one of the Culkin acting brothers, gives a strong performance as a rebellious high school senior who hates his mother (Susan Sarandon) and seeks solace in all the usual vices. I disliked the film for being exploitative and pretentious, but younger viewers report feeling a strong identification with the Culkin character.

The festival's second-place award went to *Innowhereland*, the first feature film by director Tayfun Pirselimoglu. It confronts the issue of the "disappeared" in Turkey.

Sukrun, a mother working in the Istanbul train station, refuses to believe that any one of three corpses she is asked to identify in the morgue could be her missing son. Sukrun hears a rumor that he may be in Mardin, in Kurdish territory in southeast Turkey. Officials there discourage her attempt to find him. Her son's political activity, which may have led to his disappearance, is never revealed. Did he work against the Turkish government on behalf of the Kurds? Perhaps, but Turkish film censors would not have been friendly to overt accusations of government responsibility for the "disappearance" of citizens.

The government of China is also on constant alert to block films that might reflect badly on the country's human rights record. The favored competitive film from China was a well-made ethnic tale set in Mongolia, *Heavenly Grassland*, made by Sai Lu and Mai Lisi. The film is poignant and moving, but it also presents a picture of fiercely independent and happy grassland inhabitants that the Chinese government wants the world to see.

A second Chinese film, which received additional funding from Austria, was perhaps the strongest family-oriented film in the festival. *On the Other Side of the Bridge* begins in 1932 in Vienna as the young Fanny Ebner goes ice skating with a dashing Chinese police officer, falls in love with him and, in defiance of her father, goes to China.

The version of the film which played in Montreal is not the version its co-producer, Ursual Wolfe, wanted to show. It is dubbed into German from the Chinese, which removes some of the beauty and flow of the film's rhythm. And the Chinese side of the production team, which controls the Chinese version, had deleted sections of the film which showed the husband's incarceration and reeducation.

Wolfe is the wife of a retired Austrian diplomat who served as ambassador to China from 1980 to 1986. She told me that the Austrian embassy received a request from an Austrian-born woman living in Zhejiang province, south of Shanghai. The woman's maiden name was Fanny Ebner, and she asked the embassy if it could provide her with German books and magazines.

Intrigued, Wolfe met Ebner and found that she had come to China in 1934 to marry a Chinese police officer whom she had met while he was in training at the police academy in Vienna. Her husband worked for the Nationalist government until the communist takeover in 1949.

Ebner told Wolfe that the years from 1949 through 1978 were "tough times" for former Nationalist officials. Her husband went through a variety of reeducation programs during that period, and on three occasions Ebner was asked to leave China. She refused, insisting that her place was to be with her husband and their four children (one son had died earlier in the war).

Ebner, whose husband died in 1990, still lives in Zhejiang province. When she agreed to allow a film to be made about her life, she had two requests: tell the truth about how hard it was during those dark days, and don't show the house where she currently lives. "I didn't want to disturb the neighbors," she says.