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Melski lands quad at film fest

Charlie Zone receives four awards, including best feature, direction

By ANDREA NEMETZ Entertainment Reporter

Photos by MARK GOUDGE

Halifax filmmaker Michael Melski was already on a high entering the 31st Atlantic Film Festival Awards at the Pacifico on Saturday.

His feature film, *Charlie Zone*, had two sold-out screenings and was greeted with a standing ovation.

On Friday, at Fore4Film, the festival's charity golf tournament at Granite Springs, he recorded a double eagle on a par-5.

And then things got even better as *Charlie Zone* picked up four major awards: Best Atlantic Feature; Outstanding Direction; the Ed Higginson Cinematography Award for Christopher Ball and the David Renton Award for Outstanding Performance by an actor for Glen Gould, who tore up the screen as the movie's lead character, a down and out Aboriginal boxer sent on a mission by a mysterious woman to rescue a young woman from a heroin den in Halifax's North End.

While Melski, who grew up in Sydney, knew about the awards going to Halifax's Ball and Gould, a Membertou native now living in Toronto, the other two were a complete surprise.

"I wasn't expecting this," said the beaming director, sporting a fedora with a red wine in hand following the awards ceremony. "It is a very dark film . . . and a lot of dark movies are challenging and the audience doesn't cleave to them. But people responded to the way we pulled no punches and also to the fact we showed there was hope."

This is the second feature film from Melski, who directed *Charlie Zone*, co-wrote the script with Joe LeClair and was a co-producer. *Growing Op*, a witty, coming-of-age drama about a teenage boy coping with pot-growing parents and the pangs of first love, debuted at the Atlantic Film Festival in 2008, where it won the film fest award for best art direction.

Ball was also director of cinematography on *Growing Op* and accepted his award with his son, Cirrus, by his side.

"It was very challenging to shoot in the time and budget we had," he said, noting it was also incredibly rewarding to see the finished movie.

Melski accepted the best actor award on Gould's behalf.

Also a playwright, Melski was named as a mentor by writer-director Michael Ray Fox, who

with producer Richard MacQueen won the First Feature Project, a new award from Telefilm Canada and Film Nova Scotia, which provides production financing for \$105,000 towards a first feature length film. There is another \$5,000 earmarked for polishing the script.

Fox's arty zombie movie, Katrina's New Beau, screened as part of the CBC Atlantic Shorts Gala this year.

Tarek Abouamin won the Rex Tasker Documentary Award for 18 Days.

The 19-minute film, with footage of Cairo during the people's revolution earlier this year, is shown without narration.

"It was probably the most important moment of my life, the project is the most important project of my life," said the Halifax-based filmmaker who was born in Kuwait to Egyptian parents, moved to Egypt at 15, arriving in Halifax in May 1995 to study theatre at Dalhousie University. "And it's not finished."

Abouamin is still working on a longer piece about the uprising entitled Preparing for Dawn, which is also the title of a photo exhibition that he's curating at the Anna Leonowens Gallery next month, a collection of pictures taken during the uprising.

With the award, Abouamin, who is an instructor at NSCAD, says he finally feels at home and part of a community.

He was also director of photography on Snow, a feature film from Halifax director Rohan Fernando, an original drama about a young Sri Lankan woman transplanted to Nova Scotia after losing her family in the 2004 tsunami.

Asif Illyas received the award for outstanding music for his work on Snow, which he called "a really beautiful story" and which was one of four films in the festival that he created music for.

Illyas called his brother Shehab to the stage while accepting his award, noting in everything he does, he is assisted by Shehab.

They also worked on Fernando's documentary The Chocolate Farmer and short films The Dance from Pardis Parker and Fiddler's Reel from Marc Almon, both Halifax natives.

"They were all great films," said Asif, who with Shehab, made up the band Mir. "For Rohan's films, we got to explore music from Belize and South America. We journeyed to Sri Lanka in Snow. I'm lucky, compared to being in a band, this is superdynamic and interesting."

Shehab noted one of the other projects they are working on is a feature documentary Nightmare Factory which calls for heavy metal music.

They worked on a total of six films at the same time in August, and among the films at this year's festival, their favourite was The Dance, a silent movie, starring Parker and Evany Rosen.

"It was such a little gem. I wrote Meaghan Smith a real little gem at the end of the movie," continued Asif.

The Award for Sound Editing went to Brian Power, Eva Madden Hagen, Bob Melanson and Cory Tetford for their work on Afghan Luke, which was the Closing Gala at the Atlantic Film Fest Saturday night.

Madden-Hagen noted that the feature, directed by Halifax's Mike Clattenburg of Trailer Park Boys fame was a really challenging film as it was shot in B.C. and they had to create the world of Afghanistan.

Thom Fitzgerald, who won the Michael Weir Award for Best Screenplay for Cloudburst, a story of two aging lesbians who escape from a nursing home and travel to Nova Scotia to get married, was not present to accept his award as he is on a cross-country tour with the film, that recently opened the Edmonton Film Festival.

Neither was Newfoundland's Kenneth J. Harvey, who won the Best Atlantic short for I'm 14 and Hate the World, nor was Ruth Lawrence, who won the Joan Orenstein Award for Outstanding Performance by an Actor for the short film Clipper Gold, from Newfoundland's Joel Thomas Hynes.

And while Quebec director Jean-Marc Vallee, who won the award for best Canadian Feature for Café de Flore, was not in Halifax, he made a big splash, donating his \$10,000 prize to a school or organization to be named later that serves young filmmakers from the Atlantic provinces.

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