

The politics of film

“Boycott left organisers scrambling for new content”

Even before it opened, the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) 2009 was causing an international stir. **TIMOTHY POPE** reports.

Headlining the festival this year is the Australian political thriller *Balibo* which tells the story of five Aussie journalists murdered by Indonesian militia during the East Timorese independence struggle in 1975 and Roger East (Anthony LaPaglia), the journalist determined to find them. Director Robert Connolly has said that the film should prompt war-crimes charges for those involved in the murders of the Balibo Five. The film has been praised by critics for staying faithful to the history and for extraordinary performances by its leading and supporting cast.

It featured as the festival's opening night film on July 24 and will be in cinemas on August 13. Anthony LaPaglia, Robert Connolly and East Timorese President José Ramos-Horta (played in the film by Oscar Isaac) also led a discussion on the production and historical background to the film the day after the premiere.

Also making waves at the festival is Australian-made film *The 10 Conditions of Love*. Following the Uigher riots in China in early July, Festival Director Richard Moore was asked by the Chinese consulate in Melbourne to drop the controversial documentary, which centres on Uigher activist Rebiya Kadeer. The film is critical of the Chinese Government and its treatment of the Muslim Uigher community.

Needless to say, Moore refused to drop the film from the festival's line-up, and in response several Chinese filmmakers withdrew their entries, one citing an objection to the newly-contentious documentary. This boycott left the MIFF organisers in the lurch and scrambling for new content only two days before the scheduled festival



opening. They will now fill some of the free time with extra screenings of *The 10 Conditions of Love*.

Rebiya Kadeer, who lives in exile in the USA, will visit Melbourne for the festival during August.

This is not the only political protest made by a filmmaker this year. In July, English director Ken Loach announced he was pulling his film *Looking for Eric* from the line-up as part of an orchestrated boycott of festivals and events that receive funding from the Israeli government, in protest over the alleged illegal occupation of Palestinian land.

Balibo and *The 10 Conditions of Love* are just two films in an exciting line-up of home-grown cinema which also includes the story of round-the-world-sailor Jesse Martin's second voyage, *5 Lost at Sea* (pictured on front cover). Directed and produced in part by Martin himself, this film documents his second major voyage after becoming the youngest person to sail solo around the world. Martin and four other young people set out on a three year unassisted sailing expedition to some of the world's least visited of the world's beauty spots. The film, originally planned to finance the trip, shows the crew's change from excitement and optimism to tension and malcontent.

As always, the festival is also screening many international entries. Among this year's offerings are tongue-in-cheek Thai kung-fu film *Chocolate* and *In the Loop* a US political satire on the lead-up to the Iraq war. John Hurt will also reprise his role as British gay icon Quentin Crisp in *An Englishman in New York*, a sequel to the 1975 film *The Naked Civil Servant*. 

The Melbourne International Film closes on August 9.