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A taste of the Hot Docs lineup

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Guatemalan prostitutes form a soccer team in order to gain acceptance. A Canadian man becomes a star in Myanmar (formerly Burma), learning the country's exotic national sport. An American woman believes Mozart's spirit resides in her body. Exposés uncover the other side of the war on terrorism and, equally troubling, the dark side of the coffee industry.

It's an ultra-eclectic mix of curiosities, but these are just some of the subjects coming to this year's Hot Docs documentary film festival in Toronto next month.

International politics and its injustices continue to be the documentary maker's main crutch, and the festival, running April 28 to May 7, will feature a number of films along these lines, such as the award-winning Swiss-Canadian exploration of what fosters terrorism called *Our Own Private Bin Laden*, which seems destined to be one of the festival's most talked-about films.

Others in the festival's Canadian program already gaining attention are:

Mystic Ball, about a filmmaker's journey learning the Myanmar dance-like sport of chinlone;

Actuality: The Art and Life of Allan King, a glimpse into the life of the veteran documentary maker by former Globe and Mail critic John Haslett Cuff;

Bombay Calling, about call centres in Bombay -- the second film by the young directors of the acclaimed film *Discordia*.

How important is Hot Docs on the festival circuit? "To me, this is about as important as it gets," *Bombay Calling* co-director Ben Addelman said yesterday at a festival press conference.

Discordia, produced with the National Film Board of Canada, went straight to television (which for documentary makers is a lucky break, unlike dramatic films which look for a theatrical release first). But this time the two filmmakers, Addelman and Samir Mallal, are going the festival route, partly because the TV network National Geographic International already bought the rights to show their film in many countries outside the United States. So the aim now is to gain North American exposure for the film through the festivals.

From this kind of industry perspective, as well as Hot Docs' highly mixed selection of films, the festival seems increasingly like a documentary-only version of the Toronto International Film Festival. With 99 films from around the world (out of 1,612 perspective documentaries submitted), \$50,000 in cash and prizes to the winning films and tens of thousands of moviegoers expected to attend, Hot Docs' stats continue to grow.

But programming director Sean Farnel insisted that it's not about the numbers: "We don't think about it in terms of size. We think about it in terms of quality, in being representative of the best of what's going on in documentary this year."

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