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TIFF Diary: Little White Lies Rips Off Big Chill, Mothers, Let Me In, Precious Life, 13 Assassins

Meredith Brody scarfs up more of Toronto's eclectic foreign programming.



[Photo: **Mothers**]

I thought I was starting the day with a treat, a big hot fudge sundae of a movie, **Little White Lies** a drama of manners, as the catalogue has it, with a dozen of France's starriest, most accomplished, and attractive actors – including Marion Cotillard, Benoit Magimel, and Francois Cluzet—talking about life and love in that ineffable grownup way rarely seen outside of the French cinema.

Instead what I watched was an almost palpable imitation, not to say rip-off, of **The Big Chill**, complete with a rather anachronistic (not to mention expensive) soundtrack, featuring, among others, Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin, seemingly a couple of decades out of date for most of the cast. "Larry Kasdan has a lot to answer for," I muttered darkly at some point to my seatmate.

Famously, in the 1983 **Big Chill**, Kevin Costner played the dead character (cut out of the movie itself) whose friends gather for a weekend reunion after his funeral, during which Big Secrets are revealed. The reunion in **Little White Lies** is an annual summer vacation by the sea that goes on despite the serious motorcycle accident and hospitalization of one of the group (whose opening scene reveals him to be a drunken, coked-up, sexist lout, and whose finer points are somehow not revealed during the 2½-hour running time of the movie). One of the Big Secrets revealed is that a seemingly hetero character has a big crush on one of his best guy friends, who reacts, shall we say, badly.

Anyway, any pleasure I took was à la rigueur, as the French would also have it – such as recognizing a picturesque featured restaurant as being one I'd walked by in Paris, though never with the desire to eat there.

Exiting the movie, I ran into a friend who'd been seeing something else, and wanted to know how I'd liked it. "Well," I said, grimly, "it's no **Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train**," a 1998 Patrice Chereau movie on similar lines with much greater depth (and in only two hours!). Whereupon she said "Yes, I remember it well, but not for the reason you'd think," and proceeded to tell me she'd seen it at Cannes, fallen asleep, and woke up in the emptied-out, brightly-lit Grand Palais to the sounds of vacuum cleaners, "after," she said, "3,000 people walked out past me with my head on the armrest." "Oh," I said, "probably 2,500 of them didn't even notice you."

Afterwards I made three classic film festival errors in quick succession: I started to leave the theater to go to a screening several subway stops away, pausing to check the large printed schedule downstairs, and seeing that the screening was tomorrow, not today. While riding the long long escalator back upstairs, I quickly checked the several movies on offer, chose one, and ducked in just as its credits were rolling, discovering after ensconced in one of the worst remaining seats that, hey, I'd already seen this movie, **Let Me In**, a skillfully-made supernatural thriller based on a Swedish novel that also was the basis for a Swedish movie called **Let the Right One In**. (A new trend, as it were; *vide* the multiple **Girl With The Dragon Tattoo** iterations, the best being Nora Ephron's New Yorker parody, in my opinion.) The movie looked better on the huge Toronto screen than the much smaller one I saw it on. I thought Chloe Moretz was perfectly swell in it, by the way, and now am even sorrier to have missed her in **Kick-Ass**.

But enough about her. A few steps away, I slipped into **A Horrible Way to Die**, a fairly straightforward serial-killer movie with a few surprises that seemed to have been programmed in the Vanguard section because of its unsteady-cam camera work.

(The third film festival error? Doggedly staying through every last second of **Little White Lies**, instead of cutting my losses 15 minutes before it ended and going to see Isabelle Huppert all decked out in leather as a high-class prostitute in **Special**

Treatment. She *is* one of those actresses I'll go see in anything. Earlier this year I saw her in a ludicrous self-parodying Parisian production of **A Streetcar Named Desire** called **Un Tramway** that was quite possibly one of the worst productions of anything I've ever seen anywhere, but our brave little Isabelle marched through it, straight as a die, giving a sincere if somewhat out-of-place performance.

After wiping off the serial-killer blood, I watched the newest Bent Hamer film, **Home for Christmas**, whose war-torn Yugoslavian opening scene seemed not only miles away from his usual Scandinavian setting, but also not to set quite the right tone for what I thought would be one of his typical charming, off-balance, sweet-natured comedies. But the interconnected stories of failed Christmas celebrations, though often wryly funny, went a little deeper and were considerably more melancholy than amusing. And the tense beginning was satisfyingly echoes in **Home for Christmas's** optimistic ending.

A friend and I watched the last hour-and-a-quarter of Takashi Miike's splendid, classical 1844 samurai epic, **13 Assassins**, because we could. (45 minutes of what we watched was taken up with the elegantly-planned climactic battle scene, in which an entire town was prepared by the 13 assassins to be a deathtrap. A satisfyingly bloody deathtrap.) Even though I've spent the last several months watching a Kurosawa retrospective at the Pacific Film Archive, I wasn't drawing invidious comparisons – well, only a few. **13 Assassins** worked on its own merits. I hope to see it from beginning to end sometime.

I'd heard a lot about **Precious Life**, which showed at Telluride, and thought its Palestinian-baby-saved-by-Israeli-doctor story sounded pat, banal, and predictable. But the actual, taut, 86-minute film proved both complex and moving. As a Palestinian doctor who practiced in Israel (and three of whose daughters were killed by an Israeli bomb during filming), Dr. Izzeldin Abuelash, said when his path crossed that of Raida, the child's mother, many people were desperately trying to save the life of one child while many others were being killed daily by their country. When Raida said that it would be fine with her if her son survived to grow up and became a suicide bomber, the discomfort of the audience was palpable.

Milcho Manchevski knows how to make a movie, as was demonstrated by his assured, Oscar-nominated debut film **Before the Rain**, which made Stephen Spielberg sit up and request a meeting. Its three intertwined love stories have been cited as precedent for the three stories of **Mothers**, but **Mothers** reminded me of a full, old-fashioned movie palace program – though a somewhat oddly assembled one. It begins with a comedic curtain-raiser, two cute kids who lie to the police about seeing a flasher, and the mother of the title arrives to haul them home while cursing, pushing a baby stroller, and wearing oddly inappropriate above-the-knee black lace stockings. The second story, the feature, is that of a three-man documentary film crew – make that two men and one lovely woman, who starts off as the partner of one and ends up with the other – who travel around in the country, documenting (and occasionally participating in) disappearing rural

traditions. The second feature is an actual documentary about a serial killer of middle-aged women who turns out to be a journalist writing about the murders. I was never less than engaged.

My Toronto hosts had just returned from a big swanky opening party at the [Bell Lightbox](#), replete with lots o'speeches and lots o'swell food (I heard about quail risotto and lamb with pumpkin ravioli as I chewed morosely on my swiss-on-rye sandwich). And the celebration featured a short film about Ivan Reitman's parents, Leslie and Clara Reitman, who once operated a car wash on the Lightbox site, put together by Nobu Adilman. The screening rooms got two big thumbs up. I hope to see a movie in one of them before too much time had passed.

by Meredith Brody, posted to [Festivals](#), [Toronto](#), [Reviews](#) on September 13, 2010 at 3:49pm PDT