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Plenty to see at Toronto's Hot Docs film festival

With annual documentary film fest set in eclectic area of Toronto, there's plenty to see and do

INGRID SAPONA • MARCH 30, 2008

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The Toronto International Film Festival in September is a scrum, with hotel space at a premium and long lines for the popular movies. Instead, try the Hot Docs documentary festival, held this year from April 17 to 27.

Hot Docs, which is celebrating its 15th year, is North America's largest festival for documentary films. This year, more than 170 documentaries from 36 countries will be screened at seven theaters clustered in Toronto's bohemian Annex and upscale Yorkville neighborhoods, just north of the central downtown district.

Some of the films examine political and social issues, while others offer slice-of-life stories, profiles or quirky topics (*Green Porno*, a 6-minute short, features Isabella Rossellini elucidating the sex life of insects).

Several "special presentation" films have already made a buzz on the festival circuit, including Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure* (about the Abu Ghraib atrocities), *Man on Wire* (about high-wire stuntman Philippe Petit), *Citizen Havel* (about Czech politician and writer Vaclav Havel) and *The Black List* (famous black Americans discuss racial issues).

Directors usually introduce their films and participate in post-show question-and-answer sessions with the audience, talking about how they came up with the idea, how they got funding, what obstacles they may have faced in making the film and more.

If you need a break between documentaries, there's plenty to explore near the festival venues.

Because of its proximity to the University of Toronto, the Annex has a bohemian vibe, with students and student-types ambling about.

Unlike many Toronto neighborhoods, the Annex hasn't been overrun by chain stores. The numerous restaurants, boutiques and shops (including various used and new book stores and Sonic Boom records — it is a college district, after all) make it ideal for exploring. You'll find pretty much any kind of food, from falafel to natural foods, and late-night hangouts like the venerable Dooney's Cafe and Mel's Montreal Delicatessen (open 24 hours).

If architecture is of interest, the Annex's maze of tree-lined, one-way residential streets offers excellent examples of Victorian and Edwardian homes.

A visit to the Annex wouldn't be complete without a stop at Honest Ed's. The store's 23,000-light marquee beckons bargain hunters and the curious to the 60-year-old landmark that runs a full city block on the corner of Bloor and Bathurst (just down the street from the Bloor Cinema, one of Hot Docs' venues).

Honest Ed's was founded by the late Ed Mirvish who went on to become a theater impresario. Besides bargains, the store is full of autographed photos of show business personalities and memorabilia from Mirvish theaters and productions.

Another must-see is the new addition to the Royal Ontario Museum. It was designed by architect Daniel Libeskind and is known as the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. The Crystal is remarkable by day but especially interesting at night, offering a breathtaking view of the multistory dinosaurs inside. The museum, another Hot Docs venue, is at Bloor Street and Avenue Road, the informal boundary between the Annex and Yorkville.

Yorkville, which stretches east to Yonge Street, is the most expensive shopping and dining area in town. There you'll be surrounded by Gucci, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Tiffany — and not just in the designer stores. The Hot Docs box office, 87 Avenue Road, is in Hazelton Lanes, Yorkville's uber-chic mall.

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In your voice

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Audiences gather outside Bloor Cinema, one of the Hot Docs venues. The documentary film festival in Toronto is marking its 15th year.

(Provided by Hot Docs)

IF YOU GO

Hot Docs, a documentary film festival, runs from April 17 to 27 at seven venues in Toronto. Documentaries with good "buzz" sell out early, so it's a good idea to purchase advance tickets. The complete schedule is on the festival Web site, [www.hotdocs.ca](#).

Tickets cost \$10 Canadian for screenings before 6 p.m., \$12 Canadian for screenings after 6 p.m., and \$5 Canadian for late screenings (11 p.m.). Various passes are also available. To order, call (416) 637-5150 or go to [www.hotdocs.ca](#).

To buy tickets on-site: Tickets can be purchased up to the day before a screening at the festival box office, at Hazelton Lanes mall in Yorkville, 87 Avenue Road (two blocks north of Bloor Street). Day-of tickets go on sale one hour before showtime at the film's venue.

Tip: Moviegoers start lining up as much as 60 to 90 minutes before a screening, especially if they need to purchase a ticket. Before you get in a line, be sure to ask the folks ahead of you if you're in the ticket-buyer's line or ticket-holder's line. Hot Docs doesn't oversell seats, but the earlier you get in line, the better your choice of seats.

ALSO IN APRIL

Theater: In addition to Toronto's active independent theater scene, the city's mainline venues are staging *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, Parts 1 & 2* (through April 20 at the Princess of Wales Theatre), *Dirty Dancing — The Classic Story on Stage* (through August at the Royal Alexandra Theatre) and *We Will Rock You* (through April 27 at The Canon Theatre CanStage).

Other performing arts: The Toronto Symphony Orchestra performs at Roy Thomson Hall almost nightly from April 16 to 27. The Harbourfront Center hosts the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company from April 16 to 19 and Ballet Creole's spring concert from April 17 to 19.

Sports: The Toronto Blue Jays play at home April 16 to 21, while Toronto's soccer team, the Toronto FC, have home games on April 19 and April 26.

For more: For a full calendar of events and other tourist information, call Toronto Tourism at (800) 499-2514 or go to [www.torontotourism.com](#).

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