

A week without Hollywood: Toronto movie-goers get a trove of documentary, indie and Asian films

GEOFF PEVERE

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The coming week offers a surfeit of alt-multiplex distractions, from the retro-VHS glory days of cyber-cheese channelled in Steven Kostanski's low-tech, high-hilarity *Manborg* to the panoply of extra-North American visions contained in Toronto's Reel Asian film festival. In between, there's the bravely dissenting Russian doc *Putin's Kiss* and the fine-tuned *Man of a Thousand Songs*, a portrait of the artist as under-appreciated troubadour and recovering cocaine addict. My eyeballs runneth over.

Putin's Kiss

In Vladimir Putin's Russia, authoritarianism has adopted a sleek, more tailored suit, and this is the story of one young woman who dressed up accordingly only to find she didn't recognize herself. As the chipper teen spokesperson for the state-backed, youth-indocrination movement Nashi, 19-year-old Masha Drokova functioned as a valuable marketable image of nationalist youth confidence and bravado, until she met up with some dissenting journalists and acquired a dangerous new set of ideas about power and its uses. Truly enthralling and troubling, it's a vivid glimpse into autocracy's ostensibly democratic, 21st-century face. (Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, Nov. 7 and 8.)

Ron Hynes: Man of a Thousand Songs

This Canadian documentary, by the respected Nova Scotian filmmaker William D. MacGillivray, didn't get nearly the attention it deserved following its TIFF premiere a couple of years ago, but here's another opportunity to see, be moved and impressed by it. Focusing on Ron Hynes, a near-mythical figure down east but largely unknown in the rest of the country, the movie follows the veteran Newfoundland singer-songwriter as he continues to tour, compose and perform one of the most impressive songbooks in the Canadian folk tradition. His dark history of substance abuse and family dysfunction emerges as the miles on the road and the verses sung accumulate, resulting in a remarkably complex account of the ties that bind a man and his music. (Nov. 3, 7 p.m., Royal)

Manborg

After being graphically mangled, drained and left for dead during the near-future "Hell Wars" by a

gleefully unpleasant vampire exterminator, a timid soldier is re-assembled as Manborg, a hybrid of killing machine and blandly oblivious dude who must master his new, flesh-fused killing weaponry before embarking on a campaign to save what's left of the world from a further Draculonian shellacking. The film essentially answers the widely unasked question – what would happen if you bio-fused Guy Maddin and James Cameron? (Nov. 2-8, Royal)

Reel Asian

One of the city's more ambitious and established smaller film festivals – no slag there; everything's small next to TIFF – *Reel Asian* brings fresh titles from countries as culturally and economically disparate as South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, China, Canada and the U.S., the result being a program bound (very) broadly by geography but otherwise as wildly diverse as the medium itself. I only managed to see a handful of this year's entries, but of those, two stood apart as exceptionally interesting: Eric Khoo's *Tatsumi* (Nov. 9), a supremely innovative animated autobiography of Yoshihiro Tatsumi, one of Japan's most respected artists of adult *manga* (comics); and Mamoru Hosoda's *Wolf Children* (Nov. 10), an elegantly beautiful, gently observed animated feature about a widow raising the two children of a werewolf father.

Also recommended are *Graceland* (Nov. 8), a taut, emotionally punchy hi-def movie about a politician's driver who gets caught up in a political kidnapping, and *The Woodsman and the Rain* (Nov. 17), a fascinating, character-driven drama about the tentative friendship between an isolated rural tree-harvester in Japan and the young director of a zombie movie who's on location near the logging site. (Nov. 6 – 17, various venues)