

London film festival

A new lease of life for British film

From pop and fashion to football, films on show this month reveal homegrown cinema is in great shape

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The world film spotlight will shine on Leicester Square on Wednesday when the Bfi London Film Festival opens with the premiere of Ron Howard's **Frost/Nixon**. Written by Peter Morgan and starring Michael Sheen, it is a fitting and glamorous opener for the festival.

Danny Boyle's **Slumdog Millionaire**, set in India, closes events 15 days hence, with the small matter of the new Bond, **Quantum of Solace** debuting in between. These are all British enterprises in various ways, emphasising our industry's prominent place in global cinema. But this year, alongside the high-end offerings, there is a stirring of British activity in and around the Square. Last year's festival had little domestic product to shout about - perhaps the most successful film in the New British Cinema selection was *Boy A*, which last week triumphed at the Dinard Film Festival. *Boy A* was never released here in the UK, showing only on C4. Now, 13 new films swell that section, with others including Michael Winterbottom's **Genova**, Steve McQueen's **Hunger**, Richard Eyre's **The Other Man** and Terence Davies's **Of Time and the City**

So, can it be true that, after years of stops, starts and stutters, we are experiencing the flourishing of a new screen generation? Has the new wave of production schemes, regional film funds and a widening of the feature film talent pool finally borne fruit?

I suppose the more crucial question remains: are any of these films any good? I came away from the Edinburgh Film Festival in June concerned that the low-budget British films on show had bleak commercial prospects. Glancing at the LFF line-up, I would say our national cinema's subject matters haven't changed much over the years - expect council estates (**Shifty**), criminals (**Bronson**), drugs (**Better Things**), pop music (**1 2 3 4** and **Telstar**), football and street fashion (**Awaydays**). Despite such familiarity, there does seem to be a renewed energy and an increased, nationwide vigour for film culture: settings for these films include the Cotswolds, South Wales, Edinburgh (Richard Jobson's **New Town Killers**), the Wirral, Finsbury Park and the Isle of Skye.

Schemes such as Film London's Microwave programme, the Film Council's £5m-a-year New Cinema Fund and the breath-of-fresh-air impetus supplied by WarpX, **EM Media** and Screen Yorkshire are all leading to an atmosphere of confidence and creativity. FilmFour has also, rather cleverly, courted established talent from the art world, a move which has resulted in Steve McQueen's admired debut and the appearance of Sam Taylor-Wood's short film **Love You More**. Gillian Wearing and the Wilson sisters also have feature film works in preparation.

Lenny Crooks, who heads the Film Council's New Cinema Fund, says British film is in rude health: 'The LFF boasts a terrific line-up this year, but it's only the tip of the iceberg. We've made a concerted effort to lift stones and find talent and then get it behind the camera and working.' British film is right up there at the forefront of new world cinema. In a year when Hollywood has been hampered by a writers' strike, this is a good time for some new little triumphs to burst on to a grand, global stage.

But there is no shortage of American talent on display, particularly from a revived indie scene. **Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist** should please the Juno audience, starring, as it does, Michael Cera, and director Peter Sollett showed a talent for New York tales in his sweet debut, *Raising Victor Vargas*. **Ballast**, set in the Deep South, has been attracting attention, while another Sundance favourite, **Frozen River**, set in the snowy north near Canada, boasts a strong performance from Melissa Leo.

Ever-unique American directing talents are still likely to prove big festival draws: Steven Soderbergh, with **Che**, his four-hour-plus Che Guevara biopic; Jonathan Demme, with his wedding drama **Rachel Getting Married**; and Woody Allen with his summery tale of love, **Vicky Cristina Barcelona**. Funny how he made three films in London, none selected for the LFF, but as soon as he goes to Spain...

For details and availability go to bfi.org.uk/lff/

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