

SCARY SHTICK

Roman Polanski horror parody among the offerings at Toronto Jewish Film Festival, **E2**

MOVIES



Caught in a goofy, restrung web



NIKO TAVERNISE

The Amazing Spider-Man 2
 ★★½ (out of 4)
 Starring Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Jamie Foxx, Dane DeHaan, Sally Field and Paul Giamatti. Directed by Marc Webb. At GTA theatres. 142 minutes. **PG**

Andrew Garfield stars as Spider-Man in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* alongside Emma Stone in the newest chapter in the rebooted franchise.

Spider-Man franchise reboot gets by thanks to Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone's charm

PETER HOWELL
 MOVIE CRITIC

The Amazing Spider-Man 2 wears its goofiness like a big smiley face button, brazenly counting on character appeal to carry a story both dopey and mopey.

Darned if the strategy doesn't succeed, but just barely. The rebooted Marvel Comics movie franchise still needs to convince us that a redo of Sam Raimi's relatively recent *Spider-Man* trilogy was really necessary.

This latest blockbuster assault wins us over, or wears us down, by dint of fine actors who are clearly enjoying themselves, in a film that thankfully doesn't take itself too seriously.

Adorable real-life couple Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone lead the charm offensive, as good guy Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his occasional gal Gwen Stacy. They play very well together, but

their most impressive thespian feat may be in convincing us that Garfield, 30, and Stone, 25, can do characters who are graduating from high school.

Yang to their yin are a couple of well-cast newcomers, both connected to evil über-firm Oscorp: Jamie Foxx as the accident-prone electrical engineer who transforms into the energy-hurling supervillain Electro; and Dane DeHaan (*Chronicle*) as the bratty corporate heir with problems and ambitions too numerous to mention, but who needs some magical spider venom right now, dammit!

If returning director Marc Webb had

left it at this, he'd have a much stronger film. The on-again, off-again romance between Peter and Gwen works both funny bone and tearducts, while the fight scenes between Spider-Man and Electro excite the eye and raise the pulse with well-choreographed action and smart CGI.

Oh, but Webb doesn't leave it alone, and neither does his committee of screenwriters: clock-punching franchise scribes Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci (*Star Trek* and *Transformers*, both) and TV toiler Jeff Pinkner (*Lost*, *Alias*, *Fringe*).

SPIDER-MAN continued on **E4**

> HOT DOCS

Documentaries blurring the truth for art's sake



Peter Howell

This year's festival films distort reality in new ways, messing with viewers' minds

You might think that a festival screening only documentaries would be firmly grounded in the here and now.

Yet this year's Hot Docs fest, which wraps up Sunday, was emblematic of a documentary trend that's been building steam lately: the blurring of reality in content as well as form.

Filmmakers have been artfully sculpting truth for at least as far back as Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, his famous 1922 study of Inuit life in Canada's Arctic. It was originally taken as a completely accurate and honest depiction of northern life. Flaherty later admitted he'd staged many scenes, and required his subjects to wear outdated clothing and hairstyles. But he argued it was for the best of reasons: "Sometimes you have to lie. One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit."

Flaherty's philosophy has gained currency over the years, to the point where only a fool would go to a documentary today expecting the truth and nothing but the truth. For one thing, "truth" is always subject to interpretation and argument, as anyone who has ever read a Wikipedia page could tell you.

For another, the very act of aiming a camera at someone is bound to distort reality, something they teach you on day one of journalism school.

HOWELL continued on **E2**



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Filmmaker and game designer Thomas Wallner, centre, uses new software that allows for an immersive film experience.

When the gaming, filming worlds collide

Liquid Cinema software is being used to create immersive, 360-degree films via virtual reality

LINDA BARNARD
 MOVIE WRITER

Toronto filmmaker and game designer Thomas Wallner envisions a day when going to the movies becomes going into the movies.

"I don't think you need this to tell better stories," Wallner said of the Liquid Cinema software his company DEEP Inc. (Digital Entertainment Every Platform) is developing to create immersive film experiences via virtual reality.

By wearing a VR headset to watch projects made with 360-degree cameras, a movie will seem to flow all around the viewer.

Two major Canadian directors have already expressed an interest in working with the expanding technology, Wallner said.

VR continued on **E4**

> MUSIC

Government closing leaves hole in night life

Queens Quay club, opened since 1996, will host its last musician early 2015

RAJU MUDHAR AND VINAY MENON
 ENTERTAINMENT REPORTERS

Canada's largest nightclub is closing its doors next year. The Government and Koolhaas Entertainment Complex — the sprawling, throbbing facility that has showcased everyone from the Rolling Stones to Coldplay — will become a local memory on Jan. 31, 2015.

"We didn't make this decision," says restaurateur Charles Khabouth, chief executive at INK Entertainment, the club's parent company. "It was kind of made for us. The building was sold. I tried to buy it with my partners, but we couldn't cut a deal."

The end of an era — more than 12 million people passed through the Government over the years — will also change the city's DNA on the waterfront. The Government, near Jarvis on Queens Quay E., is expected to be replaced by a commercial and residential project.

The closure will also leave a gaping hole in concert scheduling.

