

So Near So Spa: The Art Film Festival

By Steven Yates

Taking place in the neighbouring Slovak spa towns of Trenčín and Trenčianske Teplice, the **Art Film Festival** has been diligently bringing some of the most innovative local and world cinema to this remote region since 1993. Though not (yet) as famous as Karlovy Vary, its spa town equivalent in the Czech Republic, this charming and intimate festival now has to cope with a steadily rising profile. Despite not having a surplus amount of expenditure for advertising, the festival had record attendances this year.

The Competition Program consisted of 15 features and 46 short films, both having an International Jury. The feature program was not surprisingly strong, with a selection from all parts of the world. Some were co-productions, a consequence of requiring outside backing for production in certain film industries. The festival's main prize, the Blue Angel Award (left) for best film, was given to the film **HUNGER**, directed by former Turner Prize winner Steve McQueen. The film details the events leading up to and including the hunger strike by IRA volunteer Bobby Sands at the height of the Northern Ireland troubles in 1981 and is a remarkable achievement for a director whose film won the *Caméra d'Or* for best debut at **Cannes** in 2008. The portrayal of Bobby Sands by actor Michael Fassbender also won an Award for Best Male Actor.



day we have the opportunity to see simple stories, but it's not every day that we can see a film with such a simple story and at the same time such depth, full of humour and emotion and delicately portraying human nature, relationships and love."

The Slovak Season section catered for local attendees wanting to see the recent increase in production. Of the 13 films in the section from the first half of 2009, many were well produced, others indifferent. One of the highlights was Vladimir Balko's **SOUL AT PEACE**, which was also screened at the **Berlinale** earlier this year, while the sold-out premiere of the short **x=x+1** by Juraj Krasnohorsky became an event in itself. Meanwhile, conferences on Film Distribution in Slovakia attempted to explain the paradox of cinemas losing profits in the digital age while film festivals are increasing in popularity.



One of the retrospective sections of the festival was the Dancing '80s program. In this period, a musical sub-genre emerged in the U.S. that contained memorable songs and choreography, set against stories ranging from social issues and alienated characters to stage productions. Films such as **FAME** and **WHITE NIGHTS** may never have had a highbrow critical reputation usually associated with a festival tribute, but their appeal has endured. The recent documentary **EVERY LITTLE STEP** portrayed the long-running musical **A CHORUS LINE**, with the latter being appropriately screened as a companion piece in the section. The programming of **MOONWALKER** as both the final screening of the Dancing '80s section, and also the festival, was unwittingly appropriate and, not least, eerily prophetic in that it posthumously became a tribute to Michael Jackson who passed away two days before the festival's end.

The Short Film Prize went to **EVERYDAY EVERYDAY** by Malaysian director Chui Mui Tan (who also won the festival's On the Road Award). The film concerns a young woman who gives up her job to change her monotonous life, with a tenuous plan to live in Peru and start writing. The film questions whether a change of location and lifestyle are an appropriate escape from a personal crisis. The Jury lifted a quote from the director as motivation for awarding the prize; "Every