"It's not going to be easily replaced, which leaves the city with Sound Academy as the only other option at this size," says promoter Amy Hersenhoren of Collective Concerts. "It's going to make booking dates very, very competitive for the acts that require a 2,500-capacity venue."

"It's definitely going to have an impact," says Khabouth. "But we will move our concerts down the street to where Sound Academy is now."

CLOSING continued on **E6**





MOVIES

Redemption found on both sides of the lens

Joe

★★½ (out of 4)

Starring Nicolas Cage, Tye Sheridan, Gary Poulter and Ronnie Gene Blevins. Directed by David Gordon Green. At the Carlton. 121 minutes. **14A**

PETER HOWELL

MOVIE CRITIC

Redemption is found on both sides of the lens in *Joe*, a tough rural drama by David Gordon Green that digs deep in all the right ways.

Nicolas Cage plays the combustible title character, and the role brings out the Cage we'd almost forgotten: the soulful and fully committed actor from *Leaving Las Vegas* and *Moonstruck*, rather than the expedient cheque casher of more recent times.

There's some redeeming going on for the director, too. Arkansas-born Green earned critical kudos a decade ago for urgent small dramas such as *George Washington* and *Undertow*, in which he drew upon his knowledge of and empathy for hardscrabble Americans.

His films had searing images and powerful performances, the latter often contributed by non-professional actors.

Then Green turned to making stu-

dio comedy fluff like *Pineapple Express* and the truly wretched *Your Highness*.

Actor and director both seem to have found epiphany in *Joe*, a Texas-set story by Gary Hawkins, drawn from Larry Brown's celebrated novel of the same name.

Cage's Joe Ransom is an ex-con with a ratty beard and dirty Pantera T-shirt who is struggling mightily to bottle up the monster within. That's a tough thing to do in his corner of the U.S., where jobs are scarce, hope is scarcer and violence comes as easily as breathing.

He runs a tree-poisoning operation for a company that is replacing sickly trees with thriving ones. This grim task requires the hiring of low-skill labourers, most of them poor and more than a few of the addicted to booze or other drugs.

Joe could exploit his desperate workers, but instead he plays fair, pays honestly and promptly and doesn't care if his workers are white or black, young or old, as long as they get the dirty job done.

He's got a beating heart inside that stony exterior. He hires 15-year-old Gary Jones (*Mud*'s Tye Sheridan) to join his crew, and soon realizes the



Nicolas Cage plays the combustible title character in *Joe*.

kid needs more than a weekly wage. Gary comes from a desperately dysfunctional family, ruled by his alcoholic father Wade (Gary Poulter), who savagely beats son and anybody else who crosses him.

Joe's got a drinking problem of his own. He also smokes to excess and he's got a brutal streak that manifests itself when uses his pet pit bull to take out the dog guarding the whorehouse he frequents.

This is not the film's only act of mindless cruelty, and it's not the end of Joe's dark side. His biggest problem is keeping a lid on the explosive temper that leads him to even greater violence, and which resulted in his most recent two-year stint in the slammer.

Restraint is a struggle for him in a town where the cops constantly torment him. There's also a snickering psycho (Ronnie Gene Blevins) who just won't leave him to drink in peace.

Joe is every bit as rough as its characters, a film of shaky close-ups and unhinged men, and it doesn't exactly take us down roads we haven't been before.

But it's a tonic for anyone who might have given up on Cage and Green. It also introduces an incredible talent in Gary Poulter, a homeless man and completely natural actor, who seeps into the role of the evil Wade like oil through sand.

Sadly, the bipolar Poulter was found dead in a homeless camp shortly after filming completed, leaving *Joe* as his one and only testament to raw talent. Like the characters in the movie, luck didn't come easily for him, or remain long.

Virtual reality best suited to short films for now

VR from E1

The tech is rapidly evolving. Virtual reality headsets Oculus Rift — made by the company recently purchased by Facebook — and Sony's Project Morpheus are speeding through prototype stages. That involves getting the hardware to developers to allow them to create a wide range of applications for VR before the headsets, expected to be priced at about \$300 or less, hit the market sometime in the next 18 months.

Gamers are enthusiastically embracing VR, said Wallner. Now it's the filmmakers' turn.

"We don't have to dream some day that this technology will get cheap enough to use," said Richard Lachman, digital media associate professor and director of Ryerson University's RTA Transmedia Centre. Previous incarnations were "flops," he said, because headset viewers were uncomfortable, unresponsive and far too expensive for home use.

"I think that the field is exploding right now and a lot of people are excited about different things," said Brooklyn-based filmmaker and computer programmer James George. "It's a convergence between the gaming world and filmmaking world. That's the most interesting intersection."

Clouds, the award-winning interactive documentary George and co-director Jonathan Minard debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival in April, was viewable as an installation or through the Oculus Rift.

George also recently converted a friend's 360-degree-shot music video to VR, using what he calls "a very basic open source tool," that he made available free online through software development sharing site, GitHub.

Wallner had participated in shooting 360 video in the Arctic for a documentary titled *The Polar Sea* and hit on the idea to watch the footage in VR. Ryerson's RTA Transmedia Lab, which is now helping create the Liquid Cinema software, aided in setting up a viewer.

"We had no idea what to expect," Wallner said. "So we created a viewer and we watched the footage and we were just amazed by it."

DEEP is using two very different projects to help develop the software



COLIN MCCONNELL

Filmmaker and game designer Thomas Wallner, centre, is developing software called Liquid Cinema, which will create virtual reality film experiences.

tools for Liquid Cinema.

One is *The Polar Sea*, part of a multimedia project on the Northwest Passage for TVO, French-German public television network Arte and British Columbia's Knowledge Network. The other is *Heaven Must Be Boring*, a web-based 360 video comedy series co-produced through the RTA Transmedia Lab. Helmed by showrunner Dan Redican (*Puppets Who Kill*), *Heaven Must Be Boring* follows five comics from different religious backgrounds who are sent by a Toronto-based NGO on a cross-Canada tour to promote tolerance through laughter.

"I think we're part of a historical development," said Wallner. "I believe we'll look back on this ... and realize it was a very special moment in the history of cinema and imaging."

"It's an innovation that allows storytellers to use forms that exist to address you directly with an explosion of creativity," observed Lachman, who said putting the tools in the hands of filmmakers will define how Liquid Cinema is used. "It doesn't mean staring at a screen; I can be surprised, I can be shocked."

Certainly, the two-minute highlight reel from *The Polar Sea* engaged those who put on the VR headset to view it at the Star recently. The movie plays through the headset, giving you the ability to turn your head to see in a complete circle, as well as up and down, putting the viewer in the centre of the scene. We could even gaze up to see the drone that was used to shoot the footage, propellers whirring as it floated overhead. There were sensations of flying over Arctic landscapes, floating above a

cruise ship's deck to look out at jutting icebergs, or riding along bumpy roads on an ATV, before popping into the ship's kitchen and dining room.

"Because I'm a filmmaker, I've come to realize quickly we have the ability to capture and play this back but where it gets interesting is to evolve, to be able to bring narrative to the experience," Wallner explained.

There are still many unanswered questions about filmmaking and VR. Lachman believes it's best suited to short films for now, rather than feature films. Wallner, meanwhile, wonders how can a director work with actors if there's no place to stand off camera when filming takes place in 360 degrees? Storytelling tricks like steering the viewer's attention to a specific element or close-ups will also need to be rethought.

"I'm of the mind right now that I'd

like to keep things simple and experimental and human," said Wallner, adding he can see applications where VR is interspersed with conventional film and static images. "We just want to be taken somewhere and swept away."

George agrees. "I hesitate to guess what the future will hold," he said when asked about the potential for movie theatres filled with people in VR headsets or primarily solo use.

"Everything will happen but to what degree and to what success?" he added. "For me what's most exciting is there is really a context for people with a background in code to work with people with a background in film."

"This is not about technology, but an immersion into a piece of art," Wallner pointed out. "And for that, we would like to create the tools."

Spider-Man 2's likeable actors tangled up in convoluted plotline

SPIDER-MAN from E1

None of these guys know the meaning of "enough." They prove it with a bloated and revisionist narrative, running a bladder-testing 142 minutes, that seeks to swing like Spidey through New York's skyscrapers, yet frequently crashes to Earth.

Struggling between farce and tragedy, it lards in unnecessary characters (Paul Giamatti's bookending psycho truck driver), wallows in melodrama (Peter's daisy-pulling dithering over Gwen), squanders talent (Sally Field's feisty Aunt May, reduced to a shrill nag) and dispenses tired bromides (the "keep hope alive" refrain of several characters).

None of it really amounts to much, except to lead up to *The Amazing*

Spider-Man 3, already in the works. All of this is set to an uninspiring score by Hans Zimmer, who sounds as if he borrowed it from a CNN special report theme.

To give Webb and his hired pens their due, though, they're pretty much singing from the Marvel songbook and some 50 years of Spider-Man lore — and yep, Marvel legend Stan Lee makes another cameo.

These guys know they're making a comic book movie and they're unashamed of it, to the point where Spidey actually whistles his own theme song.

If Webb and his crew could have inserted white borders between every scene, I'll bet they would have, and it might have made the plot feel less choppy.



Andrew Garfield stars as Spider-Man with Jamie Foxx, who plays supervillain Electro, in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.

They've also made Spidey every bit as sarcastic as he is in the comic series, which is what made him Marvel's most popular superhero to be-

gin with. Garfield seems to be easing into that side of the character more readily than Tobey Maguire did in the original trilogy, although — call

me sentimental — I still prefer Maguire as Spidey and Raimi as director.

Or at least I did for the first of their two *Spider-Man* collaborations, released in the first decade of this century, which were both pretty great. The weird and annoying third one convinced me and many others that Maguire and Raimi were burned out and it was time to roll up Spidey's webbing.

The rebooted franchise is now heading into a similar situation, which makes the prospect of yet another Garfield/Webb *Spider-Man* teaming seem something less than amazing.

This one gets by on charm and noxie, but the next one is going to need a whole lot more to impress. Like a good story, for instance.